REFORM, DIGITALISATION AND DEMOCRATIC ANCHORAGE

Comparative Discourse Analysis

D3.1. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND INITIAL CROSS-NATIONAL RESULTS

This Report presents first cross-national outputs of RADAR's WP 3, which analyses how European public administrations articulate reform, resilience, and democratic principles in their official documents. WP3 builds a hybrid, multilingual analytical system that combines large-scale corpus construction with NLP structuring, LLM-assisted reasoning, and systematic human validation. The resulting CLIO Library now includes nearly 500 national documents and over 10,000 EU texts, allowing for the comparative study of Romania, Belgium, and a preliminary Dutch corpus.

WP3 SNSPA RESEARCH TEAM

November 2025

Reform, digitalisation and democratic anchorage

RADAR

renewing administration through democratic anchorage reforms

For more information about the project, please visit https://theradarproject.eu

Funded by the European Union

Horizon Europe - HORIZON-CL2-2024-DEMOCRACY-01-09 - Grant Agreement No 101177536

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the first cross-national analysis produced under Work Package 3 (WP3) of the RADAR Project, examining how European public administrations narrate reform, resilience, and democratic anchorage. WP3 develops a hybrid analytical system that combines large-scale corpus construction, multilingual processing, NLP-based structuring, LLM-assisted reasoning, and rigorous human validation. The objective is not simply to classify reforms, but to understand how administrations *define* problems, *justify* solutions, and *signal* institutional values and vulnerabilities through their official documents. These discursive patterns function as early indicators of democratic resilience or fragility. To date, WP3 has constructed the CLIO Library, a multilingual corpus of nearly 500 national documents and over 10,000 European Commission documents, already exceeding project-wide expectations. Three country cases were analysed in depth: Romania, Belgium, and a preliminary Netherlands corpus. Romania served as the methodological pilot (66 fully analysed documents), Belgium provided the most extensive set (≈165 documents), and the Netherlands offered an early scenario of post-crisis reform. The WP3 analytical engine – grounded in four structured LLM prompt suites – proved portable across administrative traditions, languages, and levels of institutional maturity. Across the three cases, WP3 identifies **three distinct administrative ecologies**: **Belgium** reflects a *Mature Stability Model*, where reform is architectural, iterative, and technocratic. Discourses highlight coherence, digital interoperability, legal certainty, and citizen-centred simplification. Silence on politicisation or integrity is benign and signals institutional confidence rather than avoidance. **Romania** embodies an *Emergent Procedural Resilience Model*. Reform is strongly Europeanised, transparency-centric, and capacity-driven, yet asymmetrical: meritocracy, depoliticization, and integrity appear inconsistently across macro-strategic documents. Romania is actively building resilience but has not fully institutionalised it. **The Netherlands** demonstrates a *Reactive Ethical Reconstruction Model*. Following the Childcare Benefits Scandal, Dutch documents reveal a deliberate shift toward fairness, proactive transparency, humane execution, and institutional self-correction. Resilience in this case emerges from introspection and repair. Across all three systems, digitalisation is central but differently conceptualised: as an administrative backbone (Belgium), a modernisation catalyst (Romania), or an ethical risk domain requiring safeguards (Netherlands). WP3 provides one of the first scalable, multilingual frameworks for analysing administrative discourse in Europe. By integrating computational tools with human judgment, WP3 can detect: implicit vulnerabilities (e.g., suspicious silence on meritocracy), normative shifts (e.g., ethical recalibration in the Netherlands), reform orientations (engineering, state-building, ethical repair), and structural risks relevant to populist mobilisation. The approach is transparent, reproducible, and ethically grounded: all findings are anchored in textual evidence, all LLM outputs undergo human verification, and the limits of text-based inference are explicitly acknowledged. However, the analysis reflects *documents*, not administrative practices. Texts often present idealised intentions; institutional reality requires triangulation through WP2's risk modelling, WP4's fieldwork, WP5's scenarios, and WP6's governance toolkit. The Dutch corpus is still expanding, and additional Member States and Western Balkan partners will enter the CLIO Library in the next phase. All findings should therefore be treated as diagnostic hypotheses, to be validated through interdisciplinary collaboration across RADAR.

1. INTRODUCTION

Public administration reform has re-emerged as one of the central political and institutional challenges in Europe. Over the past decade, reforms have been shaped simultaneously by pressures for greater administrative efficiency, digital transformation, fiscal consolidation, territorial disparities, integrity concerns, and the shifting expectations of citizens in an increasingly uncertain democratic environment. These trends unfold as democratic institutions across Europe confront growing public distrust, weakening legitimacy, deteriorating service performance, and highly politicised narratives surrounding the role of the state. Against this backdrop, understanding how public administrations *talk about* reform – how they justify it, how they define problems, and how they frame solutions – becomes essential for understanding not only the reforms themselves but also their democratic anchorage. Work Package 3 (WP3) of the RADAR Project addresses precisely this analytical gap. Its core objective is to systematically collect, structure and interpret public administration reform discourses across Europe, using a combination of corpus-building, natural language processing (NLP), and large language model (LLM)-assisted analysis. WP3 complements the structural assessments of WP1 and the governance innovations examined in WP4 by illuminating the *narrative foundations* of reform: how reforms are legitimated, contested, justified, and connected to democratic values.

Reform discourses are not simply descriptive – they play a constitutive role in shaping public expectations, defining institutional priorities, and signalling the values that underpin administrative transformation. They reveal how governments conceptualise the purpose and direction of reform, how administrative weaknesses are diagnosed, whether issues such as meritocracy, integrity, participation or inclusion are treated as priorities or marginal concerns, where silence indicates political sensitivity or institutional avoidance, and how citizens are framed within narratives of efficiency, digitalisation, and performance.

In this sense, discourses are instruments of governance: they legitimise certain solutions, make other solutions unthinkable, and influence the degree to which reforms anchor democratic values.

WP3 provides three unique contributions to the RADAR project:

1. A systematic, multilingual corpus of public administration reform documents, covering the last decade across EU Member States and Western Balkans. This includes strategies, white papers, reform agendas, digitalisation plans, anti-corruption strategies, sectoral frameworks, monitoring reports, open government commitments, and EU-driven reform documents (National Reform Plans, Semester recommendations).
2. A hybrid analytical methodology combining NLP + LLM inductive coding, enabling both large-scale mapping and fine-grained interpretive insight into how reform is framed, justified, and explained.
3. A comparative evaluation of democratic anchorage and vulnerability, linking discursive patterns to the legitimacy concerns raised in WP1 (citizen trust, performance, territorial inequalities, politicisation) and to the innovation pathways analysed in WP4.

Through these contributions, WP3 connects the empirical reality of reform implementation with the *discursive ecosystem* that makes reform credible, contested, or fragile. The WP3 analysis is anchored in four core analytical pillars, operationalised through carefully designed LLM prompt suites:

- **Resilient institutions**: examining how reform discourses address meritocracy, integrity, transparency, accountability and administrative capacity.
- **Benign vs. suspicious absence**: assessing whether silence on democracy or resilience is natural (scope-driven) or problematic (blind spot).
- **Meaning of public administration reform**: identifying how reform is conceptually constructed – technocratically, ethically, managerially, democratically, or hybrid.
- **Populism vulnerability**: assessing whether discourses acknowledge, reinforce or mitigate vulnerabilities exploited by populist narratives (bureaucratic frustration, politicisation, corruption, inequality, distrust).

These four pillars constitute the "interpretive engine" of WP3, allowing a cross-national, cross-sectoral understanding of the deep logic of administrative reform discourses.

This Discourse Analysis Report (D3.1) provides templates for comparative narrative maps of how administrations in Europe talk about reform, country case analysis and insights into how democratic anchorage is articulated or absent in official reform documents. It also offers a synthesis of cross-national trends, divergences, and emerging paradigms and an evidence base for connecting reform narratives to legitimacy, contestation and resilience in European public governance. Understanding discourse is not a purely academic exercise. It is integral to recognising where reforms risk failure, where administrative weaknesses are misunderstood or strategically ignored, and where democratic engagement is strengthened or bypassed. As such, WP3 contributes directly to RADAR's ambition of developing a clearer, more grounded, and more forward-looking understanding of public administration reform in the changing European democratic landscape.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework of WP3 was developed to address a central challenge in contemporary public administration research: understanding how European administrations narrate, justify, and delimit public sector reform in a multilingual, highly heterogeneous policy environment. To achieve this, WP3 uses an integrated research design that combines systematic corpus construction, automated translation, natural language processing (NLP), large language model (LLM) – assisted inductive analysis, and human qualitative validation. This hybrid approach enables both scale and interpretive depth – qualities essential for a Horizon Europe project concerned with democratic resilience and reform legitimacy.

2.1. Corpus Construction and CLIO Library

The analytical foundation of WP3 is the CLIO Library – a multilingual repository of public administration reform documents covering the last decade. Corpus construction follows a dual-source strategy. First, consortium partners manually identified and selected key national documents reflecting administrative reform priorities: reform strategies, policy declarations, digitalisation agendas, civil service strategies, anti-corruption frameworks, sectoral and cross-sectoral plans, evaluation reports, and annual performance assessments. To ensure broader representation beyond the consortium's geographical reach, partners also engaged external experts through a standardised request template.

Second, the SNSPA team developed a legally compliant Python-based scraping tool to collect publicly available documents from government portals, ministerial archives, legislative repositories, parliaments, EU institutions, and OECD databases. This automated component ensures that the corpus does not depend solely on expert familiarity but also captures less visible documents that play an important role in national reform ecosystems. Each document entering the CLIO Library is catalogued using a harmonised metadata schema including issuer, publication year, type, domain, strategic relevance, and linguistic characteristics, enabling future comparative analysis across countries.

Given the corpus's multilingual nature, translation is essential. WP3 adopts a tiered translation pipeline. All non-English documents are initially translated using DeepL, followed by LLM-based semantic checking to identify potential mistranslations, omissions, or shifts in meaning – particularly in administrative terminology. Because translation noise can affect downstream analysis, especially in languages with dense administrative vocabularies, the project incorporated human quality checks by B2/C1-level speakers. The pilot for this translational process began with the Romanian corpus and later extended to Belgian and Dutch documents. Future project stages will incorporate certified translators to ensure maximum linguistic accuracy.

Before LLM interpretation, all documents undergo standard NLP pre-processing: OCR (when required), text cleaning, segmentation, tokenisation, and frequency-based extraction (n-grams). Conceptual clustering is used to generate preliminary lexical fingerprints of each document. However, NLP outputs – especially n-grams – are treated only as descriptive layers, not as indicators of conceptual weight. During the Romanian pilot, for example, n-grams frequently prioritised generic terms like "public" or "service", which reflect the structural vocabulary of administrative prose rather than the intentional focus of the reform. Because such artefacts risk over-interpreting

frequency as meaning, all n-gram results are subjected to human filtering, with researchers removing or de-prioritising structurally generic terms. This approach ensures that computational signals do not distort conceptual interpretation.

2.2. LLM-Assisted Analytical Framework

The core analytical engine of WP3 is a suite of four structured LLM prompt families, each aligned with one of RADAR's conceptual pillars: (1) resilient institutions; (2) benign vs. suspicious silence; (3) the meaning of public administration reform; and (4) populism vulnerability. These prompt families were developed iteratively and first piloted extensively on the Romanian corpus of 66 documents. Romania served as the methodological stress-test: its diverse document set, varying levels of institutional clarity, and strong presence of external actors (OECD, EU) ensured that the prompts were conceptually robust, sensitive to administrative variation, and linguistically portable.

Following the Romanian pilot, the same workflow was applied to the Belgian and Dutch corpora. Belgium's substantial collection (approximately 165 documents) provided an ideal test of cross-level consistency, given its multi-layered federal structure and internally generated reform agendas. The Netherlands, with a smaller but conceptually dense post-crisis corpus (~30 documents at this point), offered a contrasting environment in which ethical, transparency-oriented, and restorative narratives dominate following the childcare benefits scandal. Both corpora are currently undergoing human validation.

In all three cases, WP3 combines computational scale with interpretive depth. NLP structures (keyword extraction, semantic clustering, conceptual mapping) provide empirical grounding, while the four LLM prompt families generate structured inductive coding across reform narratives. Crucially, every LLM output is reviewed, interpreted, and triangulated by human researchers. This hybrid methodology ensures that comparison across Romania, Belgium, and the Netherlands does not rely on automated reasoning alone, but on a rigorously validated interplay between computational analysis and expert qualitative judgment. The Dutch case, however, remains explicitly a *work in progress*. While the current analysis covers approximately 30 high-density reform documents, additional Dutch materials are still being collected and will be integrated into the CLIO Library in subsequent iterations. The partial analysis nevertheless serves a clear methodological purpose: it demonstrates how the WP3 analytical engine performs in a post-crisis administrative setting (following the childcare benefits scandal) and highlights cross-country differences in reform narratives even at an early stage. The inclusion of the Netherlands at this preliminary stage is therefore illustrative rather than exhaustive, designed to show scenario variation and to confirm the portability of the WP3 framework across different administrative ecologies.

To ensure methodological integrity, LLM-generated insights undergo a multi-layer validation process. First, researchers perform semantic validation, confirming that LLM interpretations accurately reflect textual evidence. Second, all analytical claims are anchored in direct quotations from the corpus; no interpretive statement is accepted without textual support. Third, outputs are triangulated across multiple tools (ChatGPT, Gemini, and a custom extractive model) to detect inconsistency or bias. Finally, where uncertainty persists, the original text – often in its native language – is reviewed manually to resolve ambiguities. Through this process, LLMs function as augmentative tools, accelerating inductive reasoning without replacing human expertise.

Ethical compliance is core to the methodological design of WP3. All data originate from freely accessible public sources; no restricted or personal data are collected. Scraping procedures were constructed to respect copyright and robots.txt restrictions. Translations and LLM processing occur only after documents are publicly archived in the CLIO Library. Furthermore, the project explicitly recognises the risks inherent in AI-assisted analysis – particularly hallucination, over-interpretation, or the masking of linguistic nuance. For this reason, human oversight, cross-validation, and transparency are embedded at every stage. The project clearly distinguishes between empirical findings, computational outputs, and interpretive judgments, ensuring adherence to academic requirements for traceability, reproducibility, and responsible use of AI.

Although the analytical framework developed in WP3 integrates advanced NLP and LLM-assisted reasoning, its outputs remain inherently bounded by the explicit content of the documents. LLMs can identify patterns, conceptual orientations, omissions and vulnerabilities, but they do not – and cannot – replace contextual

institutional judgement. Reform discourses often contain subtle institutional signals that require domain knowledge to interpret. For example, normative provisions such as the transfer of a public administration training institute under ministerial authority may appear merely administrative in the text, yet they have significant implications for autonomy, professionalisation, and long-term administrative capacity. Such institutional consequences cannot be inferred directly by an LLM without risking over-interpretation or projection beyond the textual evidence.

For this reason, WP3 treats LLM outputs as structured interpretive suggestions, not verdicts. All findings are validated by researchers with expertise in public administration and democratic governance, who assess both what the text states and what it omits, and how these elements relate to broader institutional realities. This reflexive approach ensures that automated analysis enhances, rather than substitutes, human expertise, and that the limitations of text-based inference are explicitly acknowledged in the research design.

2.3. The WP3 Analytical Output: Standardised Document Report

WP3 produces, for every document included in the CLIO Library, a structured analytical report in a standardised template (HTML format provided in the Annex). Each report integrates: the original and translated text, a document-level summary, NLP-derived semantic fingerprints, and LLM-based analyses following the four WP3 prompts. This pipeline creates a transparent and reproducible analytical format, allowing both scale and depth across highly heterogeneous corpora. The Romanian pilot generated 66 complete document reports, including OECD and EU analyses which play a direct agenda-setting role in Romania's reform ecosystem. In contrast, Belgium's corpus (approx. 165 documents) consists almost exclusively of domestically produced reform strategies, policy notes, and advisory opinions, as external reports (OECD/Banque Nationale de Belgique/EU) do not shape the Belgian reform agenda in a comparable way and were therefore excluded from the analytical set. The Netherlands corpus (~30 documents) is currently in the validation stage, reflecting an evolving selection of post-crisis reform documents following the childcare benefits scandal. This asymmetry in corpus composition is *analytic rather than methodological*: it reflects genuine cross-country differences in how reform agendas are produced, influenced, and institutionalised. As WP3 progresses, updates to the CLIO Library and additional expert validation will extend coverage and ensure comparability across all RADAR consortium countries.

By combining transparent corpus construction, cross-linguistic harmonisation, fine-grained inductive coding, and rigorous human validation, WP3 delivers a methodological contribution that extends beyond the RADAR project. It demonstrates how large-scale multilingual policy analysis can be conducted responsibly, reproducibly, and with conceptual fidelity – bridging the gap between computational text analysis and the normative concerns at the heart of administrative reform and democratic governance.

3. CORPUS OVERVIEW

The empirical foundation of WP3 is the CLIO Library, a multilingual and ever-expanding collection of public administration reform documents from across the European Union and the Western Balkans. The corpus reflects a decade of administrative change (2014-2024), encompassing national reform strategies, civil service frameworks, digital transformation agendas, anti-corruption plans, sectoral reforms, evaluation reports, fiscal strategies, and European Semester materials. From the outset, WP3 sought to develop a corpus that is not only broad and representative but also sufficiently diverse to capture the full range of reform discourses across administrative traditions, political contexts, and linguistic environments. The current dataset already demonstrates that WP3 is fulfilling – and in important respects, exceeding – the ambitions articulated in the RADAR project proposal.

3.1. Composition of the corpus

The corpus contains five broad categories of texts: whole-of-government strategies, legislative and regulatory frameworks, monitoring and evaluation reports (including National Reform Plans), sectoral reform documents (e.g., digitalisation, sustainable development, education, energy), and technical or procedural documents used in reform implementation. This diversity is essential for understanding the narrative ecosystem in which reform is produced and legitimised. It also offers a foundation for the comparative analysis of reform trajectories, discursive gaps, administrative path dependencies, and patterns of democratic anchorage.

Although the corpus remains dynamic and continues to expand, WP3 already includes a substantial number of national documents and an even more extensive set of European Commission materials relevant to administrative reform. The following narrative overview presents the status for each country at the time of writing this Report (10 November 2025).

Austria: Austria contributes 11 national reform documents, including strategies and key policy frameworks. Automated retrieval has added 415 European Commission documents related to public administration, governance performance, and reform monitoring. Sorting and thematic validation are scheduled in the next phase.

Belgium: Belgium currently represents one of the most comprehensive corpora, with 169 national documents spanning federal and regional strategies, civil service reforms, performance frameworks, and digitalisation agendas. An additional 356 EC-level documents have been collected. Belgium is now in the final stages of human semantic validation and will be among the first comparative cases alongside the Netherlands.

Bulgaria: The Bulgarian corpus contains 9 national documents, complemented by 264 European Commission reform-related texts. Translation and NLP pre-processing will follow the completion of the Belgian and Dutch validations.

Croatia: Croatia provides 35 national documents covering public administration reform, digitalisation, decentralisation, and integrity initiatives. Automated retrieval has identified 276 EC documents to be filtered and analysed.

Estonia: Estonia contributes 31 national documents and 328 EC documents, offering valuable insight into one of Europe's most digitally advanced public administrations. NLP pre-processing has begun for this corpus.

The Netherlands: The Dutch corpus includes 79 national documents collected across multiple batches. These reflect the country's decentralised structure and strong administrative evaluation culture. Automated scraping added 362 EC documents. The Netherlands is now in the human validation phase, making it a key comparator for Romania and Belgium.

Italy: Italy's corpus currently comprises 50 national documents, including strategic frameworks, civil service reforms, digital government plans, and sectoral strategies. These are complemented by 403 EC documents. Italy's corpus is prepared for translation and validation.

Lithuania: Lithuania contributes 21 national documents, primarily on decentralisation, civil service development, and policy coherence, alongside 403 EC-level documents. Sorting and semantic validation will follow.

Romania – Completed Pilot Case: Romania offers the most complete national corpus in WP3, with 78 national documents, of which 66 have been fully analysed through the complete WP3 methodology: translation, NLP pre-processing, LLM-based analysis using ChatGPT and Gemini, and extensive human validation. This corpus served as the methodological pilot that allowed the team to refine prompt logic, calibrate semantic checks, test tool interoperability, and establish quality assurance standards. Additionally, 390 EC-level documents have been collected for Romania. Although these remain to be filtered, their availability demonstrates the depth of potential EU-level triangulation.

United Kingdom: The UK contributes 32 national documents and a remarkably large corpus of 715 EC documents, reflecting its pre-Brexit engagement with EU administrative reporting mechanisms.

Other EU Member States: Through automated scraping, WP3 has already collected more than 6,000 European Commission documents relating to administrative reform, covering Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. National-level documents for these countries are being added systematically through partner networks and targeted expert outreach.

Taken together, the corpus currently contains approx. 490 national documents sorted and integrated, and 10,113 European Commission documents collected for future filtering and use. This means that WP3 has already reached the minimum corpus size envisioned for the entire duration of the project, well ahead of schedule. At the same time, the team continues to expand and refine the dataset, with the aim of producing the most comprehensive European corpus on public administration reform to date.

3.2. From collection to analysis: preparing the corpus

Before entering the analytical pipeline, each document undergoes a harmonisation process involving translation, text cleaning, NLP-based conceptual mapping, and LLM-assisted interpretation. This harmonisation step ensures that documents drawn from different languages, administrative traditions, and policy domains can be meaningfully compared and integrated into a coherent cross-national analytical framework.

The Romanian pilot played a foundational role in testing and stabilising this process. By completing full analyses for 66 Romanian documents, WP3 validated the scalability of the linguistic pipeline, the robustness of the four prompt families, and the reliability of the human–machine validation workflow. Romania thus served as the methodological stress-test, demonstrating that the analytical engine can manage diverse document types and uneven institutional narratives.

Lessons learned from the Romanian pilot directly informed the extension of the workflow to Belgium and the Netherlands. Belgium's substantially larger corpus (approx. 165 documents) is currently undergoing structured validation, allowing WP3 to test the pipeline in a multi-level, mature administrative system with internally generated reform agendas. The Netherlands, by contrast, is being analysed in a staged manner: the current work-in-progress corpus (~30 reform documents) provides an early scenario test in a post-crisis administrative context, with additional Dutch materials scheduled for integration as the CLIO Library expands.

Together, these three cases demonstrate that the WP3 pipeline is not only scalable, but also portable across administrative ecosystems. It can process corpora of different sizes, reflect different reform philosophies, and remain sensitive to contextual variation – all while maintaining methodological consistency through harmonisation, NLP structuring, LLM-guided coding, and expert validation.

3.3. A dynamic and living corpus

The CLIO Library is not static. It is a living dataset, continuously enriched as new documents become available, as scraping tools detect further relevant sources, and as national partners and external experts contribute additional texts. The flexible architecture of WP3 ensures that the corpus can evolve alongside new governance initiatives, emerging reform agendas, and shifts in national or EU-level priorities. As WP3 progresses, this corpus will become an unprecedented resource not only for the RADAR project but for the broader research community interested in reform trajectories, administrative resilience, and democratic anchorage in European public governance.

In addition to the EU Member States, the RADAR project explicitly includes the Western Balkans, where public administration reforms, integrity frameworks, and democratic anchorage are undergoing rapid transformation. At this stage, national-level documents from the Western Balkan countries have not yet been integrated into the CLIO Library. This reflects not an omission, but the planned phased structure of WP3 implementation. For the Western Balkans, the technical backbone is already in place. The automated scraping tool developed for EU Member States has been extended to identify and map publicly accessible document sources in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Similarly, the set of European

Commission enlargement documents, including progress reports and reform recommendations, has already been identified and will be extracted during the next phase. These materials constitute an essential complement to national reform texts and will significantly enhance the comparative dimension of WP3 in the second iteration of this deliverable.

Beyond public documents, WP3 will expand to include political discourse, as originally envisioned in the RADAR proposal. The team has begun testing a dedicated module for retrieving and processing political statements, interviews, and publicly accessible social media content from political actors, strictly in compliance with platform policies, data protection rules, and ethical requirements. This component is essential for understanding the discursive dynamics of reform contestation and the ways in which political narratives shape administrative legitimacy and reform outcomes. The tool is designed to function exclusively on publicly available content and to avoid any form of personal data collection or behavioural profiling.

Taken together, these developments illustrate that WP3 is not only on track, but already implementing the expanded architecture required to cover both administrative and political reform discourses across the EU and Western Balkans. The inclusion of Western Balkan countries and political narratives in the next phase will further strengthen WP3's analytical depth and its contribution to understanding reform trajectories, contestation, and democratic resilience across the wider European region.

4. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

WP3 develops a structured analytical framework designed to capture the narrative foundations of public administration reform across Europe. Building on RADAR's overarching concern with democratic resilience, legitimacy, and reform contestation, this framework enables a systematic exploration of how governments conceptualise reform, how they address institutional vulnerabilities, where they remain silent, and how these discursive patterns relate to the challenges identified in WP1 and the innovation pathways explored in WP4.

4.1. Conceptual anchors

Three conceptual pillars drawn from the RADAR proposal anchor the analytical logic of WP3:

1. **Reform and institutional change**, understood not only as technical adjustments but as the redefinition of administrative roles, capacities and expectations.
2. **Legitimacy**, which depends on how reforms are justified and whether they align with democratic values, meritocratic principles, and integrity standards.
3. **Contestation**, which arises when reforms generate asymmetries, when implementation falters, or when political narratives frame reforms in ways that undermine trust.

Discourse sits at the intersection of these three elements. It defines how reform is framed, why it is necessary, what problems it aims to solve, and how citizens and civil servants are positioned within the reform process. As such, discourse provides a crucial analytical entry point into the democratic anchorage of administrative change.

Reform discourses are performative: they construct meaning, signal priorities, and delimit what is politically or administratively feasible. They also reveal tensions between competing visions of the state – managerial, technocratic, integrity-oriented, democratic, or digital. When reforms are justified through narrow efficiency narratives, democratic values may become marginal. When integrity or participation are absent, institutional resilience may be compromised. For RADAR, analysing discourse means uncovering the narrative architecture through which administrations conceptualise reform, legitimate action, articulate problems, and manage public expectations. It also sheds light on the conditions under which reforms become vulnerable to contestation or are co-opted by populist actors.

4.3. The Four-Pillar Analytical Architecture

WP3 operationalises this conceptual agenda through four analytical pillars, each translating a core RADAR concept into an interpretive question applied systematically across all documents.

Pillar 1: Resilient Institutions. It examines whether and how reform documents address the four dimensions of institutional resilience: meritocracy and political neutrality; integrity and anti-corruption; transparency, participation and openness; administrative capacity, coordination and coherence. This allows us to evaluate whether reforms strengthen or overlook the institutional foundations of democratic governance.

Pillar 2: Silence Analysis (Benign vs. Suspicious Absence). Reform documents often omit key themes. Some omissions are benign, reflecting the technical scope of the text. Others are suspicious, signalling potential blind spots or politically sensitive areas such as politicisation, integrity enforcement, or implementation gaps. By distinguishing between benign and suspicious silence, WP3 identifies latent vulnerabilities in reform narratives.

Pillar 3: Conceptualising Public Administration Reform. This pillar reconstructs how each document defines and legitimises reform. Discourses vary: some emphasise digital transformation, others capacity building, fiscal discipline, professionalisation, participation, or integrity. The analysis maps these conceptual orientations and their implications for democratic anchorage.

Pillar 4: Populism Vulnerability Scan. The fourth pillar examines whether reform discourses acknowledge or ignore vulnerabilities commonly exploited by populist actors: bureaucratic frustration; fragmentation and inconsistency; politicisation; corruption and integrity gaps; territorial inequalities; weak service delivery; and distrust in institutions. This analysis directly supports RADAR's objective of understanding the relationship between reform, legitimacy and democratic resilience.

4.4. Prompt Structure and Analytical Content

Although the full prompt suites are provided in the Annex for transparency and reproducibility, it is important to clarify here the analytical content of each. The four prompt families have been designed to elicit structured, conceptually grounded responses that reflect RADAR's theoretical concerns. Each prompt follows a similar logic: it requests a holistic reading of the document, it requires the LLM to use only textual evidence, it asks for a structured interpretive output, and it generates direct quotations to anchor all findings.

Prompt 1: Resilient Institutions: This prompt guides the model to examine whether the document addresses the four resilience dimensions central to RADAR: merit-based staffing and political neutrality; integrity and anti-corruption safeguards; transparency, participation and openness; and administrative capacity and coordination mechanisms. The model must provide examples, identify explicit and implicit claims, and highlight potential institutional weaknesses.

Prompt 2: Benign vs. Suspicious Absence: This prompt distinguishes between absences that are expected due to the technical nature of the document (benign silence) and omissions that are problematic because they concern essential governance principles (suspicious silence). The model must justify its classification with evidence and explain why a missing theme is or is not theoretically relevant.

Prompt 3: Meaning of Public Administration Reform. This prompt reconstructs how the document itself defines reform. It identifies dominant reform philosophies (managerial, digital, participatory, integrity-based, professionalising, fiscally driven), explains how the text legitimates reform, and highlights underlying assumptions about the role of the state, public servants, and citizens.

Prompt 4: Populism Vulnerability Scan. This prompt evaluates whether the document acknowledges or fails to acknowledge vulnerabilities that populist narratives exploit: bureaucratic frustration, politicisation, fragmentation, corruption risks, low trust, inequality, or service delivery problems. The output reveals whether the document contributes to strengthening resilience or leaves critical vulnerabilities unaddressed. Each prompt therefore generates a multi-layered interpretive output, which – after human validation – forms the analytical foundation of the country case studies and the cross-national comparison.

LLM techniques (ChatGPT, Gemini, and a dedicated extractive model) are not used to replace qualitative interpretation but to augment it. Each document is processed using the four analytical pillars, generating a structured interpretive output. These outputs undergo human validation, quotation anchoring, and cross-model triangulation. The result is an inductive coding system that is both scalable and conceptually rigorous. This approach enables the identification of narrative patterns across languages, administrative traditions, and document types – patterns that would be extremely difficult to detect through manual coding alone. At the same time, all interpretive steps remain under human supervision to ensure conceptual fidelity and methodological integrity.

The framework developed in WP3 offers four contributions that extend beyond traditional methods of discourse analysis:

1. **Cross-linguistic coherence**: By blending translation, NLP and LLM-based reasoning, WP3 enables robust comparison across languages and administrative cultures.
2. **Detection of structural silence**: The ability to differentiate benign from suspicious silence reveals hidden constraints or blind spots in reform discourses.
3. **Mapping conceptual drift and paradigmatic change**: The framework identifies how understandings of reform evolve – from managerial to digital, integrity-oriented or democratic models.
4. **Linking administrative and political narratives**: By analysing vulnerabilities exploited by populism, WP3 connects internal reform logic with external political contestation.

Together, these contributions make WP3 a central component of RADAR's ambition to understand how administrative reforms affect democratic legitimacy across Europe. However, it is important to underline that the analytical framework developed in WP3 interprets *discourses*, not institutional consequences. LLMs operate strictly on what the text explicitly articulates; they do not infer political intent, administrative impact, or institutional effects that are not present in the written document. Many reform-relevant decisions – particularly normative or organisational shifts – carry implications that exceed what is stated on the page. For this reason, all LLM-generated insights are treated as interpretive leads rather than definitive conclusions and are always contextualised through expert judgement. This ensures that WP3 maintains a clear distinction between textual narrative and institutional reality, reinforcing the methodological integrity of the discourse analysis.

5. ROMANIA – COUNTRY CASE

The Romanian corpus comprises **66 policy and strategy documents** covering roughly the last decade, excluding political party programmes (Cluster 4). The texts span: National Reform Programmes (2014–2024); Fiscal-budgetary strategies; Civil service and professional training strategies; National anti-corruption strategies; Digitalisation strategies; Sustainable development and sectoral strategies (energy, rural development, environment, education); OECD governance assessments and Open Government Partnership (OGP) action plans; Technical assistance contracts, guides and procedural toolkits; Reports on integrity, HR management and public service performance. Together, these documents form a self-narrative of the Romanian state: how it diagnoses administrative weaknesses, how it conceptualises reform, and how it imagines institutional resilience in the face of democratic backsliding and populist contestation.

In what follows, we apply the four analytical pillars of WP3 – resilient institutions, silence, meaning of reform, and populism vulnerability – to reconstruct Romania's reform discourse and position it within the broader European context.

5.1. Resilient Institutions in Romania

In the RADAR framework, institutional resilience is assessed along four pillars: 1) Meritocracy and political neutrality of the civil service; 2) Integrity and ethics; 3) Transparency, accountability and participation; and 4) Administrative capacity and institutional coherence. Applied to the Romanian corpus, this lens reveals a **highly**

asymmetric resilience profile: Pillars 3 (transparency) and 4 (capacity) are consistently strong in most documents; while Pillars 1 (meritocracy) and 2 (integrity) are strong only in specific clusters (civil service and anti-corruption texts) and are often weak or absent in macro-strategic, fiscal or digitalisation documents. Romania thus appears as a system that has made **substantial progress in transparency and capacity**, while still struggling to fully institutionalise meritocracy and integrity across the whole administrative architecture. It is, in short,**"technocratically advanced but normatively incomplete"**.

Across strategies, National Reform Plans, anti-corruption frameworks, HRM documents, fiscal strategies, sectoral plans and digitalisation programmes, three broad patterns stand out:

1. **Romania has "learned" the language of modern public management.** Most documents are saturated with concepts such as performance, efficiency, coordination, interoperability, monitoring, evaluation, indicators, strategic planning, and alignment with EU standards. Pillar 4 (capacity and coherence) is systematically present.
2. **Transparency and access to information are treated as non-negotiable standards.** Laws and strategies on transparency, OGP action plans, and sustainable development frameworks collectively construct a strong Pillar 3. Participatory processes, transparency in decision-making and open data recur across many texts.
3. **Meritocracy and integrity are acknowledged as core issues but not integrated consistently.** When the topic is HRM, civil service, or anti-corruption, Pillars 1-2 are front and centre: recruitment standards, promotion criteria, integrity incidents, risk analyses. But in fiscal – budgetary and digital strategies, these pillars frequently disappear.

5.2.1. Pillar by Pillar Analysis

Pillar 1 – Meritocracy and political neutrality: In civil service strategies, National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS) reports, training strategies and policy proposals on career management, the discourse explicitly recognises: the need for clear, merit-based recruitment and promotion criteria; predictable and competency-based career paths; the risks of politicisation and arbitrary appointments; the importance of professional identity and standards for public officials. These texts present concrete measures: new frameworks for exams, national competitions, standardised job profiles, digital HR systems and structured training. By contrast, in macroeconomic and cross-government reforms (National Reform Plans, fiscal strategies, some digitalisation strategies): the civil service is often treated primarily as a cost item (wage bill, staffing levels); there is little or no discussion of recruitment, promotion or protection mechanisms; and politicisation is rarely named explicitly as a problem. Meritocracy is thus treated as a specialist sub-theme, not as a constitutive dimension of the state in many high-level reform texts. The reform discourse *knows* what a merit-based civil service should look like, but this knowledge remains confined to HRM-centric documents rather than being embedded in the full architecture of public sector reform.

Pillar 2 – Integrity and ethics. In the anti-corruption strategies and related reports, integrity is defined in precise, institutional terms: integrity plans as formal commitments with legal status; anti-corruption risk assessments at organisational level; clear definitions of "integrity incidents" (e.g. indictments or convictions); education and training programmes in ethics and anti-corruption; and cooperation between central and local authorities, anti-corruption bodies and civil society. These documents build a dense integrity infrastructure: formal procedures, risk methodologies, reporting obligations and monitoring mechanisms.

At the same time, they acknowledge that in many institutions, integrity plans are purely formal; that local governments often lack the capacity or willingness to apply integrity procedures; and that knowledge about internal rules (e.g. on gift declarations) is patchy. Pillar 2 is therefore strongly conceptualised but unevenly implemented. In other major strategies (fiscal–budgetary, sectoral, some digitalisation frameworks), integrity is rarely addressed beyond generic references to transparency or EU compliance. Corruption is treated as a separate policy problem, not as a transversal lens for reform.

Romania thus has a sophisticated integrity framework on paper, but institutional resilience depends on whether that framework is fully embedded into everyday governance beyond specialised anti-corruption instruments.

Pillar 3 – Transparency, accountability and participation. This is arguably **Romania's strongest pillar**. Across public administration strategies, OGP plans, National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS)-related documents and many National Reform Plans, we find commitments to transparency in decision-making (public consultations, publication of draft laws and impact assessments). There are also mechanisms for monitoring transparency (central coordination, reporting obligations, publication of monitoring reports online), consolidation of access-to-information rules, including potential sanctions for non-compliance and promotion of open data portals, transparency registers and consultative platforms.

Participation and consultation are increasingly standard features rather than optional add-ons. Even when not framed in grand democratic terms, they are institutionalised procedures. On Pillar 3, the discourse suggests a high degree of resilience: transparency and participation are seen as core components of good governance and important legitimacy resources for reforms.

Pillar 4 – Administrative capacity and institutional coherence. Pillar 4 is where the Romanian corpus is most consistently strong. National Reform Plans and fiscal strategies stress coordinated policy planning, performance-oriented budgeting, medium-term frameworks and alignment with EU conditionality. Digitalisation strategies seek to overcome fragmentation of IT systems, promote interoperability, shared platforms (e.g. government clouds), single points of contact for citizens and streamlined procedures. In addition, HRM and training strategies frame capacity not just in structural terms, but also through skills, competencies and organisational learning. Finally, OECD and sustainable development roadmaps emphasise policy coherence, interministerial collaboration, monitoring and evaluation systems.

Together, these texts project an image of a state actively trying to become more coherent, capable and predictable. The resilience profile on Pillar 4 is medium-to-high: the intent is clear, the tools are increasingly sophisticated, and alignment with international standards is strong.

5.2.2. Configurations of resilience

Across documents, four resilience configurations can be distinguished:

1. **Technocratic-strong, meritocracy-weak**. Many National Reforms Plans, fiscal strategies and digitalisation plans are strong on capacity, monitoring, EU alignment and transparency, but weak on explicit meritocracy and political neutrality.
2. **Integrity – professionalisation islands**. Civil service strategies, training strategies and anti-corruption documents are strong on meritocracy and integrity, moderately strong on capacity, with transparency embedded via integrity tools.
3. **High-resilience systemic texts**. A small subset of documents (some National Reform Plans, OECD assessments, certain qualification standards) speak comprehensively across all four pillars and come closest to the "ideal type" of resilient institutions envisaged by RADAR.
4. **Benignly limited technical documents**. Guides, implementation manuals and specific project documents focus narrowly on one process or sector and show limited engagement with all four pillars due to scope, not conceptual blind spots.

Over roughly a decade, the Romanian corpus reflects three phases in how resilient institutions are imagined:

Early phase – integrity and transparency first: National Anti-Corruption Strategies and early reforms emphasise Pillars 2 and 3: integrity frameworks, transparency law, participation procedures, access to information. The civil service is addressed, but often in the shadow of anti-corruption.

Middle phase – capacity and EU alignment as drivers: with successive National Reform Plans and fiscal strategies, Pillar 4 becomes dominant: reform is about stabilising public finances, improving EU funds absorption, building planning and monitoring systems. Integrity and meritocracy are still referenced, but more as specific components than as overarching principles.

Recent phase – digitalisation and professionalisation as twin agendas. Digital strategies, AI strategies, updated HRM reforms and training strategies converge around a vision of a professional, digital, data-driven

administration. Resilience is increasingly understood as the ability to adapt, learn and integrate technologies, not just as static robustness. However, politicisation and meritocracy remain under-addressed at systemic level.

Considering Prompt 1, the Romanian documents portray a public administration that is substantially improved in transparency, planning and capacity compared to earlier reform waves. It is also normatively ambitious on integrity and professionalisation, but implementation-dependent and sometimes formalistic; under-articulated on meritocracy and depoliticization in high-level macro-strategies; and finally, strongly Europeanised, using EU and OECD frameworks as external anchors of resilience. Romania's discourse thus suggests **"resilient institutions emerging"**: clear progress on the *how* of administration (processes, tools, structures), and an ongoing struggle with the *who* and *according to which values* (merit, neutrality, integrity culture). This makes Romania a crucial comparative case within RADAR.

5.2. When Silence Speaks: Benign vs Suspicious Absence

Silence in policy and strategy documents is not incidental, particularly in systems undergoing structural reform and exposed to democratic backsliding pressures. In the 66 Romanian administrative documents (excluding political programmes), absence itself emerges as a discursive signal. Prompt 2 distinguishes two types of silence: 1) Benign Silence – silence that is reasonable given the scope or technical nature of the document; 2) Suspicious Silence – silence that is problematic because it occurs in documents where key governance principles should be addressed but are not. This distinction reveals how the state addresses (or fails to address) meritocracy, politicisation, integrity, democratic legitimacy and structural vulnerabilities.

5.3.1. Benign Silence

A large subset of Romanian documents – guides, procedural manuals, sectoral plans, implementation instructions – are narrow-scope technical documents. Their aim is operational, not conceptual. Here, the absence of references to democracy, autonomy, civil service neutrality, politicisation or anti-corruption is expected and not analytically problematic. Benign silence appears when: the purpose of the document is strictly technical (e.g. IT implementation, environmental information guidance, monitoring methodologies); or, the text regulates procedures, not governance models; or, the focus is sectoral, not system-level; or/ and the document contributes indirectly to good governance (e.g. by improving access to information or process clarity), even if it does not mention broader reform principles. Examples include tools and procedural guides that explain how to implement a specific law or IT system; environmental or sectoral access-to-information documents; technical assistance contracts describing deliverables and workflows. In such cases, silence on meritocracy or depoliticization is benign and consistent with scope.

5.3.2. Suspicious Silence

Suspicious silence appears when system-level strategy documents – those with explicit ambitions to modernise, reform or restructure the public administration – fail to address issues that are fundamental to resilience, such as: meritocracy and depoliticization; integrity enforcement and implementation quality; participation and systemic transparency; civil service protections; and known structural vulnerabilities. These omissions are analytically significant. They indicate blind spots in reform planning, politically sensitive areas that are avoided, or assumptions that institutional problems can be solved without addressing root causes. Key examples include: Fiscal -budgetary strategies, which address wages and staffing but rarely recruitment quality, politicisation risks or career structures; Digitalisation strategies, which diagnose fragmentation ("applications that cannot communicate with each other", "decision-makers lacking digital understanding") but remain silent on civil service capacity, internal cultures or politicisation in IT governance; Some National Reform Plans, especially later ones, which focus on macro-economics, investments and National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) milestones while saying little about depoliticization, performance management or integrity enforcement; Sustainable development implementation frameworks, which emphasise policy coherence and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but omit political neutrality, implementation constraints or civil service vulnerabilities.

Across the corpus, four recurrent patterns of suspicious silence emerge:

1. **Meritocracy and depoliticization are inconsistently addressed.** Even in documents proposing institutional reforms (digitalisation, fiscal governance, sectoral strategies), the civil service is frequently absent from the analysis, as if reforms could be implemented without reforming those who implement them.
2. **Integrity is often separated from systemic reform.** Integrity frameworks are robust in anti-corruption documents yet absent in many strategies where corruption is a known barrier to digitalisation, procurement, HR management or service delivery.
3. **Implementation and enforcement gaps are acknowledged only in integrity documents.** Integrity strategies recognise formalism and partial implementation, but similar concerns are rarely reflected in broader reform strategies.
4. **Local government vulnerabilities are under-discussed.** Even though local capacity and integrity are repeatedly identified as weak, national strategies often avoid addressing this explicitly, suggesting that territorial inequalities in capacity are politically or administratively sensitive.

Suspicious Silence is not merely an omission; it reveals **the boundaries of what the administrative system feels able to articulate**. In Romania's case, these silences coincide with: politically problematic areas (depoliticization), areas requiring high enforcement capacity (integrity), deeply embedded administrative cultures (fragmentation, bureaucratic rigidity), and areas where reforms risk resistance (local government autonomy, HR restructuring). Thus, suspicious silence points to **potential blockages** in the reform process that cannot be addressed solely through technical or managerial instruments.

5.4. How Romanian Documents Define Public Administration Reform

Across the 66 non-political documents analysed in the Romanian corpus, *public administration reform* emerges not as a singular, stable concept, but as a multi-dimensional, evolving discourse shaped by overlapping pressures: EU integration, administrative modernization, anti-corruption commitments, and demands for better service delivery. The democratic dimension—participation, accountability, trust—is present, but it is not the primary anchor of reform. Instead, reform is overwhelmingly framed through **technocratic, managerial, and Europeanised lenses**. Below is an expanded description of the four dominant reform narratives visible in the Romanian documents, illustrated with direct evidence from the corpus.

5.4.1. Reform as Technocratic Modernisation and EU Alignment

This is the most consistent and defining narrative. In strategic documents such as the National Reform Programmes, fiscal-budgetary strategies, and sectoral action plans, reform is conceptualised as modernising the state to meet European standards. Terms such as efficiency, coordination, strategic planning, interoperability, resilience, and performance indicators dominate the discourse. A telling example is the emphasis on institutional development driven by external benchmarks: *"Studies show an increased interest in public participation… which influences the development of the institutional framework."* Even here, democratic engagement is framed as a functional driver of institutional upgrades rather than as a foundational value. Similarly, investments in digital transformation or fiscal consolidation are described not merely as policies, but as structural reforms necessary for Romania's convergence with the EU governance model. In this technocratic vision, *reform equals compliance and performance*: compliance with EU recommendations (European Semester), performance in digitalisation (DESI), performance in public finance (fiscal sustainability, NRRP conditions), performance in administrative capacity (coordination, monitoring, evaluation). This creates a powerful – but strongly managerial – conceptualisation of reform.

5.4.2. Reform as Professionalisation of the Civil Service

A second major axis is grounded in HRM, competence-based career development, and administrative capacity building. This narrative appears prominently in: the Strategy for the Development of the Civil Service, the Professional Training Strategies (2016–2020 and 2023–2029), annual reports of the National Agency of Civil

Servants (NACS), and policy proposals on career management and mobility. Here, reform is equated with *meritocratic, predictable, competency-driven careers*, as illustrated in multiple documents:

"Improving the criteria for selection, promotion and/or reward of persons in public office through strengthened integrity guarantees."

"Increasing the level of anti-corruption education among staff within public authorities… at central and local level."

In this vision, the civil service is perceived as a structural bottleneck whose professionalisation is essential for any long-term reform. The vocabulary is deeply managerial and normative: competency frameworks, training modules, integrity plans, recruitment standards. This narrative is the most explicit and detailed and strongly influences Romania's medium- and long-term reform trajectories.

5.4.3. Reform as Integrity, Ethics, and Anti-Corruption

The anti-corruption discourse occupies a prominent and unique place in Romanian administrative reforms. It is not a marginal concern, but a core identity marker of the reformist state. The two National Anti-Corruption Strategies (2016-2020 and 2021-2025) are among the most detailed and normative documents in the corpus. Reform here is framed as an ethical transformation of public institutions. Monitoring, risk assessments, anti-corruption training, sanctions, transparency mechanisms, and standardised procedures are core elements. Yet, the same documents often reveal that implementation is inconsistent:

"The approach remains formal in the absence of effective implementation."

This both reinforces the need for reform and highlights the fragility of progress.

5.4.4. Reform as Improved Public Services and Citizen-Centred Delivery

A fourth narrative positions reform in terms of service accessibility, digital services, administrative simplification, and user experience. This appears particularly in digitalisation strategies, sectoral plans (education, sustainable development, rural development), and HRM-related texts. Typical formulations include:

"We will create a single access point for all electronic public services."; or: *"You will no longer be the courier of documents for the state."*

These statements show a shift toward *administration-as-a-service*, with a clear intention to reduce bureaucratic burdens and increase digital accessibility. This narrative is strongly linked to Romania's investment agenda under NRRP and the EU's Digital Decade objectives.

5.4.5. Reform as Democratic Anchorage (Implicit and Dispersed)

Democratic anchorage – understood as participation, legitimacy, accountability, trust – is present but rarely positioned as the *central* definition of reform. Instead, it appears in: OGP Action Plans, transparency guidelines, sustainable development strategies, National Reform Plans with references to citizen engagement, access-to-information regulations. For example:

"Completing the legal framework on transparency in decision-making with sanctioning provisions."

This indicates *procedural democratisation* rather than a transformative democratic narrative.

5.5. Populism Vulnerability Scan

Public administration reforms do not occur in a vacuum – they unfold in contexts where public trust, perceptions of fairness, institutional myths, and political pressures shape how citizens relate to the state. Populist actors thrive precisely where reforms create frustrations or leave unresolved vulnerabilities. Using Prompt 4, the Romanian corpus was analysed across seven vulnerability axes typically exploited by populist narratives: 1) Declining trust; 2) Bureaucratic frustration: 3) Administrative fragmentation; 4) Politicisation & weak meritocracy;

5) Inequality & territorial disparities; 6) Service delivery failures; 7) Loss of prestige of the civil service. The Romanian corpus reveals a nuanced and uneven picture, with strong protections in some areas (transparency, digitalisation, integrity) and long-standing vulnerabilities in others (politicisation, implementation gaps, complexity, local capacity).

5.5.1. Trust and Transparency: Significant Protective Mechanisms

Nearly all major Romanian strategies display a strong normative commitment to transparency, which functions as a barrier to populist narratives about "hidden elites". Many texts include actions such as updating transparency procedures, monitoring compliance, or enhancing digital access. This reinforces procedural fairness and predictability – central antidotes to distrust. OGP action plans and anti-corruption strategies present transparency as institutional culture, not one-off measures: "Procedures of transparency in decision-making will be monitored… and reports will be published on the Government website." (paraphrased from transparency framework documents; OGP action plans). Such mechanisms counteract populist claims of opacity and arbitrariness.

5.5.2. Bureaucratic Frustration and Complexity: A Core Vulnerability

Populism thrives when citizens experience friction in interactions with public institutions. The corpus shows clear awareness of bureaucratic dysfunctions yet also reveals how deeply rooted they are. This problem fuels the feeling that the state is chaotic or incompetent – fertile ground for anti-elite narratives. Despite vulnerabilities, several strong commitments aim to reduce bureaucratic friction:

"You will no longer be the courier of documents for the state."

"We will create a single access point for all electronic public services."

These directly attack one of populism's major sources of legitimacy: dissatisfaction with daily interactions with the state.

5.5.3. Administrative Fragmentation: Diagnosed but Not Yet Solved

Many Romanian documents acknowledge fragmentation – across agencies, across levels of government, across digital systems. This is one of the most consistent themes in the corpus. Fragmentation is often cited as: a cause of inefficiency, an obstacle to strategic coherence, a barrier to EU implementation, a driver of citizen frustration. However, solutions tend to focus on process integration (e.g., interoperability, coordination committees), not on clarifying roles, reducing overlaps, or depoliticising coordination structures. Local governments are often described as: under-resourced, uneven in integrity, inconsistent in applying national rules. For example: *"Internal procedures on gift declarations… are little known and applied in local administrative units."* This vulnerability is rarely addressed in system-level reforms, making it a suspicious silence (Prompt 2).

5.5.4. Politicisation and Meritocracy: Romania's Deepest Vulnerability

This is the weakest and most unevenly addressed axis in the entire corpus. Documents in the HRM and anti-corruption clusters acknowledge inconsistent application of merit-based recruitment, risks of politicised appointments, lack of predictable career pathways. For example: *"Improving selection and promotion criteria… through strengthened integrity guarantees."* However, in fiscal strategies, digitalisation strategies, sustainable development frameworks, and even some National Reform Plans, politicization is rarely mentioned, despite being a root cause of implementation failure. This omission heightens vulnerability to populism: when citizens perceive public servants as politically captured, populist actors exploit the sentiment.

5.5.5. Inequality & Territorial Disparities: A Quiet Driver of Discontent

Sectoral strategies (rural development, sustainable development, energy, environment) show awareness of: uneven access to services, differing institutional capacities between urban and rural areas, uneven digitalisation,

disparities in training and HRM capacity. However, territorial inequality rarely appears as a cross-cutting administrative reform priority, even though it can fuel narratives of abandonment (a known populist theme).

5.5.6. Service Delivery Failures: Recognised and Actively Addressed

Unlike meritocracy or politicisation, service quality is a central theme in almost every strategy: digitalisation of services, interoperability, single points of access, reduction of travel burden for citizens, improved monitoring and evaluation of service delivery. For example: *"We will create a single access point for all electronic public services."* This narrative directly counters populist exploitation of service delivery failures.

5.5.7. Prestige and Motivation of the Civil Service: A Mixed Picture

Civil service prestige is shaped by salary structures, career prospects, integrity frameworks, training opportunities, political interference. Documents emphasise training programmes, integrity education, competency frameworks. These efforts enhance professionalism. However, fiscal strategies sometimes freeze wages or reduce benefits – measures that risk frustration, cynicism, and loss of professional dignity.

Populist exploitation relies heavily on frustration with bureaucracy, perceived corruption, politicisation of the civil service, service disparities, opaque decisions, and unmet promises. The Romanian corpus shows a reform system that actively mitigates some vulnerabilities (through transparency, digitalisation, integrity plans) but leaves core vulnerabilities under-addressed, especially politicisation, meritocracy, and implementation coherence. Thus, Romania's resilience profile is: "Strong in transparency and digital capacity, emerging in integrity implementation, and structurally weak in depoliticization." This asymmetry is critical for WP3's cross-country comparison and for understanding democratic anchorage in reform discourses.

5.6. Romania's Discursive Position in European Public Administration Reform

The analysis of the Romanian administrative reform discourse reveals a pattern of Asymmetric Institutional Resilience driven primarily by external anchoring and instrumental modernization. Across its corpus of policy and strategic documents, Romania successfully internalizes the contemporary language of public management, resulting in a discourse that is simultaneously robust and unbalanced. Romania's position is defined by a strong, consistent focus on Pillar 3 (Transparency and Accountability) and Pillar 4 (Administrative Capacity and Coherence). Reform is framed through a highly Europeanized and Technocratic lens, prioritizing operational components like interoperability, performance monitoring, and digital platforms (KPIs) over foundational institutional sociology. This focus constructs a sophisticated administrative architecture aimed at meeting EU/OECD benchmarks.

However, this instrumental strength masks a significant normative deficit concerning the administrative core. Foundational principles of Pillar 1 (Meritocracy and Political Neutrality) and Pillar 2 (Integrity and Public Ethics), while addressed in specialist sub-documents (HRM, anti-corruption), lack consistent integration into macro-strategic frameworks (fiscal or digitalization strategies). This persistent compartmentalization suggests that while the state understands the *mechanics* of resilient governance, it continues to struggle with the consolidation of the values and personnel responsible for implementation. The state remains actively engaged with populist vulnerabilities, but the persistence of gaps in depoliticization and implementation consistency remains the critical point of friction.

The Romanian experience illustrates a Hybrid Case in comparative public administration: a system that has achieved advanced transparency norms and is emerging in managerial structures yet remains fundamentally weak in resolving the enduring conflict between political authority and administrative professionalism. The reform architecture is thus more instrumental than democratic-theoretical, relying heavily on the momentum of external standards and managerial metrics, and signalling a persistent need to integrate civil service neutrality as a systemic defence rather than a specialized HR concern.

6. THE BELGIAN REFORM DISCOURSE

The Belgian public administration reform landscape is shaped by a uniquely complex institutional architecture, defined by five parallel levels of authority (federal, Flemish, Walloon, Brussels-Capital, and the German-speaking Community). Unlike unitary systems, Belgium produces multiple reform narratives simultaneously, each emerging from a different political, linguistic, and administrative context. Across the government agreements, policy notes, white papers, digital strategies, Social – Economic Council of Flanders (SERV) advisory opinions, and local government reforms reviewed, the corpus reveals a highly differentiated but conceptually coherent understanding of administrative modernization.

A first striking feature is the shared commitment to digitalisation as the dominant vehicle of state reform. Across Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels and the federal level, digitalisation is framed not merely as a technical upgrade but as a foundational transformation of governance, service delivery, data management, and administrative interaction with citizens. Landmark documents such as *Vlaanderen Radicaal Digitaal*, *Digital Wallonia*, *Easy.Brussels*, and the various interoperability and data strategies form the backbone of this discourse. Reform is thus conceptualised in strongly functional and infrastructural terms, revolving around efficiency, simplification, transparency, and integration.

Second, Belgium's corpus demonstrates a consistent ambition to reduce administrative fragmentation. Given that fragmentation is structurally embedded in the Belgian state model, reform efforts repeatedly emphasise coordination, coherence, simplification of procedures, and modernization of institutional architectures. Digital interoperability, shared data infrastructures, and streamlined local governance (including the integration of municipalities and Public Centres for Social Welfare (OCMWs) appear as crucial levers to overcome fragmentation at both federal and regional levels.

Third, the documents show a sustained concern for administrative simplification and citizen-centred services. This includes the reduction of administrative burdens, harmonised procedures, "only once" principles, simplification of local governance structures, and transparent communication. The logic is both managerial and democratic: simplification reduces inefficiencies but also mitigates frustration that can undermine trust in public institutions.

Fourth, across the corpus – especially in SERV advisory opinions, there is a strong emphasis on legal certainty, quality of legislation, proportionality, and administrative rights, which indicates a reform narrative deeply anchored in the rule of law and procedural guarantees. Even when structural integration is pursued (e.g., municipal – OCMW integration), attention is given to legal safeguards, personnel rights, and data protection.

Fifth, Belgium stands out for its explicit concern with digital inclusion and socio-digital inequality. Documents such as the *Barometer Digitale Inclusie*, e-inclusion strategies, and reports on essential digital services highlight the risks of uneven access, skills gaps, and the widening digital divide. Unlike many countries where digitalisation is seen as inherently empowering, Belgian policy discourse continuously flags digital exclusion as a major governance and social challenge – one that can erode access to fundamental services and exacerbate systemic inequalities.

Finally, the corpus reveals a reform philosophy that is pragmatic, technocratic, and continuity driven. Belgian reform documents rarely use ideological or rhetorical language. Instead, they rely on detailed measures, multi-year programmes, and incremental adjustments. This creates a reform landscape that is mature and institutionally stable, but also heavily technocratic and dispersed across administrative layers.

Taken together, the Belgian corpus presents a reform narrative centred on: transforming governance through digitalisation and interoperability; increasing coherence in a multi-level state; improving service quality, transparency, and administrative simplicity; protecting legal certainty, rights, and integrity standards; addressing socio-digital inequalities; reinforcing local governance capacity; and consolidating citizen-centric public administration.

6.1. Corpus overview

The Belgian country case is based on a remarkably extensive and multi-layered documentary corpus. After removing all international materials (OECD, BNB, EU-level reports), the final dataset comprises approximately 165 Belgian documents produced across the country's five levels of governance. This unusually rich collection allows for a nuanced reconstruction of the administrative reform narrative in a complex federal state. At the **federal level**, the **corpus includes 25-30 documents**, among them government agreements, policy notes, digitalisation strategies, and programmes for administrative simplification. These documents collectively trace the federal commitment to coherent service delivery, interoperability, and modernisation of public sector governance. The Flemish Region contributes the largest and most structurally coherent segment, with **55-60 documents.** These range from successive government agreements and Beleidsnota's to long-term strategies such as *Vision 2050* and *Vizier 2030*, and key digital transformation frameworks including *Vlaanderen Radicaal Digitaal* and the Flemish Data Strategy. A particularly significant subset consists of **SERV advisory opinions** – nearly **25 documents** – which provide rigorous assessments on legality, proportionality, and the institutional quality of reforms. **The Walloon Region adds 25-30 documents**, including two cycles of political declarations, the three generations of *Digital Wallonia*, and various sectoral or territorial strategies connected to administrative modernisation. These texts frame digital transformation as a driver of socio-economic development and territorial cohesion. The **Brussels-Capital Region** offers **25-30 documents,** centred around government declarations, policy notes, and the region's signature modernisation programmes such as *Easy.Brussels*. Together, these documents reflect the specific administrative challenge of delivering coherent, multilingual, and user-centred services in a dense metropolitan context. The **German-speaking Community** contributes **15-20 documents**, including government declarations, administrative simplification plans, and long-term visions such as *Ostbelgien 2040*. This smaller but conceptually consistent segment highlights the administrative priorities of a compact, tightly integrated regional system. Across these levels, the corpus contains a diverse set of document types: 15-18 government agreements, 45-50 policy notes, 8-10 long-term strategic visions, 25-30 digitalisation strategies, 20-25 simplification/interoperability documents, 15-20 local governance reform texts and 25-30 advisory opinions (mainly SERV). Thematically, the corpus demonstrates striking convergence. Digitalisation and interoperability appear in over 60% of all documents, administrative simplification and coherence in 50%, local governance capacity in 35%, citizen-centricity and trust in 40%, and digital inclusion in approximately 25%. Legal certainty and procedural quality appear consistently, particularly within advisory opinions.

Overall, this corpus reveals a reform agenda that is not shaped by crisis or rupture, but by engineering coherence in a fragmented state, building digital infrastructures, strengthening local capacity, ensuring inclusive access to services, and maintaining legal clarity. The breadth and depth of the dataset allow the analysis to reconstruct Belgium's administrative philosophy with precision: a mature, methodical, and institutionally confident model of public sector transformation.

6.2. Definition of Public Administration Reform in Belgium

Public administration reform in Belgium emerges from a landscape that is both institutionally fragmented and remarkably consistent in its aspirations. Despite the country's five overlapping layers of governance, the reform discourse across federal, Flemish, Walloon, Brussels, and German-speaking Community documents converges around a shared vision: a modern, coherent, digitally enabled state that serves citizens with clarity, transparency, and fairness. What is striking in the Belgian corpus is the absence of drama. Unlike systems where reform is presented as a rupture, a break with the past, or a battle against entrenched political interests, Belgian documents speak in a quieter, more pragmatic tone. Reform appears as a long-term administrative craft, built step by step, often technocratic in style, but anchored in a clear understanding of the state's responsibility toward its citizens. Three core ideas define this understanding:

1. **Digitalisation as the structural backbone of reform:** Across regions and levels of government, digitalisation is not framed as an IT project, but as the infrastructure through which the state is rebuilt. Documents such as Vlaanderen Radicaal Digitaal, Digital Wallonia, and Easy Brussels describe a transition in which: interactions between citizens and administration become "all-digital," institutions

rely on "harmonised data standards" and interoperable systems, and digital tools support transparency, service quality, and administrative coherence. Digitalisation is thus not a theme of reform, but the format of reform itself. It reorganises workflows, simplifies procedures, and provides a common language across a traditionally fragmented administrative system.

2. **Administrative simplification and citizen-centred services:** A second pillar is the sustained effort to reduce administrative burdens, both for citizens and for public institutions. The Flemish white paper on open and agile government, for instance, calls for "simplifying procedures, integrating services, and reducing unnecessary burdens," presenting simplification not only as efficiency, but as a democratic responsibility. Brussels follows the same line with its vision of a "Région simplifiée et digitale," while Wallonia's programmes embed simplification into broader regional development objectives. Across these documents, reform is framed as the work of removing obstacles between the citizen and the state – making rights more accessible, communication clearer, and administrative pathways more intuitive. The state is expected not simply to function, but to function with empathy, clarity, and fairness.
3. **Strengthening coherence and institutional capacity:** Belgium's multi-level governance produces recurring concerns about fragmentation, and many reform documents present coherence as a central objective. The interoperability agenda speaks explicitly about the need for "cohesive administrative architectures," while local governance reforms emphasise the integration of municipalities and OCMWs to create more resilient, capable local administrations. SERV advisory opinions, often the most principled documents in the corpus, insist on the preconditions for sustainable reform: legal certainty, high-quality legislation, and clear institutional responsibilities. Their analyses underline that structural change can only succeed if the underlying legal and organisational foundations are robust. In this sense, reform is not simply digital or managerial – it is deeply institutional, concerned with how government structures relate to each other, how responsibilities are allocated, and how coherence can be achieved in a complex state.

Belgium stands out in Europe for integrating digital inclusion into the very definition of reform. The Barometer Digitale Inclusie offers a stark warning: "*46% of the population is digitally vulnerable*" and reliance on digital tools risks deepening inequality unless accompanied by robust inclusion policies. This insight permeates regional strategies. Digital transformation must not reproduce or amplify socio-economic divides; instead, it should become a tool for equal access to essential services. Reform is therefore imagined not only as modernisation, but as a commitment to fairness in a society undergoing rapid digital change.

Taken together, these elements show that Belgian public administration reform is understood as a continuous, systemic modernisation with four defining features: **Digital-by-design governance** that restructures processes, data flows, and interactions; **Simplified and citizen-centred administration** that reduces burdens and improves accessibility; **Institutional coherence and capacity-building**, especially in a fragmented state; **Inclusive modernisation**, attentive to socio-digital inequalities and legal protections.

This is not reform as political rupture. It is reform as architectural work: designing, aligning, and maintaining a public administration capable of delivering high-quality, transparent, and equitable services in a digital century.

6.3. Motives for Reform in Belgium

If the definition of reform in Belgium is steady and technocratic, the motives that drive it are more revealing. They show what the Belgian public sector is concerned about, what problems it tries to solve, and what pressures – internal or external – shape its administrative agenda. Across federal and regional documents, six families of motives stand out. They recur in different formulations, but their substance converges clearly.

Overcoming structural fragmentation: Belgium's institutional design – multilevel, multilingual, and constitutionally dispersed – produces a recurring concern visible in almost every major policy note: the need for coherence, seamless coordination, and integration of responsibilities. Interoperability documents openly acknowledge that the administrative landscape is too fragmented and that shared data infrastructures are necessary to "create cohesive administrative architectures." Local governance reforms, especially those concerning the integration of municipalities and OCMWs, are justified by the belief that only more coherent

structures can sustain predictable, high-quality service delivery. Reform is needed because fragmentation risks inefficiency and confusion, and the state can no longer deliver effectively without structural alignment (*implicit motive*).

The pressure of digital transformation: A second powerful motive is the recognition that Belgium must modernise the machinery of the state to keep pace with technological and societal change. Digital strategies describe digitalisation as: "a societal transformation" (Digital Wallonia), "the foundation for future administrative interaction" (Flanders), and the path toward "a simpler and more transparent Brussels." Here, the motive is not only efficiency. It is also legitimacy. A state that cannot offer intuitive, digital, user-friendly services risks losing credibility with citizens who already live digitally in all other spheres of life. We find here an explicit problem framing: traditional processes are too slow, too paper-based, too siloed and without digitalisation, Belgium risks both administrative stagnation and social inequality.

Administrative burdens and citizen frustration: Belgium's reform discourse consistently evokes a concern common to many European administrations: complexity generates distrust. Flemish white papers speak about: "unnecessary burdens", "overly complex procedures" and the need to "improve the quality and clarity of administration." Brussels frames simplification as essential to "rebuild trust through better services." SERV, in its advisory opinions, frequently warns that unclear rules, inconsistent legal frameworks, or poorly designed processes not only create inefficiency, but also undermine citizens' confidence in the administration. There is an implicit motive here: a simpler state is a more legitimate state and reducing bureaucratic friction is a defence against frustration and disengagement.

Ensuring legal certainty, integrity, and high-quality governance: Belgium's legislative councils (especially SERV) repeatedly emphasise that complex reforms – especially structural ones – risk generating legal uncertainty, conflicts between federal and regional law, unclear responsibilities, and weakened rights protections. For SERV, reform is necessary precisely to: protect administrative rights, foster predictable governance, and safeguard the rule of law. In the Decreet Lokaal Bestuur, SERV voices specific concerns about data protection, personnel rights, and the need for clear oversight mechanisms – implying that reform is justified only if it respects legal proportionality and clarity (explicit motive: without legal certainty, administrative reform can produce confusion rather than progress).

Socio-digital inequalities and the risk of exclusion. Belgium is unusually explicit in recognising digital inequality as a systemic risk. The *Barometer Digitale Inclusie* reports that: 46% of Belgians are digitally vulnerable, reliance on smartphones alone is a marker of precarious access, and essential services risk becoming inaccessible to those with limited skills. This creates a compelling motive: reform must be accompanied by inclusion, otherwise digitalisation will generate new layers of inequality in access to rights. The Walloon and Brussels strategies similarly insist that digital services must be equitable and human-centred. Reform is then needed not merely to modernise, but to prevent a two-speed society where vulnerable groups fall behind (implicit motive).

Strengthening local governance and administrative capacity: Several reforms, especially in Flanders, aim to reinforce local government by merging political and administrative levels (*gemeenten*-OCMWs), integrated planning cycles, reduction of mandates in inter-municipal structures, and more autonomy paired with clearer responsibilities. SERV frames these changes as necessary to ensure that municipalities have "*sufficient capacity to implement their mandates.*" (explicit motive)

6.4. The Envisioned Future Public Administration in Belgium

If the motives for reform reveal what Belgium seeks to fix, the future model of public administration shows what the country aspires to become. Across the federal, Flemish, Walloon, Brussels-Capital, and German-speaking Community documents, reform is not imagined as a moment, but as a **transition toward a more coherent, digital, inclusive, and citizen-centred state**. Belgium's vision of its future administration is not revolutionary or ideological. It is architectural. The documents describe a system that should function more smoothly, communicate more clearly, and operate with the confidence and calm of institutions that know what they are doing. The emphasis is on capability, coherence, and fairness—qualities that give the state stability and citizens predictability. The future Belgian administration can be understood through five interlinked characteristics.

1. **A digitally driven, interoperable, "once-only" administration:** Belgium's future state is imagined as digital-by-design. Not digital as an add-on, but digital as the organising principle. Documents repeatedly refer to: interoperable systems, harmonised data standards, cloud infrastructures, once-only (Only Once) data collection, user-friendly digital portals and predictive and data-driven policymaking. Rather than multiple administrations asking citizens for the same information, the future system anticipates: *"a coherent administrative architecture where data flows seamlessly across services"* (Interoperability Report); Flanders expresses this vision most explicitly: *"All interactions with the administration should be digital, intuitive, and accessible."* (Vlaanderen Radicaal Digitaal). Digital Wallonia frames it similarly as a *territoire intelligent*, where digital tools support both governance and social inclusion. The future administration is therefore not simply modernised – it is interconnected, able to coordinate across levels and institutions without friction.
2. **A simpler, clearer, more predictable administration**: Across regions, the documents converge on a future where administration is: easier to understand, easier to navigate, easier to trust. Belgium imagines a state where simplicity becomes a civic right. The Brussels "Easy Way" document describes a region: *"simplifiée et digitale"* where administrative time, steps, and uncertainty are reduced. Flemish white papers frame simplification as crucial to both efficiency and legitimacy: "Simplifying procedures, integrating services, and reducing unnecessary burdens ensure trust and clarity." The future Belgian administration is therefore a less heavy administration: light in procedures, transparent in expectations, and coherent in design.
3. **A citizen- and rights-centred state:** Almost all Belgian reform documents tie administrative transformation to citizens' rights and democratic legitimacy. Belgium imagines a state where: services are accessible to all, communication is "*heerlijk helder*" (beautifully clear), rights can be exercised without navigating complexity, and vulnerable groups are protected from digital exclusion. The Barometer Digitale Inclusie emphasises that digitalisation must be equitable: "*46% of the population is digitally vulnerable."; "Exclusive reliance on smartphones is a marker of vulnerability."* This insight shapes a future where public services are designed not only for the most digitally literate, but for everyone. Administrative reform is thus connected to fairness, dignity, and the social contract. Belgium's future state is human-oriented, not tech-oriented.
4. **A more coherent and resilient multi-level state:** Given Belgium's unique institutional design, the envisioned future administration emphasises: coordination across levels of government, integrated planning cycles, clearer distribution of competences, shared standards, and consolidated local capacity. The Flemish integration of municipalities and OCMWs represents one of the clearest attempts to reduce institutional fragmentation at the local level. SERV describes the goal as: "*ensuring municipalities have sufficient capacity to implement their mandates*." More broadly, the future system aspires to be less fragmented, less duplicative, and less prone to inconsistency in regulation or service delivery. Belgium imagines a state where complexity does not disappear – because it cannot but is managed consciously and coherently.
5. **An administration that is legally robust, ethical, and procedurally stable:** The SERV advisory opinions give voice to another pillar of the future model: respect for the rule of law, legal certainty, and administrative ethics. In the reform of local governance, SERV repeatedly insists on: clear procedural guarantees, protection of personnel rights, transparent oversight mechanisms, good legislative drafting, data protection, and coherent regulatory frameworks. These concerns shape a vision of public administration that is stable, predictable, and anchored in legality – qualities that strengthen democratic resilience. The future administration is therefore not just efficient or digital; it is institutionally careful. This is a model of reform built not on disruption, but on administrative craftsmanship.

6.5. Resilient Institutions in Belgium

Reading across the Belgian reform documents, one has the impression of entering an administrative culture that does not shout its principles but lives them quietly. Its documents reflect a system where resilience is woven into the ordinary work of governance: in how legislation is drafted, how procedures are aligned, how digital infrastructures are built, and how rights are safeguarded. Institutional resilience in Belgium emerges through four subtle but powerful patterns.

1. A professional public administration, implicitly meritocratic and politically stable: Belgian documents rarely use the vocabulary of *meritocracy* or *political neutrality*. This is not because these principles are absent, but because they are taken for granted. Administrative professionalism appears through stable HR structures,

integrated management cycles, and clear legal frameworks. The reform of local governance, for example, insists on predictable personnel rights, transparent disciplinary rules, and coherent organisational structures. These are not framed as protections against political interference, but as conditions for "legal and administrative certainty." This quietness is meaningful: Belgium does not need to assert depoliticization loudly because the administrative culture already leans toward it. Resilience here is understated: a stability that comes from habit, not rhetoric.

2. Integrity expressed as legality, proportionality, and ethical data governance: Unlike countries where the reform discourse is shaped by concerns about corruption or politicisation, Belgian documents treat integrity as a question of legality and proportionality. When SERV critiques draft reforms, it does so on grounds of legislative coherence, respect for rights, and the constitutional division of powers. These are the everyday ethics of a mature system: ensuring that reforms do not overreach, that responsibilities are clear, and that rights are protected. In the digital domain, integrity takes a new form. As Belgium invests in interoperable databases, cloud infrastructures, and digital-by-default services, it simultaneously stresses data protection, secure systems, and responsible information sharing. This shows a shift toward ethical digital governance, where the protection of citizens' data becomes a contemporary expression of public sector integrity. Rather than building anti-corruption campaigns, Belgium builds ethical guardrails into its digital transition.

3. Transparency as both a democratic value and a practical tool: Transparency is the most visible expression of resilience in Belgian reform documents. But here, transparency is not a slogan. It is a practical working principle woven into digital portals, mandatory online publication of decisions, clear communication standards, and structured planning cycles. Transparency is conceived not as an obligation to disclose, but as a way of organising administration: tools, platforms, open data, simplified forms, traceable procedures. Belgium's reform narrative suggests that transparency is what makes a fragmented state governable. In a system where competences are dispersed, transparency is also a mechanism of horizontal accountability – ensuring that administrations can see and understand each other. This is resilience through openness, through clarity, through predictable access to information.

4. Administrative capacity strengthened through coherence, digitalisation, and legal stability: This is where Belgian institutional resilience becomes most visible. Reform after reform, document after document, Belgium returns to the same priorities: reducing fragmentation, improving interoperability, harmonising standards, strengthening local capacity, ensuring legal certainty. Digitalisation is not merely technological; it becomes the architecture through which a multi-level state learns to govern itself more coherently. Interoperability is framed as the solution to overlapping responsibilities. Integrated planning cycles create predictability. SERV's insistence on legal certainty builds structural stability. In Belgium, administrative capacity is resilience. Not muscular, centralised, or hierarchical, but coherent, predictable, and interconnected.

6.6. Benign vs Suspicious Absence

One of the most revealing aspects of the Belgian corpus is not what is present, but what is *absent*. Unlike countries where public administration reform is framed around crises of politicisation, declining integrity, or concerns about democratic backsliding, Belgian documents rarely mention, explicitly – terms such as *meritocracy*, *political neutrality*, *anti-corruption*, or even *integrity standards*. At first glance, this silence may appear surprising. There is also a lack of narrated resilience: documents assume it. The absence is not evasive: it is *benign*. To understand why, we must look at three elements: the language of the documents, their internal logic, and the broader institutional context. Belgian reform documents are written in a tone that is consistently technical, precise, and calm. They do not problematise political interference, integrity risks, or unprofessional administrative practices. Instead, they focus on digital transformation, administrative coherence, citizen experience, planning and budgeting cycles, legal certainty, interoperability, and public service accessibility. These are concerns characteristic of systems that have already solved the most fundamental problems of democratic governance. The discourse is one of refinement rather than repair, of adjustment rather than rescue. When a system does not speak about politicisation, it is often because politicisation is not a central administrative threat.

A second reason the absence is benign is the orientation of reforms. Belgian documents focus overwhelmingly on innovation, digitalisation, efficiency, open government, evidence-based policymaking, service quality. They

do *not* focus on strengthening the executive at the expense of oversight, concentrating power in central institutions, reducing institutional autonomy, relying on vague ideological appeals, reshaping administrative careers along political lines. In other words, the Belgian reform agenda does not resemble the reform agendas in countries undergoing democratic drift. Its ambitions are administrative, not political; infrastructural, not rhetorical. This orientation is itself a sign of institutional maturity.

The documents consistently reference earlier strategies, update them, or build upon them. This is important: in systems with weakening institutions, strategies typically break with the past. They delegitimise prior reforms or claim to initiate a "new model". Belgium does the opposite. Digital Wallonia evolves into Digital Wallonia V3. Vlaanderen Radicaal Digitaal becomes a deeper architecture of interoperability. Local governance reforms build on earlier cycles of integration. Brussels' simplification programmes expand gradually. This consistency indicates a stable administrative culture in which reform is iterative and non-conflictual.

Even without external indicators quoted explicitly, the internal evidence from the documents aligns with what is known about Belgium: high rule-of-law stability, strong administrative professionalism, robust constitutional guarantees, active oversight bodies (SERV, Raad van State, Cour des Comptes), low perceived corruption, resilient multi-level governance. Nothing in the reform texts suggests attempts to weaken these safeguards. If anything, reforms reinforce them through legal clarity, transparent communication, digital safeguards, and predictable administrative structures.

6.7. Populism Risk Assessment in Belgian Reform Documents

Public administration reform can unintentionally create vulnerabilities that populism later exploits. This section examines how Belgian reform texts interact with the seven structural risk factors identified in Prompt 4. What emerges is a reform landscape that is highly resilient – not because Belgium directly addresses populism, but because its administrative philosophy, legal culture, and digital transformation agenda collectively reduce many of the systemic entry points typically used by populist narratives. Belgium's documents do not speak about populism. But they speak in ways that make populism less effective.

Belgian documents do not reference an erosion of trust explicitly, yet trust appears throughout the corpus as an embedded objective. Administrative simplification, digital clarity, and transparency are consistently framed as tools to reinforce legitimacy: simplified procedures reduce frustration, clear digital platforms strengthen predictability, publication of decisions promotes transparency, "*heerlijk helder*" communication is a democratic virtue. In Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels alike, the vision is a state whose clarity and accessibility generate confidence – not by persuasion, but by design.

Few European countries articulate the bureaucratic burden as systematically as Belgium. Across regions, simplification is framed as a structural duty: "simplifying procedures," "reducing unnecessary burdens," "integrating services," "moving toward a simpler Brussels," "clearer citizen journeys," "once-only" data collection. The framing is not that citizens distrust the state, but that the state owes citizens a frictionless administrative experience. This is a powerful counter-narrative to populism, which often weaponizes bureaucracy as evidence of detachment or incompetence.

In addition, Belgium knows its own vulnerabilities intimately. Fragmentation is not hidden; it is named and addressed repeatedly. Documents emphasise interoperability, shared data infrastructures, coordination mechanisms, integration of municipalities and OCMWs, reduction of mandates in inter-municipal structures, unified management cycles (BBC), and harmonisation of digital services. This is reform as stitching, a careful effort to create coherence in a constitutionally dispersed system.

Finally, Belgium's documents do not speak about depoliticization directly. But they consistently frame personnel rights, transparent procedures, unified HR systems, clear disciplinary protections, and predictable administrative cycles as essential elements of reform. SERV's insistence on *"legal and administrative certainty"* indirectly protects civil servants from arbitrary political influence. The analysed documents' look to fairness and justice not through meritocratic rhetoric, but through legal proportionality, data protection, rights-based administration, transparent oversight, ethical digital governance. Integrity appears as legislative quality, not as anti-corruption

struggle. This is itself a marker of institutional maturity: systems that do not face widespread nepotism seldom feel the need to talk about meritocracy. Belgium positions service quality at the centre of reform. Digital-by-default services, local capacity-building, and simplified procedures are framed as: protecting access to rights, anticipating citizens' expectations, maintaining social cohesion. Moreover, the *Barometer Digitale Inclusie* highlights that essential services risk becoming inaccessible to vulnerable groups. By naming this risk and integrating inclusion into the reform agenda, Belgium avoids the populist pattern where digitalisation creates new inequalities.

Belgian reform discourse approaches public administration as a profession requiring: capability, coherence, digital literacy, legal clarity, and continuous improvement. Although prestige is not explicitly discussed, the entire tone of the documents suggests respect for the public sector as a complex craft that requires skill and responsibility. The absence of rhetoric that undermines the administration is itself striking. The narrative is constructive, solution-oriented, and appreciative. Belgium's reform discourse acts like a stabiliser: it prevents the political temperature from rising by offering a governance model grounded in clarity, predictability, legal certainty, and inclusiveness. This is perhaps the most subtle form of democratic resilience.

6.8. Preliminary Conclusions

Across institutional layers, political contexts, and administrative traditions, the Belgian corpus reveals, now, a surprising degree of coherence, with five themes standing out clearly.

1. Digitalisation as the Administrative Backbone: Belgium treats digitalisation as the structural infrastructure of the modern state. Not as an efficiency tool, but as the architecture through which governance becomes coherent, accessible, and future proof. Interoperability, data standards, cloud systems, digital-by-default services, and the "once-only" principle serve as the connective tissue of the state across federal and regional lines. Digital governance is the language through which Belgium imagines itself as a 21st-century administration.

2. Managing Fragmentation Through Coherence: Belgium's constitutional complexity is not denied; it is confronted and managed directly. Reforms consistently emphasise integration of local structures, harmonised planning cycles, coordination of responsibilities, streamlined decision-making, interoperable data infrastructures. The state's fragmentation is treated not as a flaw, but as a design challenge requiring continuous attention and architectural solutions. Belgium's administrative resilience lies in its ability to create coherence without needing uniformity.

3. Transparency and Simplification as Foundations of Legitimacy: Simplification appears not only as efficiency, but as a moral obligation toward citizens. Belgium sees clarity as a democratic virtue: transparent decisions, clear communication, accessible services, and the reduction of unnecessary burdens. Simplification is how Belgium prevents frustration, strengthens trust, and keeps populist narratives at bay.

4. Inclusion as a Democratic Safeguard: The *Barometer Digitale Inclusie* treats inequality in access to digital services not merely as a social issue, but as a risk to rights, social cohesion, and democratic functioning. This recognition ensures that digital transition remains human-centred, with attention to vulnerable groups, older adults, job seekers, and low-income households. Belgium's reform discourse thus protects not only efficiency, but equity.

5. Legal Certainty and Procedural Quality as Ethical Anchors: SERV's advisory opinions highlight that reforms must rest on: high-quality legislation, clarity of competences, predictable rights, robust oversight mechanisms, constitutional proportionality, and disciplined rulemaking. This creates a culture where legality is the expression of ethics. Belgium understands administrative integrity not through grand declarations, but through respectful, careful, procedurally rigorous governance. This disciplined legal culture is one of Belgium's strongest resilience assets.

Belgium's public administration reform narrative is neither dramatic nor ideological. It is **architectural**, gradual, and deeply rooted in institutional maturity. What emerges from the corpus is a model that blends three identities: the digital state (structurally modern and interconnected, where digital systems serve as the backbone

of service delivery, coordination, and decision-making); the coherent state (managing complexity with design discipline achieved via interoperable systems, integrated planning cycles, and simplified structures); and a human centred state, attentive to rights, inclusion, and fairness (digitalisation is accompanied by safeguards: inclusion, accessibility, legal certainty, clarity, and proportionality).

Belgium's reform documents reveal a public administration striving to be predictable without being rigid, innovative without being disruptive, transparent without being performative, inclusive without being paternalistic. It is a system that does not fear acknowledging its own complexity. Instead, it responds through careful, layered, evidence-based engineering – stitching coherence where fragmentation is inevitable, and building trust through clarity rather than rhetoric. In this sense, Belgium represents an example of administrative modernisation in a mature democracy, where reform is not a political instrument, but an ongoing craft anchored in stability, legality, and citizen service.

7. THE NETHERLANDS' EMERGING CASE

This section presents a preliminary analysis of the Dutch reform discourse, based on a corpus of approximately **30 strategic documents** produced between 2017 and 2025. The analysis remains work-in-progress: additional Dutch documents are still being analysed and will be integrated in future iterations of the CLIO Library. Nonetheless, the existing corpus already reveals a distinct pattern of institutional behaviour that differs markedly from Belgium's mature stability and Romania's emergent procedural resilience. The Netherlands offers a compelling case of what may be called *Reactive Resilience*: a profound reorientation of administrative norms following a systemic failure that disrupted a long-standing self-perception of administrative competence. The critical juncture in this transformation is the *Kinderopvangtoeslagaffaire* (Childcare Benefits Scandal), formally acknowledged in the 2020 Parliamentary Inquiry Report. This moment constitutes a classic *punctuated equilibrium* event: a sudden shock that exposes deep structural vulnerabilities, triggers political accountability at the highest level (including government resignation), and redefines the trajectory of public administration reform. The documents reviewed – coalition agreements, Recovery and Resilience Plan components, digital government strategies, and Open Government Partnership (OGP) action plans – capture the transition from a system that assumed its own effectiveness to one undertaking a deliberate project of ethical, cultural, and structural repair.

7.1. A Model of Asymmetric Reactive Resilience

Pillar 1: Meritocracy and Political Neutrality: Dutch administrative culture presumes strong professional standards. Meritocracy is rarely discussed explicitly because it is generally taken for granted. Yet post-scandal documents, especially the *Werk aan Uitvoering* (WAU) agenda and the *Staat van Bestuur* assessment, reveal concerns about execution capacity (*uitvoering*). The issue is not formal neutrality, but the ability of agencies to operate humanely, competently, and autonomously when under institutional or political pressure. Thus functional meritocracy proved vulnerable not through politicisation, but through over-bureaucratisation and rigid rule enforcement that overshadowed contextual judgment.

Pillar 2: Integrity and Public Ethics: Integrity is the pillar where vulnerability is most visible. The scandal exposed a culture of procedural hostility, data misuse, poor information transparency, and institutional defensiveness. Subsequent documents express a profound normative shift toward trust (*vertrouwen*), citizen-centredness, and ethical discretion. The Dutch system demonstrates a rare form of reactive accountability – the capacity for radical introspection, political sanctioning, and normative realignment following a governance catastrophe.

Pillar 3: Transparency, Accountability, and Participation: Transparency emerges as one of the strongest reform drivers. Repeated OGP Action Plans and the *Wet Open Overheid* (WOO) mandate proactive disclosure, improved access to information, open data, and more predictable administrative communication. However, transparency is coupled with a reduction of direct-democratic instruments, exemplified by the repeal of the Advisory Referendum Law. This reflects a rebalancing toward representative and procedural accountability, rather than

participatory experimentation. Openness is deployed strategically to rebuild institutional legitimacy, even as representative democracy is strengthened relative to direct consultation.

Pillar 4: Administrative Capacity and Coherence: High capacity is framed as essential to preventing future failures. Documents such as *NL DIGIbeter 2020*, the Digital Government Agenda, the Inter-Administrative Programme (IBP), and the Recovery and Resilience Plan converge around digitalisation, interoperability, once-only principles, and cross-government coherence. The Netherlands views organisational fragmentation and execution weaknesses as systemic risks that can be mitigated through integrated digital infrastructures and coordinated administrative design.

7.2. Discussion: Populist Risk and Reactive Resilience

The Dutch case illustrates that populist risk does not arise only from ideological polarisation – it can also emerge from administrative injustice. The scandal generated public distrust and offered fertile ground for populist narratives about an indifferent or punitive state. The government's response seeks to pre-empt this risk by explicitly acknowledging administrative wrongdoing, focusing on execution quality and error prevention, and institutionalising proactive transparency to prevent opacity, while deliberately avoiding populist concessions such as expanding direct democracy. In this regard, Dutch resilience differs from Belgium's quiet stability and Romania's externally anchored reforms. The Dutch model is one of self-corrective institutional learning, triggered by failure rather than by external pressure or long-term administrative design.

The Netherlands represents then a form of **Reactive Resilience** characteristic of mature democratic systems capable of confronting their own failures. The challenge ahead – visible throughout the corpus – is to ensure that the cultural shift toward trust, ethical discretion, and humane execution becomes embedded not only in reform strategies but in daily administrative practice. As this analysis is based on a partial corpus (≈30 documents), it remains an initial mapping of the emerging Dutch reform narrative. WP3 will expand this case as additional strategic documents are validated and integrated into the CLIO Library. The preliminary findings nonetheless demonstrate the portability of the analytical framework and provide a clear contrast with the Belgian and Romanian trajectories.

8. CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

A comparative reading of the reform discourses in Romania, Belgium, and the Netherlands reveals three distinct administrative ecologies, each with its own logic of resilience, reform priorities, and institutional self-understanding. Although the size and nature of the documentary corpus differ (Belgium ~165 documents, Romania ~70, the Netherlands ~30, with the Dutch case still work in progress), this variation does not hinder comparability. Rather, it allows us to observe how different governance systems articulate reform under conditions of maturity, emergence, or post-crisis reconstruction. The result is not a uniform picture of "European administrative reform", but a constellation of reform philosophies shaped by historical legacies, institutional architectures, and the political conditions under which reform is imagined.

8.1. Three Administrative Ecologies, Three Paths to Resilience

Belgium – The Mature Stability Model: Belgium's reform narrative is calm, methodical, and technocratic. It does not speak of crisis, politicisation, or democratic decay. Reform appears as administrative craftsmanship, grounded in legal certainty, simplification, digitalisation, and procedural coherence. Digitalisation functions as an architectural principle that weaves together a complex multi-level state through interoperability, integrated planning cycles, and predictable institutional routines. Resilience here is almost taken for granted: there is no rhetoric of emergency or repair because institutional trust is not framed as broken. It is a system where resilience is embedded in ordinary administrative design.

Romania – The Emergent Procedural Resilience Model: Romania stands in sharp contrast. While the corpus is substantial and increasingly sophisticated, the discourse reveals a state still in the process of constructing predictability, transparency, and institutional discipline. Reform is strongly shaped by external anchors (EU directives, OECD and EU assessments, NRRP conditionalities, digitalisation agendas) and by an internal need to stabilise basic administrative functions. Romanian documents speak frequently about inefficiency, capacity gaps, integrity risks, performance deficits, and the need for professionalisation. The silence on meritocracy and depoliticization is meaningful, signalling unresolved tensions in the administrative culture. The narrative is energetic and forward-looking, but uneven, anchored in procedural reconstruction and digital transformation as tools for legitimacy. Romania reflects a state actively seeking resilience, not yet living inside it.

Netherlands – The Reactive Ethical Reconstruction Model. The Netherlands presents a third trajectory: a post-crisis reform ecology. Even though the current Dutch corpus is smaller (~30 documents) and explicitly preliminary, it is dense, coherent, and shaped by the profound shock of the *Toeslagenaffaire* (Childcare Benefits Scandal). Reform documents display heightened sensitivity to transparency, fairness, error correction, data misuse, and administrative ethics. The state is seen as needing to repair its relationship with citizens. Where Belgium seeks simplification to increase transparency, and Romania seeks digitalisation to stabilise functions, the Netherlands seeks ethical restoration as the core of reform. Documents emphasise learning from failure, improving service empathy, safeguarding rights, and preventing digitally amplified injustices. Resilience here is introspective and reconstructive, driven by institutional humility.

Beyond their substantive differences, the three systems diverge in how they *imagine* the very nature of reform. In Belgium, reform is conceived as a form of administrative engineering, where digitalisation functions as the infrastructural backbone that sustains coherence and trust. In Romania, reform retains the character of state-building: transparency, legality, and Europeanisation frame its ambitions, while digitalisation operates as both a modernising instrument and a signal of alignment with European standards. In the Netherlands, reform is understood primarily as ethical repair — a project centred on accountability, fairness, and human-centred governance, with digitalisation treated not as progress by default but as a domain requiring safeguards after institutional trauma. All three pursue better services, stronger institutions, and digital transformation, but they do so with distinct internal narratives and drivers.

One of the most revealing comparative insights concerns **what the documents do not say**. In Belgium, the near absence of references to politicisation, corruption, or democratic crisis aligns with a discourse centred on refinement rather than rescue. Silence is largely benign. In Romania, the lack of emphasis on meritocracy, civil service autonomy, or HR depoliticization sits uneasily alongside frequent references to integrity risks and capacity gaps. Here, silence points to fragility and unresolved reform areas. In the Netherlands, silence is broken: themes previously assumed (fairness, empathy, proportionality) become explicit only after the scandal, signalling a rupture that forces norms to be named and reasserted. These patterns illustrate the analytical value of WP3's discourse methodology: institutional identities are shaped as much by the concepts they mobilise as by those they consistently leave unsaid.

For all three countries digitalisation is a common thread with different meanings: In Belgium, digitalisation is the backbone of administrative architecture – interoperability, shared data standards, cloud infrastructures, and "once-only" principles are presented as the structural solution to fragmentation. In Romania, digitalisation is both modernisation and corrective: a way to reduce fragmentation, improve transparency, and align with EU standards under the pressure of external conditionalities. In the Netherlands, digitalisation is ambivalent: an essential tool for coherence and service delivery, but also a site of ethical risk after algorithmic and data-driven injustice. Reform emphasises not only "more digital", but "safer and fairer digital". The same technical vocabulary thus encodes very different administrative self-understandings. The three reform trajectories also generate distinct profiles of administrative risk. In Belgium, the risk of populist appropriation remains low, supported by a stable institutional culture and a technocratic reform ethos; vulnerabilities arise instead from the persistent challenge of managing complexity in a multi-level state and maintaining coherence across overlapping layers of governance. Romania faces a markedly different configuration: trust deficits, politicised appointments, uneven meritocratic structures, and capacity gaps render its administrative system more exposed to populist narratives, with resilience still under construction and unevenly embedded. In the Netherlands, the principal risk does not stem from fragility but from the potential consequences of over-correction: a climate of hyper-transparency and

institutional caution may slow decision-making, while unresolved questions of digital ethics continue to represent a structural pressure point in the aftermath of the Childcare Benefits Scandal.

Despite these differences, **the three reform discourses converge on several priorities**: clearer service pathways, stronger digital infrastructures, more accessible and understandable administration, more robust protection of rights, and greater institutional humility in the face of complexity. Taken together, these cases suggest that contemporary European administrative reform is increasingly organised around the citizen's experience of the state, not only around internal machinery and procedures.

8.2 Theoretical Implications for Institutional Resilience in Europe

The three-country comparison offers several theoretical insights into how institutional resilience is constructed, communicated, and maintained in contemporary European public administrations. These insights move beyond description and speak to broader debates on democratic resilience, digital governance, and administrative reform. They show how different administrative cultures produce different varieties of resilience, and how discourse becomes a mechanism of institutional continuity or change.

Resilience as a Situated Administrative Property: Institutional resilience is not a generic quality, but a situated property shaped by each country's governance ecology. In Belgium, *resilience emerges as habitual stability* – the product of long-term professionalisation, legal coherence, and predictable multi-level coordination. It is not theorised; it is practiced. In Romania, *resilience is aspirational*, constructed through reforms aimed at transparency, digitalisation, and standardisation, often under external guidance. It is being built rather than inherited. In the Netherlands, *resilience becomes reflective and ethical* – a reaction to institutional failure in which the state redefines itself around fairness, accountability, and protection of rights. **This supports a theory of polycentric resilience:** European states do not converge on a single model, but translate resilience through their own histories, vulnerabilities, and reform paths.

Silence as a Diagnostic of Institutional Health: As shown in the comparative analysis, institutional silence is not a mere absence of information but a structural feature of administrative identity. Persistent silence in a context of stability (Belgium) can signal internalised norms and mature routines. Silence around unresolved vulnerabilities (Romania) can indicate blocked reform areas and potential risk zones. The breaking of silence after crisis (Netherlands) marks moments of institutional rupture and re-articulation of core values. This suggests that silence itself can function as a discourse-based indicator of institutional health, fragility, or transformation. For WP3, it opens a promising avenue: using discourse analysis to identify early warning signs or blind spots that standard governance indicators might miss.

Digitalisation as Structuring Force, Not Unifying Logic: Digitalisation appears as a meta-institutional infrastructure in all three countries, yet its function is contextually defined. In Belgium, it structures coherence in a fragmented state, in Romania, it symbolises and facilitates catching up with EU standards and in the Netherlands, it is simultaneously a tool of coordination and a domain of ethical concern. The implication is that theories of digital government should move beyond generic narratives of efficiency and service improvement. Digitalisation acts as administrative self-narration: through digital strategies, states tell a story about who they are, what they fear, and how they seek to secure legitimacy.

Balancing Procedural and Relational Resilience: The three cases reveal two complementary dimensions of resilience: **procedural resilience** – clear rules, legal certainty, stable coordination and predictable cycles (strong in Belgium, under construction in Romania); and **relational resilience** – trust, empathy, and the quality of state–citizen relations (most salient in the Dutch post-crisis context). Most systems need both, but they rarely develop symmetrically. Belgium prioritises procedural order; Romania is building basic procedural capacity; the Netherlands is reconstructing relational legitimacy after trauma. A generalizable insight is that institutional resilience is strongest when procedural capacity and relational legitimacy reinforce each other. Where they diverge, vulnerabilities emerge – a pattern that RADAR can map across a broader set of countries.

Reform Discourses as Early-Warning Instruments: Finally, the comparison suggests that reform discourse can function as an early-warning instrument for democratic resilience. Calm, technocratic language with strong

emphasis on legality, inclusion, and transparency (Belgium) tends to predict continuity and low populist vulnerability. Energetic but uneven narratives with gaps around meritocracy and politicisation (Romania) point to exposed flanks that populist actors can exploit. Introspective, self-critical narratives with strong ethical recalibration (Netherlands) signal a system in recovery, but also one that may become risk-averse or overcautious.

9. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

These discourse-based signals complement quantitative indicators (corruption indices, trust surveys, rule-of-law scores) and can enrich comparative diagnostics with a more fine-grained understanding of how states perceive and address their own weaknesses. The comparative analysis presented in this report illustrates the analytical contribution that WP3 brings to the RADAR project. By combining computational methods with expert validation, WP3 offers a scalable and systematic approach to understanding how European public administrations frame reform, resilience, and institutional legitimacy. The results gathered so far (based on the Romanian, Belgian, and preliminary Dutch corpora) demonstrate that AI-assisted document analysis can reveal patterns that are difficult to detect through traditional qualitative methods alone, particularly when navigating multilingual and multi-layered policy landscapes.

At the same time, the approach remains fully aligned with the scientific and operational goals of RADAR. By identifying how governments articulate transparency, digitalisation, administrative capacity, or ethical responsibility, WP3 directly supports the project's wider ambition to develop robust indicators of democratic resilience. The discourse patterns identified here – whether Belgium's infrastructural stability, Romania's procedural reconstruction, or the Netherlands' ethical self-correction – provide an evidence base that other Work Packages can build upon. They inform risk modelling in WP2, they guide fieldwork priorities in WP4, they shape scenario-building exercises in WP5, and they offer concrete inputs for the governance toolkit developed under WP6. This ensures coherence across the project and avoids duplication of effort, while strengthening the cross-national comparability of RADAR's analytical outputs.

These results, however, remain preliminary. The Dutch corpus is still expanding; additional partner country documents will be incorporated in the coming months; and all findings require triangulation through interviews, expert consultations, and institutional diagnostics in the subsequent phases of the project. Policy documents are strategic texts: they present intentions and self-descriptions that do not always match administrative practice. For this reason, WP3 treats these results as provisional hypotheses – diagnostic signals to be refined through interdisciplinary work rather than definitive statements about institutional performance.

The role of AI in this process is instrumental but not determinative. Large-scale language models enable WP3 to process extensive corpora rapidly and to detect structural features of reform discourse – patterns of silence, narrative configurations, and the conceptual architecture of reform. Yet interpretation remains the responsibility of researchers. As the project advances, WP3 will continue to refine its analytical pipeline, integrate additional corpora, and collaborate closely with other Work Packages to validate findings and enhance methodological depth. The work conducted so far demonstrates the feasibility, value, and strategic relevance of AI-assisted discourse analysis in understanding administrative resilience. It also confirms that WP3 is well positioned to deliver substantial contributions to RADAR's overarching mission: strengthening democratic resilience by systematically analysing how European public administrations narrate their challenges, ambitions, and reform paths.

ANNEX 1. WP3 PROMPTS

PROMPT 1: IDENTIFYING RESILIENT INSTITUTIONS

"I want you to analyze the strategy document(s) I provide and identify whether and how **resilient public institutions** are present, as defined in OECD, SIGMA, GRECO, and EU governance standards. Please scan the document for evidence related to the four pillars of institutional resilience and analyze each pillar separately:

PILLAR 1 – Meritocracy and Political Neutrality

Search for:

• merit-based recruitment

• standardized competitive examinations

• competency frameworks

• protection from political interference

• career stability and predictability

• neutral and professional civil service

PILLAR 2 – Integrity and Public Ethics

Search for:

1. ethics standards and codes of conduct

2. integrity policies

3. anti-corruption mechanisms

4. disciplinary procedures

5. conflict-of-interest rules

6. internal audit and compliance systems

PILLAR 3 – Transparency, Accountability, and Participation

Search for:

• transparency in decision-making

• access to information

• public consultation mechanisms

• open data

• performance reporting

• citizen feedback and participation

• clear communication standards

PILLAR 4 – Administrative Capacity and Institutional Coherence

Search for:

• strategic planning

• monitoring and evaluation

• evidence-based policymaking

• digitalisation and interoperability

• organizational coherence

• management of performance

• professional development of civil servants

OUTPUT I EXPECT:

• **Direct quotations** from the document for each pillar (if available).

• **Your interpretation** of why these quotations demonstrate or do not demonstrate resilient institutions.

• A rating for each pillar:

· "Strongly present"

· "Moderately present"

· "Weakly present"

· "Absent"

• A **final assessment**:

· "Resilient institutions consolidated"

· "Resilient institutions emerging"

· "Resilient institutions fragile"

· "Resilient institutions absent / high democratic risk"

Do not limit yourself to literal keywords. Identify conceptual equivalents even if phrased differently."

PROMPT 2: Testing Whether the Absence of Democratic/Resilience Concepts Is Benign

This prompt helps determine whether the absence of terms like meritocracy, integrity, transparency, and depoliticisation is normal (benign) or a warning sign of democratic backsliding.

PROMPT 2 — TESTING FOR BENIGN ABSENCE

"I want you to evaluate whether the absence of explicit references to meritocracy, political neutrality, integrity, anti-corruption, transparency, or competency-based public management in a national strategy document represents a benign absence (because the country has mature, consolidated institutions) or a warning sign of deterioration or democratic backsliding.

Please follow this methodology:

STEP A – Analyse the Document Itself

Evaluate:

• Type of language used

Is it technical, professional, coherent?

Or political, vague, ideological?

• Orientation of the reform

Toward innovation, efficiency, digitalisation, advanced public services (sign of institutional maturity), OR

Toward control, centralisation, loyalty, discipline (potential warning sign).

• Structure of the reform

Does it focus on high-level modernization, smart governance, or service quality?

Or on strengthening executive authority, reducing institutional autonomy, or vague structural changes?

• Continuity with previous strategies

If earlier strategies spoke about merit, transparency, integrity, and these concepts suddenly disappear, treat this as a red flag.

STEP B – Cross-Check with International Indicators ("Reality Check")

Consult (or request) the country's scores in:

• European Commission: Rule of Law Report

• GRECO: Anti-Corruption Evaluation

• OECD SIGMA: Public Governance Assessments

• Freedom House: Democracy Score

• World Bank: Worldwide Governance Indicators

• EU Justice Scoreboard

For each indicator:

• Assess whether the country performs high, medium, or low.

• Note if there are criticisms regarding politicisation, integrity, transparency, or institutional capture.

• Correlate indicators with the document's content:

If indicators are strong → the absence may be benign.

If indicators are deteriorating/poor → the absence is likely suspicious.

STEP C – Final Verdict: Benign or Suspicious

Provide one of the following conclusions:

• "Benign absence — institutions are mature; the strategy is in a post-resilience stage."

• "Partially benign absence — institutions are generally strong, but vulnerabilities exist."

• "Suspicious absence — potential signs of democratic decline or institutional weakening."

Justify your verdict using:

5) textual evidence

6) international indicators

7) your analysis of language, structure, and coherence of the reform.

Be precise, rigorous, and neutral."

PROMPT 3: Reform Meaning → Reform Motives → Future State Model

"I will provide you with one or more national documents related to public administration (such as public administration reform strategies, public service development plans, civil service strategies, integrity/anti-corruption documents, digitalisation strategies, or other governance frameworks).

Please analyze all documents holistically and answer *three* core questions in a structured, evidence-based manner:

1. What does "public administration reform" mean in these documents?

Provide:

- a clear definition based on the documents;
- an explanation of the underlying philosophy of reform (professionalisation, depoliticisation, efficiency, digital transformation, service orientation, etc.);
- references to specific passages (quote exactly where possible);
- a synthesis of how the documents conceptualise reform (administrative, managerial, democratic, digital, ethical, etc.).

2. What are the reasons and arguments invoked for the need for reform?

Identify all explicit and implicit motives. Categorise them, for example:

1. governance or bureaucratic weaknesses,

2. integrity and corruption concerns,

3. low performance or poor service delivery,

4. political or institutional fragmentation,

5. digitalisation gaps,

6. public trust problems,

7. socio-economic or demographic pressures,

8. alignment with EU/OECD standards.

For each motive:

• extract direct quotations,

• explain why the document considers this a problem,

• group motives into root causes (systemic), secondary causes, and contextual factors.

3. How is the public administration expected to look after the proposed reforms?

Describe the *future state* or *target model* envisioned in the documents.

Identify elements such as:

1. merit-based and politically neutral civil service,

2. stronger integrity and ethical standards,

3. transparent and accountable governance,

4. digital, interoperable and efficient processes,

5. citizen-centred service delivery,

6. strategic and evidence-based policymaking,

7. coherent institutional architecture,

8. professional management of human resources,

9. resilient and modern institutions able to implement policies.

Provide:

• a narrative description,

• bullet-point characteristics,

• mapping between proposed reforms and expected outcomes,

• illustrative quotes when possible.

Deliverables:

Please structure your output as follows:

A. Definition of Public Administration Reform (from the documents)

• Synthesis

• Key themes

• Direct quotations

B. Motives for Reform

•List of explicit motives with explanations

•List of implicit motives (inferred from context)

•Quotes supporting each motive

C. The Envisioned Future Public Administration

•Narrative description

•Bullet list of features

•Direct quotes illustrating the vision

D. Optional (only if relevant): Identify cross-cutting themes

such as good governance, resilience, transparency, digitalisation, anti-corruption, professionalism, depoliticisation.

You must base your answer entirely on the content of the documents provided and cite passages directly. Avoid speculation."

PROMPT 4: Populism

"I will provide one or more strategic, governmental or public administration documents. Your task is to identify whether the document contains elements that help reduce, address, or inadvertently create vulnerabilities exploited by populism.

Please analyse the text according to the following seven categories of populism-related structural risks:

1. Low public trust in institutions

Look for:

- commitments to strengthen trust, transparency, accountability;
- references to legitimacy, participation, democratic oversight;
- evidence of acknowledging mistrust as a problem.

2. Excessive bureaucracy and resulting citizen frustration

Look for:

- administrative simplification measures;
- reduction of red tape;
- improved service delivery;
- any risks that bureaucracy is portrayed or could be perceived as hostile to citizens.

3. Institutional fragmentation and incoherent governance

Look for:

1. reforms targeting coordination, integration, merging agencies, streamlining;
2. risks created by overlapping structures or unclear mandates;
3. references to coherence, whole-of-government approaches.

4. Politicisation of human resources

Look for:

1. merit-based recruitment; depoliticisation;
2. stability and neutrality of civil service;
3. risks related to political appointments.

5. Lack of meritocracy and perceptions of injustice

Look for:

- references to fairness, equity, ethical governance, anti-corruption;
- mechanisms that ensure competence-based selection, evaluation, and promotion;
- reforms targeting integrity and ethical standards.

6. Social pressure and perceived decline in public services

Look for:

- measures addressing service quality, access, responsiveness;

- references to citizen dissatisfaction;
- risks that poor services may fuel populist narratives (e.g., “the state does not work for the people”).

7. Loss of prestige of the public service

Look for:

- reforms aimed at restoring dignity, professionalism and pride in public administration;
- references to negative public perceptions;
- risks that the document unintentionally reinforces negative stereotypes.

OUTPUT FORMAT

Structure your answer as follows:

A. Summary Assessment

Provide a short overview:

- Does the document address populist risk factors?
- Does it strengthen institutional resilience?
- Does it leave vulnerabilities unaddressed?

B. Detailed Analysis per Category (1–7)

For each category:

- Indicate if the document contains protective measures, risk factors, or remains silent.
- Quote directly from the document when possible.
- Explain the implications for democratic resilience.

C. Overall Vulnerability/Resilience Profile

Classify the document on a 3-level scale:

- High resilience (explicit measures countering populist narratives),
- Moderate resilience (partial measures, some gaps),
- Low resilience (silence or elements that may fuel populism).

Base the entire analysis exclusively on the content of the documents provided. Avoid speculation beyond what is explicitly stated.”

ANNEX 2. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS REPORT (TEMPLATE)

1. Source Document Information

1.1 Overview

- Analyzed file name: {{analyzed_file_name}}
- Number of pages: {{number_of_pages}}
- Word count: {{source_word_count}}
- Letter count: {{source_letter_count}}
- Detected language: {{detected_language}}
- Language confidence: {{language_confidence}}

1.2 Document Summary

{{source_summary}}

1.3 WordCloud (Source Document)

Insert figure here Path: {{source_wordcloud_path}}

1.4 VOSViewer Network Visualization (Source Document)

Insert figure here Path: {{source_vosviewer_path}}

1.5 n-Gram Analysis (Source Document)

1.5.1 1-Gram Frequency Table

{{source_1_gram_rows}}

1.5.2 2-Gram Frequency Table

{{source_2_gram_rows}}

1.5.3 3-Gram Frequency Table

{{source_3_gram_rows}}

1.5.4 4-Gram Frequency Table

{{source_4_gram_rows}}

1.6 Full Document Text (Source)

{{source_document_text}}

2. Translated Document Information

2.1 Overview

7. Word count (translated): {{translated_word_count}}
8. Letter count (translated): {{translated_letter_count}}

2.2 Translated Summary

{{translated_summary}}

2.3 WordCloud (Translated Document)

Insert figure here Path: {{translated_wordcloud_path}}

2.4 VOSViewer (Translated Document)

Insert figure here Path: {{translated_vosviewer_path}}

2.5 n-Gram Analysis (Translated Document)

2.5.1 1-Gram Frequency Table

{{translated_1_gram_rows}}

2.5.2 2-Gram Frequency Table

{{translated_2_gram_rows}}

2.5.3 3-Gram Frequency Table

{{translated_3_gram_rows}}

2.5.4 4-Gram Frequency Table

{{translated_4_gram_rows}}

2.6 Full Document Text (Translated)

{{translated_document_text}}

3. LLM Analysis (Four-Prompt Structure)

3.1 Prompt 1 — {{prompt_1_title_placeholder}}

Prompt Used:{{prompt_1_prompt_placeholder}}

LLM Output:{{prompt_1_output_placeholder}}

3.2 Prompt 2 — {{prompt_2_title_placeholder}}

Prompt Used:{{prompt_2_prompt_placeholder}}

LLM Output:{{prompt_2_output_placeholder}}

3.3 Prompt 3 — {{prompt_3_title_placeholder}}

Prompt Used:{{prompt_3_prompt_placeholder}}

LLM Output:{{prompt_3_output_placeholder}}

3.4 Prompt 4 — {{prompt_4_title_placeholder}}

Prompt Used:{{prompt_4_prompt_placeholder}}

LLM Output:{{prompt_4_output_placeholder}}

RADAR

renewing administration through
democratic anchorage reforms