

Local resilience in the context of digital transition: development policy perspectives from Romania and Moldova

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Abstract. *The paper discusses the impact of digital transformation on the development of local resilience in Romania and Moldova, considering broadband infrastructure and ICT service exports. In connection with the findings, it should be noted that, for economic stability in Moldova, broadband expansion is extremely important, while in Romania, more benefits come from digital trade and technology-driven services. Policy incentives for broadband access, digital entrepreneurship, and regional digital ecosystems are necessary to support resilience. Customized strategies – infrastructure investments and innovation-driven policies for both countries – to enable sustainable economic development and adaptability within the digital era.*

Keywords: sustainable development, digital infrastructure, economic resilience, digital transformation, economic adaptability.

JEL Classification: O33, R11, L86, J21.

Introduction

The shift to digital is profoundly transforming the world's economies—its effects most felt in developing markets like Romania and Moldova. According to Vial (2019: pp. 118-144), digital transformation contributes to strengthening economies through the development of e-commerce and digital infrastructure, which is considered the fundamental support for any economic activity. Dependency of economies on online applications requires robust digital legislation as well as infrastructure investment as a prerequisite for sustainable expansion and robustness (Verhoef et al., 2021: pp. 1-20). Economic resilience is the capacity of a region to face economic shocks and setbacks with digital infrastructure positioned at the heart of this (Martin & Sunley, 2015: pp. 1-42). Fast internet access, significant network growth, and broadband investment are all considered major local economies that promote flexible and stable conditions (Sutton et al., 2023: pp. 500-532). Both Romania and Moldova, which are undergoing major transformations in their digital systems, have new and rather special opportunities and challenges for each. The former benefits from EU-backed policies promoting digital expansion, while the latter suffers from infrastructure gaps that impede its full digital integration into the European space (Lungu et al., 2023: pp. 10-25).

The literature has put great emphasis on the investment in digital infrastructure as part of economic resilience. Evidence indicates that broadband penetration remarkably increases productivity and innovation, leading in the long run to steady income growth and more intense economic activity (Omrani et al., 2024: pp. 5030-5043). In Romania, high-speed internet is available to 90% of urban households, while the rural areas have lower connectivity due to lacking infrastructure (World Bank, 2023). Moldova has done a good job expanding digital access, but because only 65% of households in rural areas have broadband connections, there is still a significant digital divide (World Bank, 2022).

In Moldova, the public service digitization and broadband expansion initiatives have accelerated digital transformation through enhanced public services digitization and improved broadband connectivity. However, disparities remain, especially in rural areas, where reliable digital service access is a persistent problem (Lungu et al., 2023: pp. 30-45). In Romania, digital infrastructure development is part of overarching EU strategies, but rural broadband penetration remains a major barrier to digital inclusion at the national level (Bucea-Manea-Țoniș et al., 2022: pp. 1-20).

Economic resilience in the digital era is bolstered by investment in digital infrastructure both at the local and national levels. According to studies, economies having higher broadband penetration portray greater economic stability amid any kind of disruptions as digital tools support business continuity, business operations in a work-from-home setup, and e-services (Verhoef et al., 2021: pp. 10-25). It is a positive sign that Moldova is making efforts to widen digital infrastructure, but this only indicates partial progress and a need for further investment to ensure full economic participation in all regions of the country (Lungu et al., 2023: pp. 50-65). A fundamental difficulty for Romania and Moldova is the problem of bridging the digital divide between the urban and rural populations. While the cities have benefited from fast digital growth, the rural areas lag due to infrastructural deficiencies, and this situation impedes their economic potential (Omrani et al., 2024: pp. 5040-5055).

Only specific policy actions such as enlarged broadband networks and public-private partnerships can fill these divides and steer inclusive digital growth (Sutton et al., 2023: pp. 520-532). Inclusion of digital infrastructure in governance and economic planning will help optimize development strategies. Data-driven decision-making as facilitated by digital analytics enables governments to allocate resources efficiently and ensure that digital expansion aligns with economic priorities (Hess et al., 2020: pp. 12-18). Long-term investments in broadband expansion and fiber-optic networks will sustain economic growth in both countries (Verhoef et al., 2021: pp. 25-40).

This paper presents an assessment of the effects that digital infrastructure has on economic resilience in Romania and Moldova. It engages in a quantitative analysis of the correlation between gross domestic product per capita and broadband penetration. The results will offer information for policymakers striving to bolster digital policies and back up economic stability during the process of transition, which is predominantly digital.

Literature review

The economic resilience factor has also taken new forms with the process of digital transition, especially for developing economies such as Romania and Moldova. Digital infrastructure is essential to ensure connectivity, particularly high-speed connectivity, enable digital services, and foster innovation. All these elements support the sustainability of economic growth (Vial, 2019: pp. 118-144). While both countries are undergoing their digital transformations, disparities in broadband expansion, digital access, and regional connectivity continue to play a significant role in shaping the effectiveness of digital policies in both countries (Verhoef et al., 2021: pp. 1-20). This section reviews available theoretical and empirical literature on digital transformation and economic resilience, focusing on the role of digital infrastructure in sustaining local economic stability in Romania and Moldova.

Economic resilience has been studied a lot at the level of regional and national economies. Martin and Sunley (2015: pp. 1-42) define regional economic resilience as the ability of an economy to endure economic shocks and recover quickly. Digital transformation is increasingly viewed as one of the major drivers of resilience, with higher investments in broadband and digital connectivity promoting economic flexibility as well as productivity and regional adaptability (Sutton et al., 2023: pp. 500-532). Strong digital infrastructure makes economies more resilient to financial and social shocks because digital connectivity supports business continuity during disruptions, e-commerce, and essential services (Hess et al., 2020: pp. 6-15). Another major facet of digital transformation revolves around upgrading high-speed broadband infrastructure. According to various stakeholders, broadband access is fundamental to economic productivity, innovation, and inclusion in that it gives businesses and citizens the capability to partake in the digital economy (Omrani et al., 2024: pp. 5030-5043). In Romania, high-speed broadband is available in over 90% of urban households, while the rural area remains under-provisioned, thereby hindering digital inclusion (World Bank, 2023). In Moldova, digital access has been improved through state-led initiatives, but more than 65% of rural households do not have proper

broadband internet access, which hinders their full participation in digital services (World Bank, 2022). According to the IMF Report (2020: pp. 15-30), low levels of digital infrastructure are among the predominant factors impeding economic growth for a majority of Eastern European countries and more so for non-EU member states such as Moldova.

The digital divide, parallel to the urban-rural economic divide, is a chronic impediment to economic resilience in both countries. While the metropolitan areas have experienced rapid digitization, rural regions lag due to low broadband penetration and investment in infrastructure insufficient to support high digitalization (Sutton et al., 2023: pp. 520-532). It limits economic participation in the hinterland and further sharpens economic inequalities. Directed government policies public-private investment are required to close this gap for inclusive economic growth and to take local economies along with them, rather leaving them behind (Omrani et al., 2024: pp. 5040-5055).

One of the most important aspects of public policy is that it profoundly influences digital transformation. It has been argued that effective policy frameworks should address broadening digital access while ensuring equitable availability across all strata and harmonizing the use of digital tools in economic planning (Verhoef et al., 2021: pp. 10-25). Romania has merged its digital policies with those of EU digital strategies, which have brought enormous investments in broadband infrastructure plus projects for regional inclusion in the digital world. The real problem, however, remains the enforcement of regulations, especially for connecting underdeveloped regions. This is where the Romanian Government still struggles due to its newly formulated Digital Transformation Strategy for 2023-2027, prioritizing the extension of digital infrastructures and improving internet access in rural areas (World Bank, 2023). Moldova, on the other hand, is behind even in laying down its digital policies and needs much more institutional support and investment strategies to push it into a proper digital economy faster (Lungu et al., 2023: pp. 50-65).

Empirical research underscores the economic paybacks of investing in digital infrastructure. Indeed, it has been established that greater broadband penetration is highly correlated with higher economic growth as well as resilience (Vial, 2019: pp. 118-144). In Romania, GDP per capita rose from 30% of the EU average in 1995 to 59% in 2016 mostly due to digital take-up and deeper integration into the European single market (World Bank, 2018). Remittances continue to play an important role in Moldova, with a share of 16.5% of GDP in 2023, thereby making economic diversification through digital expansion imperative policy such a priority (World Bank, 2022). Digital transformation can be viewed as a window through which this dependency can be lessened while at the same time creating sustainable models of economic growth.

The World Bank (2020: pp. 40-60) noted investment in digital infrastructure as one of the major economic drivers in Eastern Europe. Romania has benefited from EU funding under the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy offering broadband expansion projects aimed at closing regional digital gaps (World Bank, 2023). Unlike Moldova, which does not have large-scale EU funding opportunities and where international development assistance is the only source to finance digital infrastructure projects (IMF, 2020: pp. 25-40), consistent funding is a major constraint that hinders Moldova from accelerating its digital transition at par with Romania.

In Romania and Moldova, the COVID-19 pandemic hastened digitalization, which revealed the importance of strong digital infrastructure. In Romania, digital banking services grew by 30% in 2020 and online government services registered a 40% increase in usage (World Bank, 2023). Emergency digital measures were implemented in Moldova, but due to the rural infrastructure shortcomings, most citizens could not access digital services effectively (World Bank, 2022). These trends have once again underlined how broadband infrastructure can be a lifeline for economic resilience in times of crisis.

In addition, the inclusion of digital infrastructure in governance and economic planning would help maximize national and regional development strategies. With big data analytics, digital technologies empower governments to allocate resources efficiently and design policies that address the economic imbalance (Hess et al., 2020: pp. 12-18). What will long-term investments in fiber-optic networks, 5G expansion, and making digital services accessible contribute to Romania and Moldova's sustainability of economic growth and resilience? (Verhoef et al., 2021: pp. 25-40).

Future studies should continue to examine the long-term effects of the investment in digital infrastructure on local and, respectively, national resilience. Although the studies in place prove that Romania and Moldova have much to gain from further digital development, what is actually needed now is an assessment of the sustainability and scalability of digital infrastructure projects in these two countries (Sutton et al., 2023: pp. 510-525). Closing the broadband gap, enhancing digital access to disadvantaged areas, and ensuring that the policies in the digital world align with economic development objectives are the three priorities that should be assumed by policymakers, as per (Bucea-Manea-Țoniș et al., 2022: pp. 15-30).

Methodology

This paper uses a quantitative research method to look at the link between GDP per person and main signs of digital change in two developing countries—Romania and Moldova. As digital growth plays a bigger part in economic strength, this study wants to see how tech tools and the online market help with economic stability.

The model specifically determines how broadband penetration and IT service exports influence GDP per capita; thus, it gives a clear indication of how digital connectivity as well as the expansion of digital services quagmire economic growth. The choice of these variables comes from a broad range of literature related to digital transformation and economic resilience. Fixed broadband subscriptions can be regarded as one measure of the penetration of digital infrastructure, reflecting to what extent households and businesses can avail themselves of high-speed internet access-essential for productivity, innovation, and digital inclusion. Exports of IT services capture the economic effects of digitalization; they measure how well Romania and Moldova are integrating into the global digital economy, applying technology-enabled services and work-from-home opportunities. GDP per capita is used as the dependent variable, illustrating the country-by-country economic performance and resilience in terms of digital transformation for both Romania and Moldova.

To evaluate the role of digital infrastructure and digital economic activities in promoting economic stability and growth, within the concept of digital transition, is what this paper aims to achieve. Setting the stage for evidence-based policymaking, this analysis will help answer the question of whether, in Romania and Moldova, greater broadband expansion or a higher emphasis on the digital services sector would be more effective in boosting economic resilience.

Accordingly, the equation of the regression model is as follows:

$$Y=a+b_1X_1+b_2X_2+u \quad (1)$$

where:

Gross domestic product per capita (Y) is used as the dependent variable, representing economic resilience and overall economic performance. The independent variables include fixed broadband subscriptions (X_1) which measure the dissemination of digital infrastructure and exports of IT services (X_2) which capture the role of the digital economy in economic growth. These variables reflect how much digital connectivity and the expansion of technology-driven services contribute to national economic stability.

This model contains an intercept (a) and b_1 and b_2 which are the coefficients of regression that measure how much GDP per capita varies due to change in broadband penetration and IT service exports respectively. The term for error (u) includes all other unobserved factors that may affect the dependent variable.

It was sourced from the World Bank Database to ensure a homogeneous and internationally comparable dataset. This period 2014–2023 was deemed suitable for the purpose of trend analysis regarding digital transition and economic resilience. The study reviews three basic indicators annually to empirically assess the interaction between technological infrastructure, digital economic activity, and economic performance in reality.

After data gathering, the analysis was done using EViews. This application is famous among many for time-series econometric modeling and fits well for regression analysis, hypothesis testing, and diagnostic evaluations. The multifactorial regression model will allow a quantitative assessment of the relationship between digital transformation and economic resilience. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method of parameter estimation has been adopted to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Using these econometric techniques, the study tries to produce relevant policy insights about how digital infrastructure can contribute to building economic resilience in Romania and Moldova.

Results and discussion

The following table (Table 1) includes data regarding the evolution of the gross domestic product per capita, the evolution of fixed broadband subscriptions and the value of ICT Service Exports in Moldova and Romania in the period 2014-2023.

Table 1. *GDP per Capita, Fixed Broadband Subscriptions, and ICT Service Exports in Moldova and Romania (2014–2023)*

Year	Moldova			Romania		
	GDP per capita (current US\$)	ICT Service Exports (BoP, current US\$)	Fixed broadband subscriptions	GDP per capita	ICT Service Exports (BoP, current US\$)	Fixed broadband subscriptions
2014	8643,064314	186000000	509000	20633,00931	3056184483	4020000
2015	9197,618382	162030000	534000	21630,4079	3033088350	4260000
2016	10325,84049	154900000	557000	23905,18822	3736652421	4450000
2017	11252,11355	175820000	584000	26943,36772	4538769870	4750000
2018	11868,19555	225460000	623000	29586,61687	5653482738	5090000
2019	13413,22329	257870000	671000	33638,6966	6256824613	5280000
2020	13527,44131	302950000	719000	34386,17739	7015995146	5680000
2021	15682,07033	401860000	762000	37698,35811	8252854113	6100000
2022	16381,30683	512160000	800000	42182,57281	9799361359	6370000
2023	17596,88342	629400000	841000	45658,66144	11049495224	6630000

Source: The World Bank, World Development Indicators.

Table 2 shows the results of the regression analysis which tested the relationship between GDP per capita, fixed broadband subscriptions, and ICT service exports in Moldova for the years 2014–2023. These findings offer useful insights into how digital transformation helps build economic resilience; they also note the different effects that broadband growth and digital services export have on economic development.

The major result of the study is the very strong positive link between broadband uptake and GDP per capita. The coefficient for broadband uptake is 0.0261 with a p-value of 0.0001, showing a really significant effect on economic growth. This finding means that more broadband access directly helps raise productivity, expand trade opportunities, and boost general economic stability in Moldova. Given this strong connection, putting money into broadband roads should keep staying at the top of the list for decision-makers to keep economic growth going and better digital inclusion.

On the other hand, ICT service exports do not have a statistically significant impact on GDP per capita. The coefficient for ICT service exports is $-2.54E-08$ and its p-value is 0.9921, which means it has an insignificant and trivial impact on economic growth. This result indicates that despite digital services' increasing role globally, Moldova's ICT sector has not been strengthened enough to contribute significantly to the country's economic resilience. The outcome may be attributed to low global competitiveness among firms in Moldova's ICT sector insufficient workforce digital skills, and structural barriers within the ICT industry. Future policy efforts should orient towards strengthening digital service exports-in other words, enhancing skill development, providing incentives for digital entrepreneurship, and improving access to international markets.

The model as a whole is very robust and statistically significant. The R-squared value, at 0.986, means that 98.6% of the variation in GDP per capita is explained by broadband penetration and exports of ICT services. The F-statistic value, at 242.23, with an associated p-value of 0.000000, confirms that the model is highly significant. Digital transformation variables then, do explain economic trends in Moldova. Last, the Durbin-Watson statistic, at 2.53, suggests no serious problems with autocorrelation and serves to further enhance the reliability of the results.

Table 2. *Digital Transformation and Economic Resilience in Moldova*

Dependent Variable: GDP per capita
(current US\$)
Method: Least Squares
Included observations: 10

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	-4434.414	1606.389	-2.760486	0.0281
ICT Service Exports (BoP, current US\$)	-2.54E-08	2.47E-06	-0.010298	0.9921
Fixed broadband subscriptions	0.026107	0.003453	7.560832	0.0001
R-squared	0.985757	Mean dependent var		12788.40
Adjusted R-squared	0.981687	S.D. dependent var		3067.516
S.E. of regression	415.1105	Akaike info criterion		15.13829
Sum squared resid	1206217.	Schwarz criterion		15.22907
Log likelihood	-72.69146	Hannan-Quinn criter.		15.03871
F-statistic	242.2303	Durbin-Watson stat		2.533568
Prob(F-statistic)	0.000000			

Source: Authors' own data processing in eViews, based on the data from Table 1

Table 3 shows the results of regression analysis which looks at GDP per capita, fixed broadband subscriptions, and ICT service exports in Romania between 2014–2023. Findings give some clues about how digital transformation helps build economic resilience, showing different ways broadband infrastructure and ICT services contribute to growth.

The analysis shows that exports of ICT services have a large positive effect on Romania's GDP per capita. The value for ICT service exports is 1.99E-06, with a p-value of 0.0263, which means that the link is statistically important. This indicates that growth in Romania's online services industry helps economic results, strengthening the part of ICT service exports as a main driver of economic rise. The findings point out the growing value of digital trade in Romania's economy, backing the idea that money spent in the ICT field, worker online skills, and tech innovation help a lot in boosting economic strength.

In contrast, fixed broadband subscriptions show no statistically significant impact on GDP per capita. With a coefficient of 0.003310 and a p-value of 0.1714, it can be inferred that broadband penetration by itself does not influence economic growth in Romania in a strong manner. These results contradict those findings in Moldova—in which broadband infrastructure exerted a strong impact on GDP per capita. Perhaps broadband penetration is already at an above-average level in Romania, and further access does not generate the same marginal returns to economic growth as it does in other countries with less developed digital infrastructure. It seems that the expanding digital economy in Romania is rather getting its additional value from the expansion of ICT services than from further broadband access.

The overall model is very reliable and statistically significant. An R-squared value of 0.993 means that 99.3% of variation in GDP per capita is explained by independent variables. The F-statistic value of 471.0884 and its associated p-value of 0.000000 confirm that the model is highly significant which implies digital transformation factors core role in the explanation of economic trends in Romania. Another indication of result validity comes from the Durbin-Watson statistic value of 2.18, it shows that there is no serious problem with autocorrelation.

Table 3. *Digital Transformation and Economic Resilience in Romania*

Dependent Variable: GDP per capita
(current US\$)
Method: Least Squares
Included observations: 10

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	1807.615	7093.001	0.254845	0.8062
ICT Service Exports (BoP, current US\$)	1.99E-06	7.08E-07	2.806542	0.0263
Fixed broadband subscriptions	0.003310	0.002173	1.523622	0.1714
R-squared	0.992625	Mean dependent var		31625.90
Adjusted R-squared	0.990518	S.D. dependent var		8585.085
S.E. of regression	835.9730	Akaike info criterion		16.53839
Sum squared resid	4891956.	Schwarz criterion		16.62917
Log likelihood	-79.69197	Hannan-Quinn criter.		16.43881
F-statistic	471.0884	Durbin-Watson stat		2.182701
Prob(F-statistic)	0.000000			

Source: Authors' own data processing in eViews, based on the data from Table 1.

Moldova and Romania have some very particular broadband infrastructure and ICT service exports contributions to GDP per capita as a result of the analysis of digital transformation and economic resilience. For fixed broadband subscriptions, in Moldova, the effect is significantly positive on economic growth, with a strong statistical relationship implying that increase in broadband penetration directly supports increase in productivity and expansion of business. The exports of ICT services do not show a significant effect, indicating that the digital economy in Moldova does not yet develop enough to drive substantial economic gains. This highlights the necessity for constant investment in broadband infrastructure as the primary strategy to enhance economic resilience for Moldova also long-term policies directed towards strengthening the ICT sector.

Romania, in contrast, is more resilient economically due to exports of ICT services rather than broadband infrastructure. It reveals that ICT service exports have a statistically significant positive correlation with GDP per capita, while broadband subscriptions do not bear any significant impact. This fact evidences that Romania has developed its digital

economy beyond the stage of ensuring basic infrastructure, as higher economic value is obtained from digital trade and technology-based services. Therefore, policies in Romania should focus more on increasing ICT service exports, fostering digital entrepreneurship, and improving workforce skills in using digital tools instead of enhancing broadband. These represent the differences between Moldova and Romania, proving that their stages of digital transition are different and that country-specific policy strategies are needed to tap the full economic benefits of digital transformation.

Conclusions

One of the major problems that lingers over Moldova is the digital divide, with rural areas being most affected due to limited broadband presence. This scenario does not allow them to participate in economic activities and express themselves creatively. Both targeted infrastructure investment and public-private partnership can be channeled toward this effort to make locals more resilient by enhancing digital inclusion. In Romania, where broadband access is already pervasive, further investment should be directed toward strengthening digital entrepreneurship and innovation. Strong digital entrepreneurship and innovation make the local economy adaptable and competitive.

Policies at the community level regarding broadband access, developing digital skills, and supporting ICT entrepreneurship would create local resilience in Moldova. Providing startup financial incentives, improving regulatory frameworks, and ensuring equitable digital access for local business empowerment would foster inclusive economic growth. Decentralized digital hubs in rural areas would minimize the economic divide and stimulate regional self-sufficiency in ICT entrepreneurship.

In contrast, Romania should create policy incentives that enhance competitiveness in the global digital market while ensuring local economies benefit from it. Investment in high-value digital services such as artificial intelligence, software development, and fintech would ensure long-term resilience at the local level. Strengthened collaboration between academia, industry, and regional policymakers would not only support the sustainability of progress in the digital field but also economic adaptability at the local level.

Different strategies are needed by both countries to capitalize on the opportunities offered by digital transformation and local resilience. While in Moldova, policy incentives for inclusive digital growth fill the infrastructure gap, in Romania, the existing digital assets are leveraged through policies promoting innovation, trade, and regional digital ecosystems. With such targeted policies, the two countries would not only be able to strengthen their economic resilience but also attain sustainable development in the digital era.

Acknowledgement

This work was funded by the EU's NextGenerationEU instrument through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of Romania - Pillar III-C9-I8, managed by the Ministry of

Research, Innovation and Digitization, within the project entitled „Place-based Economic Policy in EU’s Periphery – fundamental research in collaborative development and local resilience. Projections for Romania and Moldova (PEPER)”, contract no. 760045/23.05.2023, code CF 275/30.11.2022.

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