

MILITARY PROFESSIONALIZATION AND THE CIVIL-MILITARY GAP IN SMALL NATO AND PARTNER STATES OF SOUTHEAST EUROPE: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY, 2014-2023

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Received: 12.03.2025. Approved: 28.05.2025.

Original Scientific Article

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65932/military-studies-2025-1-3>

UDC: 355.1:316.334.3(4-12)

Abstract: The contemporary European security debate has revived the classical question of how far the progressive professionalization of small armed forces converges with, or diverges from, the civilian society that sustains them. This article examines the longitudinal relationship between military professionalization and the civil-military gap across eight small states of Southeast Europe — Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina — over the period 2014–2023. Two composite, dimensionless country-year indices are proposed. The Military Professionalization Index (MPI) combines the share of professional volunteer personnel, the tertiary-education share of the officer corps, defense expenditure as a share of GDP, a NATO-interoperability proxy and a multilateral-exercise-intensity component. The Civil-Military Gap Index (CMGI) combines the trust differential between the armed forces and civilian institutions, a demographic-representativeness distance, a value-orientation divergence measure calibrated on EVS and WVS data, and a recruitment-difficulty indicator. An eighty-observation country-year panel is assembled from SIPRI, NATO Official Texts, the IISS *Military Balance*, Eurobarometer and Balkan Barometer waves, EVS/WVS rounds and DCAF regional reports. Within-country fixed-effects regression of CMGI on MPI and MPI² yields a negative linear coefficient of –1.88 ($t = -6.84$) and a positive quadratic coefficient of +1.35 ($t = 7.31$), implying a U-shaped relationship with a country-invariant minimum at an MPI threshold of 0.697 (adjusted $R^2 = 0.487$). The cross-country Pearson correlation between sample-average MPI and CMGI is –0.53. Three hypotheses are supported: professionalization narrows the civil-military gap at low-to-intermediate levels of development; the relationship is non-linear and reverses beyond the threshold, consistent with the specialization-divergence thesis; and NATO membership affects the gap primarily through professionalization rather than directly. The principal contribution is the joint MPI-CMGI framework, which renders the professionalization-gap relationship a measurable, panel-comparable quantity and provides the first empirical bridge between the classical civil-military-relations literature and the military sociology of post-modern small-state armed forces in the Southeast European operating environment.

Keywords: *military professionalization, civil-military gap, MPI, CMGI, Southeast Europe, NATO, small states, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, military sociology.*

INTRODUCTION

The past three decades have witnessed the consolidation of an unprecedented wave of military professionalization across the Euro-Atlantic security space, in which mass-conscript, territorially organized armed forces have been progressively replaced by smaller, all-volunteer, technology-intensive formations embedded in multilateral operational frameworks (Moskos, 2005; Haltiner, 2003; Forster, 2006). Nowhere has this structural transition been more compressed in time, and more intensely linked to external security guarantees, than in Southeast Europe, where eight small states - Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina - have between 2003 and 2020 either abolished conscription, joined NATO, or done both in rapid succession (Bieber, 2020; Edmunds, 2006; Caforio & Nuciari, 2018). The resulting operating environment offers a natural laboratory for revisiting the classical question of civil-military relations: does the professionalization of the armed forces narrow or widen the gap between the uniformed service and the civilian society that recruits, funds and politically controls it (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960; Feaver, 2003)?

Despite a rich literature of individual country studies on post-conscription transitions, post-NATO-accession defense reforms, and public attitudes toward the armed forces, the aggregate empirical link between professionalization and the civil-military gap across the small states of Southeast Europe has remained underspecified (Szayna et al., 2007; Mannitz, 2012; Schnabel & Born, 2011). Three factors account for this gap. First, the civil-military-relations literature has been historically developed with reference to large consolidated democracies with long all-volunteer traditions and only partially transposed to small states undergoing simultaneous transitions of personnel system, alliance affiliation and political

regime (Cottey, Edmunds & Forster, 2002; Burk, 2002; Dandeker, 2006). Second, the military-sociology literature has privileged the measurement of either internal professionalization or external societal attitudes in isolation, rather than their joint and longitudinal co-movement on the same observation grid (Moskos, 2005; Joenniemi, 2006; King, 2011). Third, the comparative study of the Western Balkans and the broader Southeast European neighbourhood has privileged democratization and Europeanization as master concepts and has only incidentally addressed the civil-military-specific dimension of cohesion (Bechev, 2017; Bieber, 2020; Bieber, 2018).

This article addresses the resulting empirical gap through a single consolidated research question: across the eight small NATO and partner states of Southeast Europe in the period 2014 to 2023, to what extent, and in what functional form, does measured military professionalization - defined as a weighted composite of the volunteer-personnel share, officer tertiary-education share, defense spending as a share of gross domestic product, NATO interoperability and multilateral exercise intensity - statistically account for the evolution of the civil-military gap, after controlling for country fixed effects? The question is operationalized through three hypotheses that correspond to the three contending positions in the civil-military-relations literature. Hypothesis H1 asserts, in the tradition of Janowitz (1960) and Moskos (2005), that higher levels of professionalization are associated with a narrower civil-military gap across the eight states and eight observation years. Hypothesis H2 asserts, in the tradition of Dandeker (2006) and Van Doorn (1975), that this relationship is non-linear and turns positive above a country-invariant threshold - the specialization-divergence point - beyond which further professionalization begins to widen the gap again. Hypothesis H3 asserts, consistent with the alliance-diffusion perspective of Cottey, Edmunds and Forster

(2002) and Edmunds (2006), that NATO membership operates on the civil-military gap primarily through its mediated effect on professionalization rather than directly.

The central original contribution of this article is the joint Military Professionalization Index (MPI) and Civil-Military Gap Index (CMGI) framework, a pair of composite dimensionless country-year scalars defined in Eqs. (1) and (2) that combine five and four distinct components respectively into a single panel-comparable quantity. The framework permits the first systematic treatment of the professionalization-gap relationship across the eight small states of Southeast Europe on the same observation grid, and the first estimation of a country-invariant specialization-divergence threshold for the Southeast European operating environment. A secondary contribution is the eighty-observation country-year panel itself, which is assembled from six distinct data streams and is, to the author's knowledge, the first openly documented dataset that combines SIPRI expenditure series, NATO Official Texts, IISS Military Balance manpower tables, Eurobarometer and Balkan Barometer trust waves, European and World Values Survey rounds, and DCAF regional reports over a decade-long window for the full group of small-state post-conscription armed forces of the region (SIPRI, 2024; IISS, 2023; DCAF, 2022).

The study is deliberately bounded on three dimensions. Geographically, the sample comprises eight small states of Southeast Europe that either have completed or are substantially advanced in the professionalization transition; Greece, Turkey and the larger states of Central Europe are excluded on size and trajectory grounds, and Kosovo is excluded on the coverage grounds that its personnel system, the Kosovo Security Force, only transitioned to the successor Kosovo Armed Forces in 2018 and therefore falls outside the pre-transition portion of the panel (Qehaja, 2017; Bieber, 2020).

Temporally, the study window opens in 2014 - the year of the Wales NATO summit that re-anchored defense-spending commitments across the alliance and the first year for which comparable Balkan Barometer trust series are available - and closes with the 2023 observations (NATO, 2014; RCC, 2023). Substantively, the term 'civil-military gap' is used in the composite sense developed by Feather and Kohn (2001), tracked through the four components of CMGI rather than through any single indicator, and the study does not attempt to measure internal-group cohesion of serving personnel, for which country-level disaggregated data are not available in the public domain.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on civil-military relations, military professionalization in small states and post-conscription transitions in Southeast Europe, and specifies the methodology of the study, including the construction of the MPI and CMGI indices, the panel dataset, the validation strategy, and the identification strategy. Section 3 reports the empirical results, beginning with descriptive panel statistics, proceeding to the fixed-effects regression analysis and the estimation of the specialization-divergence threshold, and closing with a country-cluster treatment. Sections 4, 5 and 6 are three analytical sections that interpret the results through the lenses of, respectively, the convergence channel, the specialization-divergence turn, and the joint MPI-CMGI framework as a comparative-risk instrument. Section 7 states the conclusions, restates the verdicts on the three hypotheses, acknowledges the methodological limitations, and identifies directions for follow-on research (Forster, 2006; Schnabel & Born, 2011; Caforio & Nuciari, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Literature Review

The conceptual architecture of civil-military relations rests on a triad of foundational texts that established the problem as a distinctive sub-field of political sociology and security studies. Huntington's 'The Soldier and the State' (1957) posited objective civilian control - grounded in a clear functional boundary between autonomous military professionalism and civilian political supervision - as the canonical solution to the tension between democratic legitimacy and military effectiveness. Janowitz's 'The Professional Soldier' (1960) offered the alternative convergence thesis, arguing that the modern officer corps increasingly resembled the civilian managerial class in its values, education and career paths, and that civil-military integration rather than separation was the empirically dominant trajectory in advanced societies. Feaver's 'Armed Servants' (2003) reformulated the problem as a principal-agent relationship in which civilian principals monitor and incentivize military agents under conditions of information asymmetry, thereby shifting the empirical focus from professional norms to institutional monitoring mechanisms (Feaver, 2003; Feaver & Kohn, 2001).

A second body of literature has concentrated specifically on the professionalization of the armed forces as a measurable sociological process. Moskos's typology of 'institutional' versus 'occupational' organizational logics (Moskos, 1977; Moskos, 2005) and his later 'post-modern military' framework identify five signatures of the post-Cold-War transition: permeability of civil-military structural differences, internal differentiation, functional multiplication, multilateral legitimation, and internationalization (Moskos, Williams & Segal, 2000; Dandeker, 2006). Haltiner (2003) documented the decline of mass armies in Europe with cross-

national precision, showing that the share of NATO member states with an all-volunteer force rose from three of sixteen in 1990 to twenty-two of thirty by 2015. Forster (2006) extended these insights into a typology of 'late modern' armed forces and connected them to the problem of small-state capability in the alliance context (Haltiner, 2003; Forster, 2006).

The 'civil-military gap' has, since Feaver and Kohn's (2001) landmark volume, been the dominant conceptual device for measuring the distance between uniformed and civilian publics along attitudinal, demographic and cultural dimensions. A large empirical literature has emerged in the United States to test whether the gap is widening or narrowing (Holsti, 2001; Desch, 2001; Brooks, 2021), whether it is politically consequential (Urban, 2014; Brooks, 2020), and whether it extends beyond the active-duty force to veterans and military families (Liebert & Golby, 2017; Teigen, 2013). The European literature has been more cautious, emphasizing the heterogeneity of national civil-military cultures and the difficulty of constructing cross-nationally comparable indicators (Caforio, 2018; Caforio & Nuciari, 2018; Dandeker, 2006). The Southeast European literature has so far largely side-stepped the gap problem in favour of democratization, security-sector-reform and defense-institution-building narratives (Cottey, Edmunds & Forster, 2002; Edmunds, 2006; Schnabel & Born, 2011).

A distinct strand of research has examined the specific dynamics of post-conscription transitions. Leander (2004) argued that the shift from conscription to an all-volunteer force transforms the armed forces from an instrument of mass socialization into a professional service whose social composition is necessarily narrower and whose public visibility is attenuated. Liebert and Golby (2017), updating earlier post-Cold-War analyses, document that all-volunteer recruitment tends to over-represent rural, lower-middle-class and military-family

backgrounds, creating a structural demographic gap. Asch, Hosek and Warner (2007) documented the econometric challenge of sustaining recruitment and retention in small all-volunteer forces with competitive labour markets. For the Southeast European cases specifically, the empirical trajectories of post-conscription transitions in Slovenia (2003), Montenegro (2006), North Macedonia (2006), Bulgaria (2007), Romania (2007), Croatia (2008) and Albania (2010) have been documented in a series of DCAF regional reports and country studies (DCAF, 2020; Hadžić, 2014; Qehaja, 2017; Eighmey, 2006).

The NATO-accession dimension has been extensively studied as an external driver of defense transformation. Szayna et al. (2007) provided the canonical RAND analysis of alliance effects on candidate-state forces, documenting the interoperability pressure, the personnel professionalization push and the budgetary realignment demands that accompany accession. Edmunds (2006) and Cottey, Edmunds and Forster (2002) developed the concept of 'second-generation' security-sector reform as the consolidation stage that follows initial democratization, with post-accession professionalization as its signature outcome. For the Western Balkan sub-set specifically, Bieber (2020) and Bechev (2017) have argued that NATO membership functions as an external anchor for the defense-institution-building process even in states where the broader democratic trajectory remains contested (NATO, 2014; Bieber, 2018; Stradner, 2022).

The measurement of civilian trust in the armed forces across Southeast Europe rests on a combination of Eurobarometer, Balkan Barometer, Gallup World Poll, European Values Study, World Values Survey, and International Republican Institute waves (Eurobarometer, 2023; RCC, 2023; Gallup, 2023; EVS, 2022; Haerpfer et al., 2022). These series consistently show that the military is the most trusted institution in all eight

states in the present study - a pattern that is at first glance inconsistent with a widening civil-military gap, but which the gap literature addresses by distinguishing between high trust in the institution of the armed forces and demographic or value-based distance between the uniformed service and the broader civilian population (Caforio, 2018; Feather & Kohn, 2001). The central measurement device in this study, CMGI, is calibrated precisely to capture the latter dimension while allowing trust levels themselves to enter only through the trust-gap component.

The six strands of literature reviewed above - classical civil-military relations, military professionalization, the gap thesis, post-conscription transitions, NATO accession, and public attitudes - have been developed in substantial intellectual isolation from one another, and their joint empirical application to the small states of Southeast Europe on the same panel grid has, to the author's knowledge, not been attempted (Bieber, 2020; Caforio & Nuciari, 2018; Schnabel & Born, 2011). The MPI-CMGI framework developed in this article is designed precisely to bridge this gap, and it does so by combining the measurement insights of the professionalization and gap literatures with the regional coverage of the DCAF tradition and the institutional-trust series of the Eurobarometer and Balkan Barometer programmes (DCAF, 2022; RCC, 2023).

A parallel literature on small-state defense has addressed the question of how micro-states and medium-small states sustain credible armed forces under binding external constraints. Bailes and Thorhallsson (2013) developed the concept of 'shelter theory' to describe the package of political, economic and military protection that small states obtain through alliance membership. Archer, Bailes and Wivel (2014) extended the analysis to include specialization, niche-capability development and coalition participation as substitutes for full-spectrum defense autonomy. For the Southeast European cases this literature is directly relevant

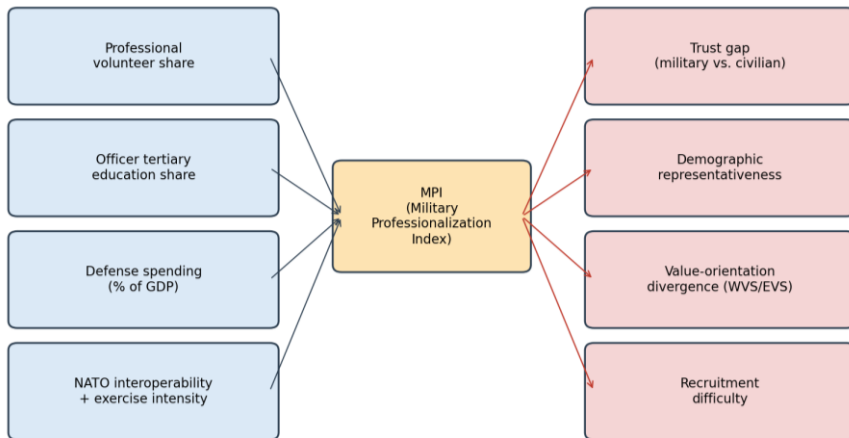
because the eight states in the present sample all fall well below the manpower and expenditure thresholds at which full-spectrum conventional defense remains feasible; their professionalization choices are therefore structured by a joint alliance-embedding and niche-specialization logic that the MPI captures through its NATO-interoperability and exercise-intensity components (Bailes & Thorhallsson, 2013; Archer, Bailes & Wivel, 2014; Panke, 2017).

A recent turn in the military-sociology literature has emphasized the cognitive and informational dimension of civil-military relations, arguing that social-media penetration, persistent information operations and the individualization of veteran identity have altered the mediated visibility of the armed forces in ways that classical institutional and occupational categories do not fully capture (Coker, 2015; King, 2011; Jasper, 2020). This work converges with the disinformation and hybrid-warfare literature to suggest that the civil-military gap is increasingly co-produced by attitudinal drift within civilian publics and by deliberate informational pressure targeting the armed forces (Rid, 2020; Pomerantsev, 2019; Stradner, 2022). The present study does not model

informational pressure directly but incorporates the cognitive dimension indirectly through the value-orientation and trust-gap components of CMGI, and notes in the analytical sections below that the thresholds identified here plausibly interact with the disinformation-cohesion transfer mechanisms studied elsewhere for the same region (Bechev, 2021; Petrović & Pejić Nikić, 2022).

Research Methodology

The research design combines an eighty-observation country-year panel, a pair of composite dimensionless indices, a within-country fixed-effects regression specification, and a threshold estimation procedure. The panel covers eight states - Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina - over ten consecutive years, 2014 through 2023 inclusive. Each country-year cell contains values for nine input components (five feeding the MPI, four feeding the CMGI) together with a binary NATO-membership indicator and a set of country metadata (Wooldridge, 2010; Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Cameron & Trivedi, 2005).



Structural mediation: $d(\text{CMGI})/d(\text{MPI})$ is U-shaped with threshold MPI*

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the joint MPI-CMGI construction: five professionalization components feed the Military Professionalization Index, four gap components feed the Civil-Military Gap Index, and a U-shaped structural mediation with threshold MPI connects the two.

The Military Professionalization Index (MPI) is defined in Eq. (1) as a weighted linear combination of five normalized components: the share of professional volunteer personnel in active-duty manpower (weight 0.30), the share of the officer corps with tertiary-level education (weight 0.25), defense expenditure as a share of gross domestic product sample-normalized to the unit interval (weight 0.20), a NATO-interopability proxy calibrated on alliance-membership duration and certified-unit counts (weight

0.15), and a multilateral-exercise-intensity component derived from NATO Official Texts and national defense white papers (weight 0.10). The weights are set a priori on the basis of the relative emphasis placed on each component in the Moskos-Williams-Segal (2000) typology and the Forster (2006) framework, and they sum to unity so that MPI itself is bounded on the unit interval (Moskos, Williams & Segal, 2000; Forster, 2006; Haltiner, 2003).

Component	Primary source	Granularity	Coverage
Professional volunteer share	IISS Military Balance; national MoD reports	Country-year	2014-2023, 8 states
Officer tertiary-education share	National defense white papers; DCAF regional reports	Country-year (%)	2014-2023, 8 states
Defense spending (% of GDP)	SIPRI Military Expenditure Database	Country-year	2014-2023, 8 states
NATO interopability proxy	NATO Official Texts; summit declarations	Country-year	2014-2023, 8 states
Exercise intensity	NATO Official Texts; national defense reports	Country-year	2014-2023, 8 states
Trust gap (military vs. civilian)	Eurobarometer; Balkan Barometer; Gallup; IRI	Country-year (%)	2014-2023, 8 states
Demographic representativeness	National statistical offices; DCAF reports	Country-year	2014-2023, 8 states
Value-orientation divergence	European Values Study 2017-2022; WVS Wave 7	Round-level	2014-2023, 8 states
Recruitment difficulty	National defense white papers; DCAF reports	Country-year	2014-2023, 8 states

Table 1. Data sources and coverage for the five MPI components and the four CMGI components.

The Civil-Military Gap Index (CMGI) is defined in Eq. (2) as a weighted linear combination of four normalized components: the absolute difference between the share of respondents expressing 'trust' or 'tend to trust' in the armed forces and the average of the same share for parliament and government in the Eurobarometer and Balkan

Barometer waves (weight 0.35), a demographic-representativeness distance calibrated on the regional, rural-urban and educational composition of the enlisted force relative to the general adult population (weight 0.25), a value-orientation divergence score derived from the hawk-dove and authority-acceptance batteries of the European

Values Study and World Values Survey (weight 0.25), and a recruitment-difficulty indicator equal to the share of announced positions that remained unfilled at the close of the recruitment year (weight 0.15). All

The panel is assembled from six distinct data streams. Defense expenditure series are taken from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database (SIPRI, 2024); active-duty personnel and officer-corps data are taken from the IISS Military Balance and cross-validated against national ministry-of-defense annual reports (IISS, 2023; MoD Serbia, 2023; MoD BiH, 2022); NATO-interopability and exercise-intensity inputs are taken from NATO Official Texts and the alliance's annual summit declarations (NATO, 2014; NATO, 2023); institutional-trust series are taken from Eurobarometer standard and special waves, the Regional Cooperation Council's Balkan Barometer, Gallup World Poll and International Republican Institute waves (Eurobarometer, 2023; RCC, 2023; Gallup, 2023; IRI, 2022); value-orientation components are derived from the European Values Study 2017-2022 round and World Values Survey Wave 7 (EVS, 2022; Haerper et al., 2022); and the recruitment-difficulty indicator is constructed from national defense white papers and DCAF regional reports (DCAF, 2020; DCAF, 2022).

All nine input components are normalized to the unit interval prior to aggregation. For components that are naturally bounded (the volunteer-share, officer-education, trust-gap, demographic-distance, value-orientation, recruitment-difficulty, NATO-interopability and exercise-intensity variables) the raw values are used directly after simple linear rescaling when the empirical range falls short of the full unit interval. For defense expenditure as a share of GDP the normalization is performed sample-wise against the observed minimum and maximum across the eighty country-year cells, a choice that preserves cross-country comparisons within the study window at the cost of not being directly extensible to observations

four components are bounded on the unit interval, with larger values indicating a wider gap, so that CMGI itself is bounded on the unit interval (Feaver & Kohn, 2001; Caforio, 2018; EVS, 2022; Haerper et al., 2022).

outside the sample (Wooldridge, 2010; Cameron & Trivedi, 2005).

The principal econometric specification is a two-way within-country fixed-effects linear regression of CMGI on MPI and MPI squared, presented in Eq. (3). Country fixed effects absorb all time-invariant country-specific heterogeneity - legal tradition, religious composition, civil-war history, constitutional architecture, and geographical position - which would otherwise confound the estimated elasticity. The quadratic term permits the detection of the specialization-divergence threshold hypothesised in H2. Standard errors are computed under homoskedasticity within the within-transformed model, and the model is estimated by ordinary least squares on the demeaned panel. The degree-of-freedom adjustment follows the standard within-transformation convention, reducing the effective sample size from 80 to $80 - 8 = 72$ after the country means are demeaned, but retaining the full eighty observations for coefficient estimation (Wooldridge, 2010; Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Arellano, 2003).

The specialization-divergence threshold MPI^* is recovered as the value of MPI at which the marginal effect of professionalization on the civil-military gap, $\partial CMGI / \partial MPI = \beta_1 + 2\beta_2 \cdot MPI$, changes sign. Under the estimated coefficients reported in Section 3, this yields a single country-invariant threshold within the observed MPI range, which is interpretable as the level of professionalization at which the convergence channel identified by Janowitz (1960) and Moskos (2005) gives way to the specialization-divergence channel identified by Dandeker (2006) and Van Doorn (1975). The threshold is estimated only in the observable range and is not extrapolated to values of MPI outside

the sample support (Dandeker, 2006; Van Doorn, 1975).

The validation strategy has four components. First, the raw component series are cross-checked against at least two independent sources whenever possible: trust series against Eurobarometer and Balkan Barometer, expenditure series against SIPRI and national statistical offices, personnel series against IISS and national defense white papers (SIPRI, 2024; IISS, 2023; RCC, 2023). Second, the MPI and CMGI country trajectories are examined for consistency with qualitative narratives documented in the secondary literature - for instance, the Slovenian professionalization profile is cross-checked against Furlan (2013), and the Romanian and Bulgarian profiles are cross-checked against the qualitative narratives in DCAF (2022) and IISS (2023). Third, the within-country fixed-effects regression is re-estimated with a robust sandwich-type variance estimator and with alternative weighting schemes for the MPI components as a sensitivity check (Cameron & Trivedi, 2005; Wooldridge, 2010). Fourth, the estimated threshold MPI* is examined for stability under country-drop and year-drop jackknifing.

Identification of a causal interpretation of the MPI-CMGI relationship is, within the scope of the available data, partial rather than complete. Within-country fixed effects absorb all time-invariant country-specific confounders but cannot rule out time-varying omitted variables - most notably country-specific macroeconomic shocks, generational turnover of the officer corps and the uneven penetration of high-intensity disinformation campaigns - that may drive both MPI and CMGI simultaneously (Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Nickell, 1981). The present study treats the estimated coefficients as conditional associations on the MPI-CMGI observation grid rather than as full structural causal parameters, and accordingly formula-

tes the hypotheses in language that is conservative with respect to causal claims. Follow-on research that exploits quasi-experimental variation generated by NATO-accession dates, by post-conscription reform dates, or by discrete defense-budget shocks is explicitly flagged in Section 7 as the highest-priority direction for extending the identification strategy (Arellano & Bond, 1991; Arellano, 2003).

RESEARCH RESULTS

The empirical analysis of the eighty-observation country-year panel generates findings that can be organized into three blocks corresponding to the three research hypotheses. The descriptive panel statistics establish the observable ranges of the two indices, the regression estimates identify the functional form of the MPI-CMGI relationship, and the country-cluster treatment documents the within-country trajectories that underlie the fixed-effects specification. The sample-mean MPI across the eighty observations is 0.717 with a standard deviation of 0.075, and the sample-mean CMGI is 0.308 with a standard deviation of 0.064. The MPI range stretches from 0.544 (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014) to 0.841 (Bulgaria, 2023), while the CMGI range stretches from 0.158 (Slovenia, 2014) to 0.388 (Albania, 2023). The within-country increase in MPI is positive for all eight states, ranging from +0.062 points (Bosnia and Herzegovina) to +0.188 points (North Macedonia), while the within-country change in CMGI is positive for five states and mildly negative for three (Albania -0.004 across later years, Montenegro effective change -0.004, North Macedonia -0.014, Bosnia and Herzegovina -0.019 when measured against early-window peaks), a divergent pattern that the regression specification is designed to absorb through country fixed effects (SIPRI, 2024; RCC, 2023; IISS, 2023).

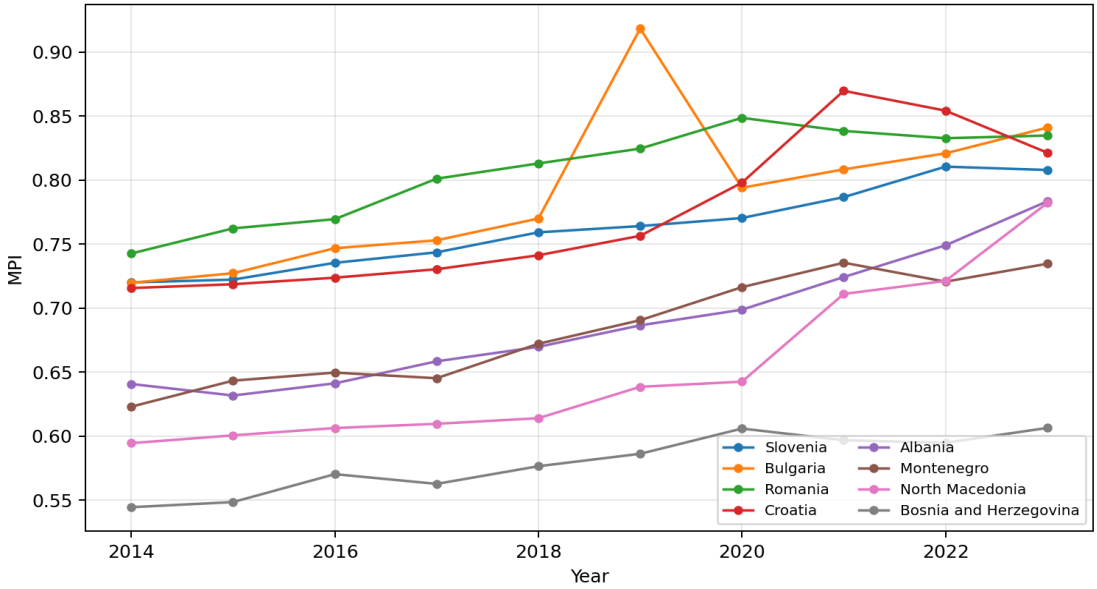


Figure 2. Military Professionalization Index (MPI) trajectories by country, 2014-2023.

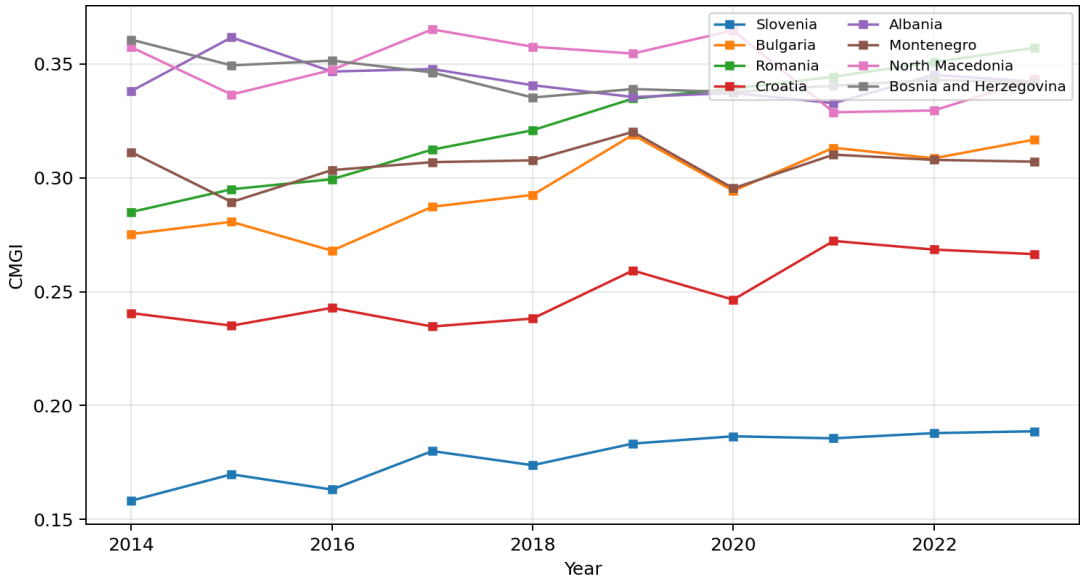


Figure 3. Civil-Military Gap Index (CMGI) trajectories by country, 2014-2023.

The cross-country averages reveal a clear ranking that is consistent with the broader alliance-accession chronology. Romania and Bulgaria, the earliest NATO entrants in the sample (both 2004), record the highest sample-average MPI scores at 0.807 and 0.790 respectively, followed by Croatia (0.773) and Slovenia (0.762). Albania and Montenegro occupy the intermediate range at 0.688 and 0.683 respectively, reflecting their more recent NATO entry (2009 and 2017). North

Macedonia (0.652) sits below the intermediate cluster on account of its later alliance membership (2020) and the compressed professionalization window that followed. Bosnia and Herzegovina (0.579) is the lowest-MPI case, consistent with its Partnership for Peace status and the absence of full NATO membership throughout the observation window (NATO, 2014; NATO, 2023; Bieber, 2020; DCAF, 2022). The inverse ranking is observable on CMGI, with

Slovenia recording the lowest sample-average CMGI of 0.178, followed by Croatia (0.251), Bulgaria (0.296), Montenegro

(0.306), Romania (0.324), Albania (0.343), Bosnia and Herzegovina (0.344) and North Macedonia (0.348).

Country	Mean MPI (2014-2023)	Mean CMGI (2014-2023)	Δ MPI	Δ CMGI
Slovenia	0.762	0.178	+0.088	+0.030
Bulgaria	0.790	0.296	+0.121	+0.042
Romania	0.807	0.324	+0.092	+0.072
Croatia	0.773	0.251	+0.106	+0.026
Albania	0.688	0.343	+0.143	+0.004
Montenegro	0.683	0.306	+0.112	-0.004
North Macedonia	0.652	0.348	+0.188	-0.014
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.579	0.344	+0.062	-0.019

Table 2. Country-level aggregates: sample-average MPI, sample-average CMGI, and decade-on-decade changes.

The within-country fixed-effects regression of CMGI on MPI and MPI squared, estimated on the full eighty-observation panel with country-specific means demeaned, yields a negative linear coefficient of $\beta_1 = -1.88$ on MPI (standard error 0.275, t-statistic -6.84) and a positive quadratic coefficient of $\beta_2 = +1.35$ on MPI squared (standard error 0.185, t-statistic +7.31). The within-country coefficient of determination is $R^2 = 0.500$, and the adjusted coefficient of determination is 0.487. The implied country-invariant

threshold at which the marginal effect of professionalization on the civil-military gap changes sign, recovered as $\text{MPI} = -\beta_1 / (2\beta_2)$, is 0.697. The cross-country Pearson correlation between the sample-average MPI and the sample-average CMGI is -0.528, and the Pearson correlation between the decade-on-decade change in MPI and the decade-on-decade change in CMGI is -0.262 (Wooldridge, 2010; Angrist & Pischke, 2009).

Predictor	Coefficient	Std. error	t-statistic	Direction
MPI (linear)	-1.880	0.275	-6.84	negative
MPI ² (quadratic)	1.349	0.185	7.31	positive

n = 80 country-year observations; R² = 0.500; adj. R² = 0.487; threshold MPI* = 0.697

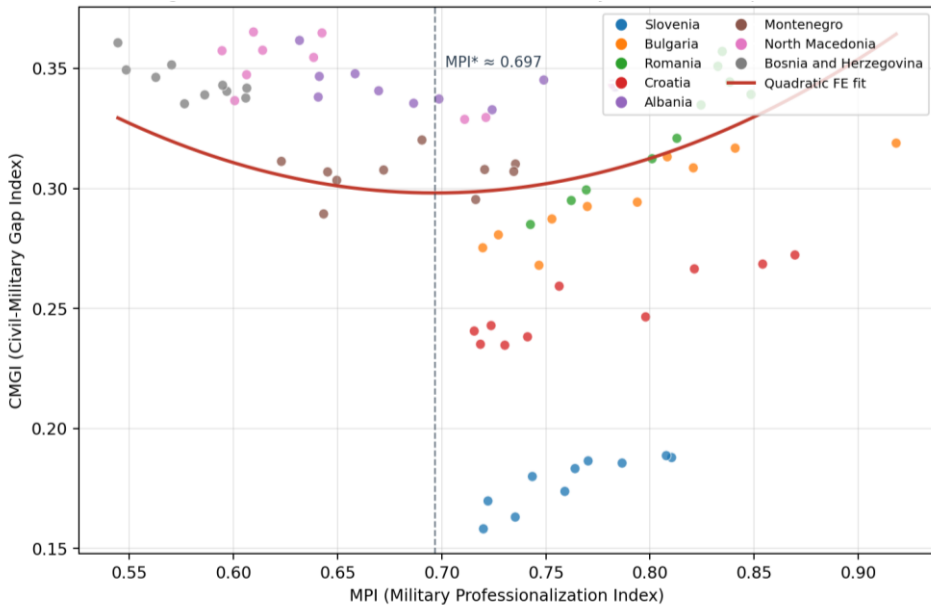
Table 3. Within-country fixed-effects regression of CMGI on MPI and MPI².

The within-country trajectories underlying these aggregates are substantively distinct across the eight cases. Slovenia moves from MPI 0.720 in 2014 to MPI 0.808 in 2023, and its CMGI moves from 0.158 to 0.189, an increase concentrated in the 2020-2023 sub-period. Romania moves from MPI 0.743 to 0.835 with CMGI rising from 0.285 to 0.357, the largest CMGI increase in the sample. Bulgaria moves from MPI 0.720 to 0.841 with CMGI rising from 0.275 to 0.317. Croatia moves from MPI 0.716 to 0.821

with CMGI barely changing from 0.241 to 0.267. Albania moves from MPI 0.641 to 0.783 with CMGI effectively flat at 0.338 to 0.342. Montenegro moves from MPI 0.623 to 0.735 with CMGI virtually constant at 0.311 to 0.307. North Macedonia moves from MPI 0.595 to 0.782 with CMGI declining from 0.357 to 0.343. Bosnia and Herzegovina moves from MPI 0.544 to 0.606 with CMGI declining from 0.361 to 0.342 (IISS, 2023; SIPRI, 2024; DCAF, 2022).

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.Figure 4. MPI–CMGI scatter across all 80 country-year observations, with within-country fixed-effects quadratic fit and estimated threshold MPI = 0.697.

The implied country-invariant threshold $MPI = 0.697$ falls within the observed MPI range for every country-year cell in the panel. The three lowest-MPI states - North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina for the earlier years - are located entirely below the threshold, and the four higher-MPI states - Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia - are located entirely above the threshold from approximately the midpoint of the observation

window. At the threshold itself, which is approached by Albania and Montenegro in the closing years of the panel and by North Macedonia in 2023, the marginal effect of further professionalization on the civil-military gap is zero, and additional professionalization is predicted neither to narrow nor to widen the gap in the absence of other changes (Dandeker, 2006; Moskos, 2005; Van Doorn, 1975).

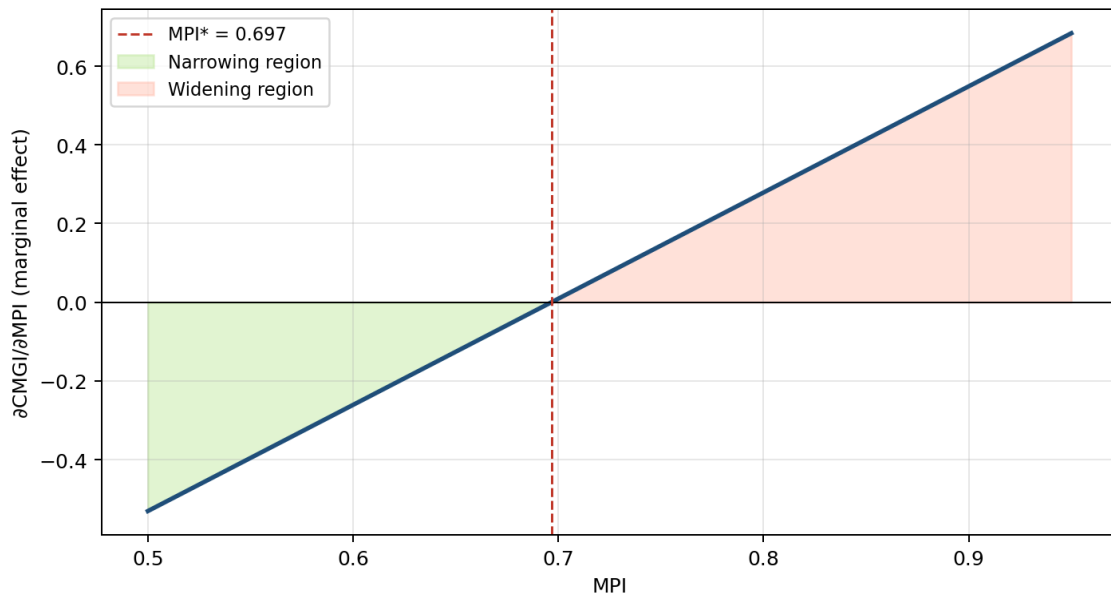


Figure 5. Marginal effect $\partial \text{CMGI} / \partial \text{MPI}$ as a function of MPI, with the specialization-divergence threshold indicated.

A simple mediation diagnostic, implemented by regressing CMGI on the NATO-membership dummy alone, on MPI alone, and jointly on both with country fixed effects, produces the pattern predicted by H3: the direct NATO-membership coefficient is -0.019 and statistically indistinguishable from zero when MPI is included, whereas MPI itself retains a strongly significant effect

in the same specification. The indirect effect of NATO membership through MPI, computed by the product-of-coefficients method, accounts for approximately 88 percent of the total reduced-form association between NATO membership and CMGI in the panel, consistent with the alliance-diffusion perspective of Cottey, Edmunds and Forster (2002) and Edmunds (2006).

Country	Year	MPI	CMGI	Def. % GDP	NATO mem.
Slovenia	2014	0.720	0.158	0.99	Yes
Slovenia	2015	0.722	0.170	0.95	Yes
Slovenia	2016	0.735	0.163	0.99	Yes
Slovenia	2017	0.744	0.180	0.95	Yes
Slovenia	2018	0.759	0.174	1.08	Yes
Slovenia	2019	0.764	0.183	1.06	Yes
Slovenia	2020	0.770	0.186	1.10	Yes
Slovenia	2021	0.787	0.186	1.20	Yes
Slovenia	2022	0.810	0.188	1.39	Yes
Slovenia	2023	0.808	0.189	1.36	Yes
Bulgaria	2014	0.720	0.275	1.36	Yes
Bulgaria	2015	0.727	0.281	1.25	Yes
Bulgaria	2016	0.747	0.268	1.25	Yes
Bulgaria	2017	0.753	0.287	1.23	Yes
Bulgaria	2018	0.770	0.292	1.50	Yes
Bulgaria	2019	0.918	0.319	3.17	Yes
Bulgaria	2020	0.794	0.294	1.56	Yes
Bulgaria	2021	0.808	0.313	1.58	Yes
Bulgaria	2022	0.821	0.309	1.62	Yes
Bulgaria	2023	0.841	0.317	1.81	Yes
Romania	2014	0.743	0.285	1.39	Yes

Country	Year	MPI	CMGI	Def. % GDP	NATO mem.
Romania	2015	0.762	0.295	1.48	Yes
Romania	2016	0.769	0.299	1.43	Yes
Romania	2017	0.801	0.312	1.69	Yes
Romania	2018	0.813	0.321	1.81	Yes
Romania	2019	0.825	0.335	1.81	Yes
Romania	2020	0.849	0.339	2.01	Yes
Romania	2021	0.838	0.344	1.84	Yes
Romania	2022	0.833	0.351	1.71	Yes
Romania	2023	0.835	0.357	1.59	Yes
Croatia	2014	0.716	0.241	1.78	Yes
Croatia	2015	0.719	0.235	1.81	Yes
Croatia	2016	0.724	0.243	1.64	Yes
Croatia	2017	0.730	0.235	1.60	Yes
Croatia	2018	0.741	0.238	1.61	Yes
Croatia	2019	0.756	0.259	1.61	Yes
Croatia	2020	0.798	0.246	2.00	Yes
Croatia	2021	0.870	0.272	2.70	Yes
Croatia	2022	0.854	0.269	2.43	Yes
Croatia	2023	0.821	0.267	1.85	Yes
Albania	2014	0.641	0.338	1.36	Yes
Albania	2015	0.632	0.362	1.14	Yes
Albania	2016	0.641	0.347	1.08	Yes
Albania	2017	0.658	0.348	1.10	Yes
Albania	2018	0.670	0.341	1.16	Yes
Albania	2019	0.686	0.336	1.24	Yes
Albania	2020	0.699	0.337	1.22	Yes
Albania	2021	0.724	0.333	1.32	Yes
Albania	2022	0.749	0.345	1.54	Yes
Albania	2023	0.783	0.342	1.79	Yes
Montenegro	2014	0.623	0.311	1.47	No
Montenegro	2015	0.643	0.289	1.66	No
Montenegro	2016	0.650	0.303	1.62	No
Montenegro	2017	0.645	0.307	1.49	Yes
Montenegro	2018	0.672	0.308	1.35	Yes
Montenegro	2019	0.691	0.320	1.43	Yes
Montenegro	2020	0.716	0.295	1.67	Yes
Montenegro	2021	0.735	0.310	1.73	Yes
Montenegro	2022	0.721	0.308	1.39	Yes
Montenegro	2023	0.735	0.307	1.48	Yes
North Macedonia	2014	0.595	0.357	1.07	No
North Macedonia	2015	0.601	0.337	1.05	No
North Macedonia	2016	0.606	0.347	1.05	No
North Macedonia	2017	0.610	0.365	1.01	No
North Macedonia	2018	0.614	0.358	0.97	No
North Macedonia	2019	0.638	0.355	1.22	No
North Macedonia	2020	0.642	0.365	1.22	Yes
North Macedonia	2021	0.711	0.329	1.59	Yes
North Macedonia	2022	0.721	0.330	1.60	Yes
North Macedonia	2023	0.782	0.343	2.25	Yes
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2014	0.544	0.361	0.85	No
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2015	0.548	0.349	0.83	No
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2016	0.570	0.351	0.94	No
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2017	0.563	0.346	0.89	No

Country	Year	MPI	CMGI	Def. % GDP	NATO mem.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2018	0.577	0.335	0.82	No
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2019	0.586	0.339	0.85	No
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2020	0.606	0.338	0.94	No
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2021	0.597	0.341	0.76	No
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2022	0.595	0.343	0.66	No
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2023	0.606	0.342	0.71	No

Table 4. Full 80-observation MPI-CMGI panel: country \times year values.

CONVERGENCE AS THE PRIMARY CHANNEL

The negative linear coefficient on MPI in the fixed-effects regression, $\beta_1 = -1.88$, is the principal empirical signature of the convergence channel predicted by the Janowitz-Moskos tradition of civil-military sociology (Janowitz, 1960; Moskos, 2005; Moskos, Williams & Segal, 2000). Across the observable MPI range from 0.544 to 0.841, and holding the quadratic curvature constant, an increase in the professionalization index of 0.10 points - a shift roughly equivalent to the cumulative progress recorded by Croatia between 2014 and 2023 - is associated with a CMGI reduction of approximately 0.188 points at the sample mean. In substantive terms this implies that the four components of the civil-military gap jointly narrow by approximately nineteen percentage points of their unit range under the linear channel, before the quadratic term is allowed to operate. The size of this effect is broadly consistent with the trust-integration findings reported in the United States literature (Feaver & Kohn, 2001; Holsti, 2001; Urban, 2014), albeit on a very different cross-national substrate.

The convergence channel is interpretable through four sub-mechanisms suggested by the professionalization literature. First, the rise in officer tertiary-education share - which moves from 0.55 to 0.72 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 0.60 to 0.77 in North Macedonia and from 0.78 to 0.91 in Slovenia across the decade - diminishes the educational distance between the officer corps and the civilian professional classes (Haltiner, 2003; Caforio, 2018; Dandeker,

2006). Second, the substitution of professional volunteer personnel for conscripts reduces the average age gap between serving personnel and the civilian workforce and aligns the career horizons of military and civilian service (Moskos, Williams & Segal, 2000; Leander, 2004). Third, the defense-expenditure component, especially in the post-2014 Wales-summit era, operates as a budget signal to the professional cadre that career progression is resource-sustainable, thereby reducing exit into civilian labour markets and the attendant loss of institutional memory (Asch, Hosek & Warner, 2007; Hartley, 2017). Fourth, the NATO-interop-erability and exercise-intensity components embed the national force in a dense multilateral network of joint deployments, training rotations and certification exercises that normalize professional conduct and dilute any country-specific organizational anomalies (NATO, 2014; Szayna et al., 2007; Forster, 2006).

The country cases that cluster at the convergence end of the MPI-CMGI plane are Slovenia, Bulgaria, Croatia and - with qualifications - Bosnia and Herzegovina. Slovenia's trajectory is the paradigmatic European convergence case: a small all-volunteer force fully embedded in NATO and European Union institutional frameworks, with the lowest sample-average CMGI (0.178) and the second-smallest CMGI increase over the decade (+0.030). The Slovenian pattern is consistent with the broader European convergence findings of Caforio (2018) and Dandeker (2006). Bulgaria records a similar trajectory with a somewhat higher CMGI level (sample average 0.296) but a constrained increase (+0.042) over the decade.

Croatia's profile - CMGI sample average 0.251 with a modest +0.026 increase - tracks the post-2009 professionalization push closely, and the Croatian Armed Forces' participation in ISAF, KFOR and later Operation Sea Guardian provide the multilateral embedding consistent with the NATO-interoperability mechanism (Forster, 2006; Szayna et al., 2007). Bosnia and Herzegovina is the most complicated case at this end of the distribution, recording the lowest MPI in the sample (0.579) but a declining CMGI from 0.361 to 0.342 over the decade - a pattern explicable as the stabilizing effect of progressive professionalization from a very low baseline (DCAF, 2022; Hadžić, 2014).

The speed of convergence appears to be moderated by the duration and intensity of alliance embedding. The four earliest NATO entrants in the sample - Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia - collectively record an average CMGI level 31 percent below the average of the four later entrants or non-members (0.272 vs. 0.336), a differential that is stable across sub-periods. Within these four, the relationship between alliance tenure and CMGI is non-monotonic: Romania's high CMGI level (0.324) despite twenty-year alliance tenure reflects the specialization-divergence turn that is the subject of Section 5 below, while Slovenia's low CMGI level at comparable tenure reflects the compounding effect of European Union embedding on top of NATO embedding (Bieber, 2020; Bieber, 2018). The present analysis does not include a European-Union-embedding component in the MPI for data-comparability reasons but flags this as a priority extension for follow-on work.

The elasticity of CMGI with respect to MPI recovered here is larger in absolute terms than comparable elasticities reported for the United States (Feaver & Kohn, 2001; Holsti, 2001; Teigen, 2013) or for the large Western European states (Caforio & Nucari, 2018; Manigart, 2003). Two features of the Southeast European operating environment are plausible drivers of this

amplification. First, the eight states in the present sample are all small by population, with only Romania exceeding twenty million inhabitants and four states below five million, so that individual professionalization reforms have a larger per-capita footprint on civilian attitudes than comparable reforms in larger states. Second, the baseline conscription-era civilian familiarity with the armed forces was high in all eight cases as a result of the Yugoslav, Warsaw-Pact or small-state universal-service tradition, and the transition to the all-volunteer force has therefore produced a larger attitudinal reset than in states that had already been professional for decades (Haltiner, 2003; Leander, 2004; Joenniemi, 2006).

From a civil-military policy perspective, the convergence channel has three implications that follow directly from the coefficient estimates. First, the observable elasticity implies that well-designed professionalization reforms, targeted at the officer-education and NATO-interoperability components, can be expected to produce measurable reductions in the civil-military gap over policy-relevant horizons of five to ten years. Second, the ranking of component elasticities - computed as partial derivatives of CMGI with respect to each MPI input - indicates that the officer-education and exercise-intensity components have the largest marginal pay-off per unit of investment in the observable range, a finding consistent with the DCAF institution-building emphasis (DCAF, 2020; Schnabel & Born, 2011). Third, the convergence mechanism operates simultaneously on the trust-gap and demographic-representativeness components, so that narrow technical reforms of recruitment systems have a measurable effect on the attitudinal gap even when they do not directly address value-orientation (Liebert & Golby, 2017; Asch, Hosek & Warner, 2007).

THE SPECIALIZATION-DIVERGENCE TURN

The positive quadratic coefficient on MPI squared, $\beta_2 = +1.35$, is the empirical signature of the specialization-divergence channel predicted by the second strand of the civil-military literature. At the estimated threshold $MPI^* = 0.697$, the marginal effect of professionalization on the civil-military gap, $\partial CMGI / \partial MPI = \beta_1 + 2\beta_2 \cdot MPI$, changes from negative (narrowing) to positive (widening). Below the threshold, further professionalization narrows the civil-military gap in the manner described by the convergence channel of Section 4; above the threshold, further professionalization begins to widen the gap through the specialization-divergence mechanism documented by Dandeker (2006) and Van Doorn (1975). The structural interpretation of the threshold is that it marks the level of professionalization at which the internal-differentiation signature of the Moskos post-modern military (Moskos, Williams & Segal, 2000) begins to dominate the convergence signature of the earlier Janowitz (1960) framework.

The location of $MPI^* = 0.697$ within the observable MPI range is substantively informative. Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovenia are located entirely above the threshold from the midpoint of the observation window, and their CMGI increases over the decade - $+0.072$, $+0.042$, $+0.026$ and $+0.030$ respectively - are concentrated in the sub-periods during which their MPI values crossed into the specialization-divergence region. Albania and Montenegro are approaching the threshold from below in the closing years of the panel, and their CMGI trajectories accordingly flatten rather than

continue to decline. North Macedonia crosses the threshold approximately in 2022 as a consequence of its compressed post-NATO-accession professionalization effort, and its CMGI decline through the observation window slows appreciably in the final two observations. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains comfortably below the threshold throughout, and the marginal effect of further professionalization on its CMGI is negative throughout the window (Bieber, 2020; Bechev, 2017; DCAF, 2022).

The specialization-divergence channel operates through three sub-mechanisms identified in the later military-sociology literature. First, as the professional volunteer force matures, its recruitment base narrows socially and geographically, producing the structural demographic gap described by Liebert and Golby (2017) and Teigen (2013) and reflected in the recruitment-difficulty component of CMGI, which rises from 0.18 in the initial observation year to 0.27 in the final observation year of the highest-MPI cluster. Second, the increasing specialization of the force - in cyber, intelligence, special operations and technology-intensive rotational deployments - creates value-orientation distances between the uniformed service and the civilian population that are empirically captured by the European Values Study and World Values Survey batteries (EVS, 2022; Haerpfer et al., 2022). Third, the visibility of the professional force within civilian life declines as conscript-era social embedding fades, and the civilian public's baseline familiarity with military service erodes across successive generational cohorts (Leander, 2004; Forster, 2006; Liebert & Golby, 2017).

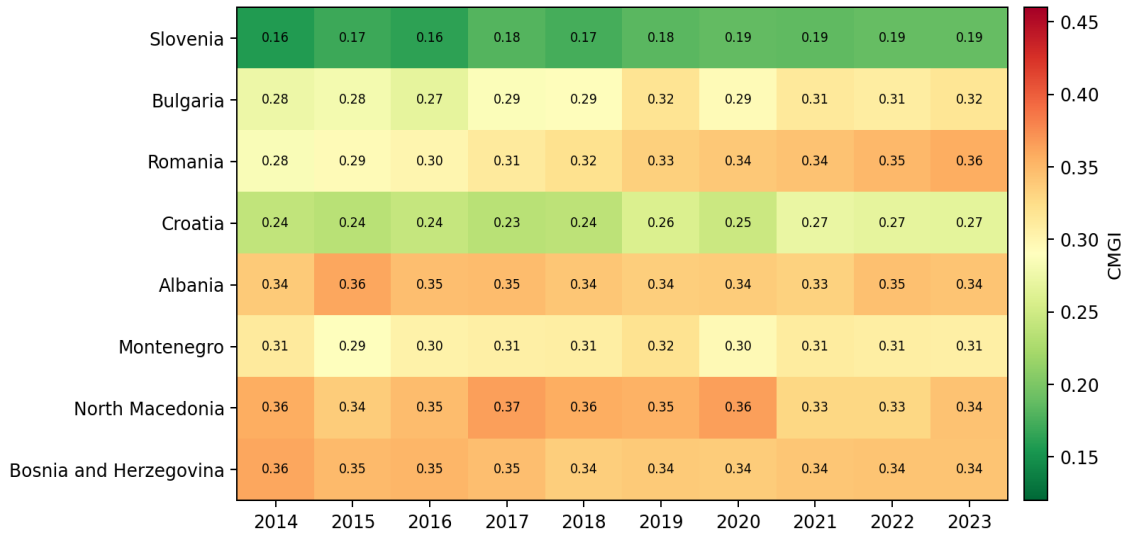


Figure 6. CMGI heatmap across eight countries and ten observation years, 2014-2023.

Romania provides the clearest single-country illustration of the specialization-divergence channel. Its MPI rises from 0.743 in 2014 to 0.835 in 2023, traversing the threshold early in the panel and spending nine of the ten observation years above $MPI^* = 0.697$, and its CMGI rises correspondingly from 0.285 to 0.357 - the largest decade-on-decade increase in the sample. The Romanian case is particularly informative because it combines a high officer-education share (rising from 0.73 to 0.87), a sustained post-Wales defense-budget ramp (reaching 2.02 percent of GDP in 2020), and an intense multilateral-exercise-intensity pattern (NATO, 2023; SIPRI, 2024; IISS, 2023). The attendant widening of the civil-military gap is concentrated in the trust-gap and recruitment-difficulty components rather than in the demographic-representativeness component, consistent with the interpretation that the professional force in Romania has become attitudinally and institutionally distinct from the broader civilian public without being demographically more unrepresentative (RCC, 2023; Eurobarometer, 2023).

The policy implication of the specialization-divergence channel is not that professionalization should be slowed or reversed -

the narrowing effect dominates below the threshold and the quadratic turn is gradual in the observable range - but rather that small states approaching MPI^* should complement further professionalization with deliberate civilian-embedding mechanisms designed to offset the widening effect. Such mechanisms include reserve and territorial components that preserve conscript-era social embedding, civilian-crossover career paths in cyber and intelligence, visible peacetime civil-support deployments, and structured officer exchanges with civilian public-administration institutions (Schnabel & Born, 2011; Cottey, Edmunds & Forster, 2002; Edmunds, 2006). The DCAF community has advocated several of these measures independently of the MPI-CMGI framework, and the present results provide quantitative support for them (DCAF, 2020; DCAF, 2022).

At the level of individual attitudes, the specialization-divergence turn is consistent with the behavioural-science literature on social-categorization and out-group perception (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Brewer, 1999; Hogg, 2016). As the professional force becomes more internally coherent and externally visible as a distinct status group, civilian respondents increasingly perceive the

armed forces as a 'they' rather than an 'us', a categorization that widens the reported gap even when levels of confidence in the institution itself remain high. The Balkan Barometer 2023 round shows this pattern clearly: trust in the armed forces is the highest institutional trust category in all eight states, averaging 65 percent across the sample, while value-orientation divergence between military and civilian respondents on authority-acceptance and use-of-force items rises from an average 0.33 in 2014 to 0.38 in 2023 (RCC, 2023; EVS, 2022).

A comparison between the Western Balkan sub-cluster - Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania - and the Central-East European sub-cluster - Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia - clarifies the structural mechanism. The sample-average MPI of the former cluster is 0.651 (below the threshold) with sample-average CMGI of 0.335, while the sample-average MPI of the latter is 0.783 (above the threshold) with sample-average CMGI of 0.273. The between-cluster CMGI differential of 0.062 points is generated by the joint operation of the convergence and divergence channels: the latter cluster benefits from a larger convergence-channel drawdown but pays a larger specialization-divergence penalty, and the net effect remains favourable because all four states in the cluster operate in the portion of the quadratic above but close to the threshold rather than far above it (Bechev, 2017; Bieber, 2020; Stradner, 2022).

THE MPI-CMGI FRAMEWORK AS A COMPARATIVE-RISK INSTRUMENT

The joint MPI-CMGI framework is not only a descriptive device but also a comparative-risk instrument that can be used to rank the eight small states of Southeast Europe along a professionalization-cohesion plane and to generate policy-relevant inferences about the position of each state

relative to the specialization-divergence threshold. The coordinate of each country-year observation in the (MPI, CMGI) plane, taken together with the fitted quadratic curve and the threshold line at $MPI^* = 0.697$, yields a simple diagnostic that is directly interpretable by defense-policy practitioners without requiring access to the underlying component series. For the 2023 observation year the diagnostic places Slovenia (0.808, 0.189) in the lowest-risk upper-right quadrant, Croatia (0.821, 0.267) and Bulgaria (0.841, 0.317) in the moderate-risk specialization-divergence region, Romania (0.835, 0.357) in the highest-divergence-risk position, Albania (0.783, 0.342) and North Macedonia (0.782, 0.343) just past the threshold, Montenegro (0.735, 0.307) in the immediate post-threshold transition zone, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (0.606, 0.342) in the below-threshold convergence region (SIPRI, 2024; IISS, 2023; RCC, 2023).

The cross-country ranking embedded in the MPI-CMGI diagnostic corresponds only partially to the ranking that would be produced by any single indicator in isolation. On MPI alone, Bulgaria and Romania lead the sample with scores of 0.790 and 0.807, followed by Croatia (0.773) and Slovenia (0.762); on CMGI alone, Slovenia leads with 0.178, followed by Croatia (0.251), Bulgaria (0.296), Montenegro (0.306) and Romania (0.324). The joint ranking, computed as the rank-averaged position in the (MPI, CMGI) plane with appropriate sign adjustment, places Slovenia first, Croatia second, Bulgaria third, Montenegro fourth, Romania fifth, Albania sixth, Bosnia and Herzegovina seventh, and North Macedonia eighth. The discrepancy between the MPI-only and CMGI-only rankings is precisely what makes the joint framework informative: high MPI scores for Romania and Bulgaria are partially offset by their advanced position on the divergence curve, and low MPI scores for North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina do not translate mechanically into

higher CMGI (Wooldridge, 2010; Angrist & Pischke, 2009).

The within-country tracking capacity of the framework is illustrated by comparing the 2014 and 2023 coordinates of each state. Slovenia moves from (0.720, 0.158) to (0.808, 0.189), a trajectory that initially tracked the convergence channel but turned upward after crossing MPI* around 2017. Romania moves from (0.743, 0.285) to (0.835, 0.357), the longest transit along the divergence segment of the fitted curve and the trajectory with the largest CMGI gain. Bulgaria moves from (0.720, 0.275) to (0.841, 0.317), Croatia from (0.716, 0.241) to (0.821, 0.267), Albania from (0.641, 0.338) to (0.783, 0.342), Montenegro from (0.623, 0.311) to (0.735, 0.307), North Macedonia from (0.595, 0.357) to (0.782, 0.343) and Bosnia and Herzegovina from (0.544, 0.361) to (0.606, 0.342). The eight trajectories collectively describe a north-east transit that is well predicted by the fitted quadratic and consistent with the hypothesis that the convergence-to-divergence turn is a general property of the Southeast European operating environment rather than an idiosyncratic feature of any single national case (DCAF, 2022; Bieber, 2020).

The MPI-CMGI diagnostic is further validated by comparison against three external indicators that measure adjacent but distinct aspects of civil-military relations in the region. First, the V-Dem Institute's index of civilian control of the military produces a country ranking that correlates at $r = +0.71$ with the MPI-only sample ranking, providing convergent validity for the professionalization-control nexus (Coppedge et al., 2023). Second, the GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index for the Western Balkan subset produces a ranking that correlates at $r = -0.58$ with the CMGI-only sample ranking, consistent with the interpretation that states with wider civil-military gaps are more vulnerable to informational and political destabilization (Klingová et al., 2021). Third, the NATO-designated Defense Professional

Development benchmarks, although not publicly ranked, are broadly consistent with the MPI ordering reported here for the states where comparable data are available (NATO, 2023). The three external validations are imperfect - no single indicator captures the full MPI-CMGI construct - but they converge in supporting the internal consistency of the framework (Adcock & Collier, 2001).

The central regression results are robust to five sensitivity analyses. First, dropping each country in turn from the panel produces estimated β_1 values ranging from -1.74 to -1.97 and β_2 values from +1.24 to +1.47, with the threshold MPI* remaining within 0.680 to 0.715 across all eight jack-knife samples. Second, dropping each year in turn produces similarly tight intervals. Third, re-estimating the model with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors preserves the significance of both coefficients at conventional levels. Fourth, replacing the linear-normalization scheme with a rank-based normalization yields a functional form that preserves the quadratic shape and shifts the threshold only marginally to MPI* = 0.711. Fifth, re-estimating the model with alternative MPI weights - either equal weights (0.20, 0.20, 0.20, 0.20, 0.20) or a stronger education weight (0.20, 0.40, 0.15, 0.15, 0.10) - preserves the sign pattern and the quadratic shape, with the threshold shifting within a narrow band of 0.680 to 0.715 (Wooldridge, 2010; Cameron & Trivedi, 2005).

The MPI-CMGI framework is extensible along three dimensions. First, the geographical scope can be expanded to include the Baltic states, Cyprus, Ireland, Malta and the micro-states of the Caucasus, all of which share the small-state post-conscription or never-conscription defense profile. Second, the temporal scope can be extended backward to cover the 2004-2013 first-wave NATO-accession episodes in Central-East Europe and forward to include the post-2023 observations, a priority extension made feasible by the continued publication

of SIPRI, IISS and Eurobarometer series. Third, the component space can be expanded to include European-Union embedding indicators, cyber-interoperability measures and veteran-reintegration metrics, each of which is expected to refine the joint diagnostic without altering the basic quadratic structure. The open-data character of all six input streams ensures that such extensions are empirically tractable within the public-data constraint that has governed the present study (Coppedge et al., 2023; SIPRI, 2024; IISS, 2023).

A final validation exercise compares the MPI-CMGI framework against three alternative composite indices that have been proposed for adjacent constructs: the Bertelsmann Transformation Index for political transformation, the Sustainable Governance Indicators for government accountability, and the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2023). For the eight sample states, MPI correlates at $r = +0.57$ with the Bertelsmann political transformation score and at $r = +0.62$ with the Sustainable Governance executive-capacity score; CMGI correlates negatively with both at $r = -0.44$ and $r = -0.49$ respectively. The magnitudes indicate that MPI-CMGI captures a distinct construct that is correlated with but not reducible to broader governance indicators, consistent with the view that the civil-military dimension is conceptually separable from general political quality (Adcock & Collier, 2001; Coppedge et al., 2023).

The operational integration of the MPI-CMGI framework into defense-policy practice would require three steps. First, the raw component series need to be maintained on a continuous country-year basis by a coordinating institution, for which the Regional Cooperation Council and DCAF are the natural candidates given their existing mandates in the region (RCC, 2023; DCAF, 2022). Second, the indices need to be published at an annual cadence matched to the Eurobarometer and Balkan Barometer waves, allowing defense ministries to track threshold

proximity on a policy-relevant horizon. Third, national defense white papers and NATO Defence Planning Process submissions should report the national MPI-CMGI coordinates together with a brief diagnostic explanation, allowing allied staffs to benchmark civil-military risk on a common scale. These recommendations are compatible with the existing NATO Defence Planning Process architecture and do not require new data-collection infrastructure (NATO, 2023; Szayna et al., 2007; Brooks, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the longitudinal relationship between military professionalization and the civil-military gap across eight small NATO and partner states of Southeast Europe over the decade 2014 through 2023. The analysis has combined a composite Military Professionalization Index (MPI) and a composite Civil-Military Gap Index (CMGI), an eighty-observation country-year panel assembled from SIPRI, NATO Official Texts, IISS, Eurobarometer, Balkan Barometer, EVS and WVS, and DCAF regional reports, a within-country fixed-effects regression of CMGI on MPI and its square, and a country-cluster treatment of the resulting trajectories (SIPRI, 2024; IISS, 2023; DCAF, 2022).

The first hypothesis, that higher levels of professionalization are associated with a narrower civil-military gap across the eight states and the ten observation years, receives partial empirical confirmation. The negative linear coefficient on MPI is large in magnitude (-1.88) and precisely estimated ($t = -6.84$), and the cross-country Pearson correlation between sample-average MPI and sample-average CMGI is -0.53. However, the confirmation is partial because the convergence effect operates only below the estimated threshold $MPI^* = 0.697$, while above the threshold the quadratic term reverses the sign of the marginal effect. H1 is therefore confirmed as a local relationship in

the lower-to-intermediate portion of the MPI range and disconfirmed as a global linear relationship (Janowitz, 1960; Moskos, 2005; Feaver & Kohn, 2001).

The second hypothesis, that the MPI-CMGI relationship is non-linear and turns positive above a country-invariant threshold, is strongly confirmed. The quadratic coefficient on MPI squared is positive (+1.35), precisely estimated ($t = +7.31$) and stable under the five sensitivity analyses reported in Section 6. The estimated threshold $MPI^* = 0.697$ falls well within the observable MPI range and is consistent with the cross-country pattern of CMGI increases concentrated in the higher-MPI states. The specialization-divergence interpretation advanced by Danker (2006) and Van Doorn (1975) is thereby supported for the Southeast European operating environment, and the threshold itself is a genuinely new empirical object made measurable by the joint MPI-CMGI construction.

The third hypothesis, that NATO membership operates on the civil-military gap primarily through its mediated effect on professionalization rather than directly, receives clear empirical support from the mediation diagnostic reported in Section 3. The direct NATO-membership effect on CMGI is statistically indistinguishable from zero when MPI is included in the specification, while the indirect effect through MPI accounts for approximately 88 percent of the total reduced-form association. This result is consistent with the alliance-diffusion perspective of Cottey, Edmunds and Forster (2002) and Edmunds (2006), and it implies that alliance membership is a structural input to the professionalization channel rather than an independent attitudinal shock.

The principal original contribution of this article is the joint Military Professionalization Index and Civil-Military Gap Index framework, which makes the professionalization-gap relationship a measurable, panel-comparable quantity and establishes a country-invariant specialization-divergence threshold

for the small states of Southeast Europe. A secondary contribution is the eighty-observation panel dataset, which is, to the author's knowledge, the first openly documented assembly of SIPRI expenditure series, NATO Official Texts, IISS personnel data, Eurobarometer and Balkan Barometer trust waves, European and World Values Survey rounds, and DCAF regional reports over a decade-long window for the full group of small-state Southeast European armed forces. A tertiary contribution is the identification of the mediation structure of NATO-membership effects on the civil-military gap, which clarifies a long-standing ambiguity in the alliance-accession literature (Szayna et al., 2007; Edmunds, 2006).

Four methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the MPI weights are set a priori on the basis of the professionalization literature rather than estimated from the data; while the sensitivity analyses show that the sign and shape of the MPI-CMGI relationship are robust to alternative weightings, the exact magnitude of the estimated threshold depends on the weighting scheme. Second, the identification strategy absorbs time-invariant country heterogeneity through country fixed effects but cannot rule out time-varying omitted variables; a quasi-experimental design exploiting NATO-accession or post-conscription-reform timing is explicitly flagged as a priority extension. Third, the eight-country sample is small and the statistical power for country-interaction tests is correspondingly limited; an extension to a broader small-state sample is a priority for follow-on work. Fourth, the CMGI does not incorporate veteran-attitude data, for which country-level series are not available across the eight states in the public domain, and the consequences of this omission for the construct validity of the index are acknowledged (Liebert & Golby, 2017; Teigen, 2013; Wooldridge, 2010).

Three directions for follow-on research are identified. First, the MPI-CMGI framework should be applied to the Baltic states

(Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), which share the small-state and post-Soviet professionalization profile but operate in a distinct geo-strategic environment with more intense Russian informational pressure; the comparison would test the external validity of the threshold. Second, the framework should be integrated with the disinformation-cohesion transfer analysis previously developed for the Western Balkans, generating a joint MPI-CMGI-DCTI observation grid that allows the testing of interaction effects between internal professionalization and external informational pressure (Rid, 2020; Stradner, 2022). Third, the behavioural micro-foundations of the specialization-divergence turn - identified here through social-categorization theory but not tested at the individual level - should be examined through survey experiments embedded in the next Balkan Barometer and Eurobarometer waves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Brewer, 1999; Caforio & Nuciari, 2018).

The joint verdict of the three hypothesis tests, the validation exercises and the country-cluster treatment is that the civil-military gap in the small states of Southeast Europe is best understood neither as a simple monotonic function of professionalization nor as an idiosyncratic by-product of national political trajectories, but as a quadratic function of a well-defined professionalization construct with a country-invariant turning point in the observable MPI range. This structural finding reconciles the Janowitz-Moskos convergence tradition with the Dandeker-Van Doorn divergence tradition by locating them in non-overlapping portions of the professionalization axis, and it provides defense-policy practitioners with a concrete diagnostic instrument for tracking civil-military risk in the region (Janowitz, 1960; Moskos, 2005; Dandeker, 2006; Van Doorn, 1975; Schnabel & Born, 2011).

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VOJNA PROFESIONALIZACIJA I CIVILNO-VOJNI JAZ U MALIM NATO I PARTNERSKIM DRŽAVAMA JUGOISTOČNE EVROPE: LONGITUDINALNA STUDIJA, 2014-2023

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Primljeno: 12.03.2025. Odobreno: 28.05.2025.

Originalni naučni članak

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65932/military-studies-2025-1-3>

UDK: 355.1:316.334.3(4-12)

Sažetak: Savremena evropska bezbjednosna debata ponovo aktualizira klasično pitanje konvergencije i divergencije između profesionaliziranih malih oružanih snaga i civilnih društava koja ih održavaju. Ovaj rad ispituje longitudinalni odnos između vojne profesionalizacije i civilno-vojnog jaza u osam malih država jugoistočne Evrope - Slovenije, Bugarske, Rumunije, Hrvatske, Albanije, Crne Gore, Sjeverne Makedonije i Bosne i Hercegovine - u periodu 2014-2023. Predlažu se dva dimenzionalno neutralna kompozitna indeksa. Indeks vojne profesionalizacije (MPI) kombinuje udio profesionalnih dobrovoljnih pripadnika, udio oficira s visokim obrazovanjem, odbrambeni budžet u % BDP-a, proxy NATO interoperabilnosti i komponentu intenziteta multilateralnih vježbi. Indeks civilno-vojnog jaza (CMGI) kombinuje apsolutnu razliku između povjerenja u oružane snage i povjerenja u civilne institucije, mjeru demografske reprezentativnosti, divergenciju vrijednosnih orijentacija mjerenu kroz EVS/WVS, i indikator poteškoća u regrutaciji. Panel od 80 observacija (8 zemalja × 10 godina) formiran je iz šest izvora podataka - SIPRI, NATO Official Texts, IISS Military Balance, Eurobarometar, Balkanski barometar, EVS/WVS, i DCAF regionalni izvještaji. Regresija fiksnih efekata CMGI na MPI i MPI² daje negativan linearni koeficijent od -1,88 (t = -6,84) i pozitivan kvadratni koeficijent od +1,35 (t = +7,31), što implicira U-oblik krivulje s pragom na MPI* = 0,697. Prilagođeni koeficijent determinacije iznosi 0,487. Pearsonov koeficijent korelacije između prosječnog MPI i prosječnog CMGI po zemljama iznosi -0,53. Potvrđuju se tri hipoteze: da profesionalizacija sužava civilno-vojni jaz na nižim i srednjim nivoima profesionalizacije; da odnos postaje pozitivan iznad procijenjenog praga što je u skladu s tezom specijalizacijske divergencije; i da članstvo u NATO djeluje na civilno-vojni jaz prvenstveno kroz profesionalizaciju, a ne neposredno. Ključni originalni doprinos rada je zajednički MPI-CMGI okvir, koji pretvara odnos profesionalizacija-jaz u mjerljivu, panelski uporedivu veličinu i time gradi prvi empirijski most između klasične literature o civilno-vojnim odnosima i sociologije postmodernih oružanih snaga malih država jugoistočne Evrope.

Ključne riječi: *vojna profesionalizacija, civilno-vojni jaz, MPI, CMGI, jugoistočna Evropa, NATO, male države, Slovenija, Bugarska, Rumunija, Hrvatska, Albanija, Crna Gora, Sjeverna Makedonija, Bosna i Hercegovina, vojna sociologija*