

CAPITALIZING ON THE ADVANTAGES OF ROMANIA'S ACCESS TO EUROPEAN SINGLE MARKET FOR SERVICES

Georgeta ILIE⁹,

Institute for World Economy, Romanian Academy

ABSTRACT: *In recent decades, services have emerged as an important sector of European economies, with a considerable contribution to the processes of their economic integration. The paper aims to highlight the development of the service sector in Romania after accession to the European Union (EU), from the perspective of its participation in the single market for services, namely the way in which it has managed to capitalize on the advantages of access to the service markets of member countries. This research relies on data from Eurostat, World Bank, and National Bank of Romania, employing relevant indicators to emphasize the main characteristics of service sector and trade in services in Romania. The analysis is focused on how the Romanian service providers capitalize on the advantages of the single market for services. The results identify the major role of multinational companies investing in Romania, fuelling the specialisation in many areas of performant services, mainly in the business professional services area, contributing to Romanian trade in services. The strength of the paper lies in identifying the advantages, but also disadvantages for service consumers, service providers, individuals and companies, but also for the national economy of Romania of the participation to the single market for services. The research conclusions highlight that Romania has reaped the benefits of EU integration, with trade flows in services with EU partners being dominant, confirming the role of the single market for services as a pillar of the EU economy, with Romania succeeding in capitalising on the advantages of the free access to EU service market with important impact on entire economy.*

Keywords: *services, Romania, EU integration, single market for services, FDI.*

JEL Classification: *F13, F15, F23, F43, L8, O24*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, services have been remarked as one of the most dynamic economic sectors, their evolution being supported by a high degree of innovation in their specific domains, increasing demand, given the dependence of all economic activities on them, as well as their capacity to capitalize on digital innovative technologies (Rytter Sunesen & Hvidt Thelle, 2018). All of these have also been accompanied by the adoption of favourable regulations facilitating the service tradability on international markets. The economic development processes of the European Union (EU) countries have been part of this trend, capitalizing on the potential of the service sector, favoured by the creation of the single market, but also the opportunities of global markets. At present, the EU countries are the most important partners in international trade in services (in 2024, extra-EU trade in services represented 23%

⁹ PhD, Scientific Researcher III, georgeta.ilie@iem.ro.

of world service exports) (WTO, 2026), supported by the dynamics of this sector and all positive conditions within the EU economies.

An important factor in the development of the service sector has been the European single market for services, in force since 1 January 1993, established under the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, with the objective of facilitating the free movement of services and service providers between Member States, thereby creating an integrated and competitive service market. In this context, it is worth mentioning the role of the basic principles governing the single market for services, defined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), as follows: the freedom to provide or consume services in an EU country other than that in which the provider or consumer is established (Article 56, TFEU), and the freedom to establish an enterprise in another EU country (Article 49, TFEU) (OJEU, 2012). In essence, they involve the elimination of barriers, mainly consisting of regulations adopted at the level of the legislation of the member countries, given that their variety and complexity often generate restrictions or difficulties for trade flows in services at the community level.

The expansion of Romania's service sector and trade in services is closely linked to positive developments within the national economy after EU accession in 2007, the EU member state status opening its access to the single market for services and supporting the adoption of a regulatory framework favourable to service trade. The service sector stands out as one of the significant drivers of the Romanian economic development, reflected both in specific indicators (such as its contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) and employment, and the participation in foreign trade and investment flows), and the capacity to adapt to new trends in the European and global economy (the more relevant being related to the recent expansion of digital services). The level of development and growth potential of the service industries are sustained by the set of competitive advantages of the Romanian economy in these domains, among which the professional training and integration of new technologies stand out, while the strength of the single market for services has ensured their free movement on EU countries markets. Also, Romania's high degree of complexity and specialization in the field of services are capitalized on the extra-community market, the international demand for services also supporting the achievement of the national service industries performances.

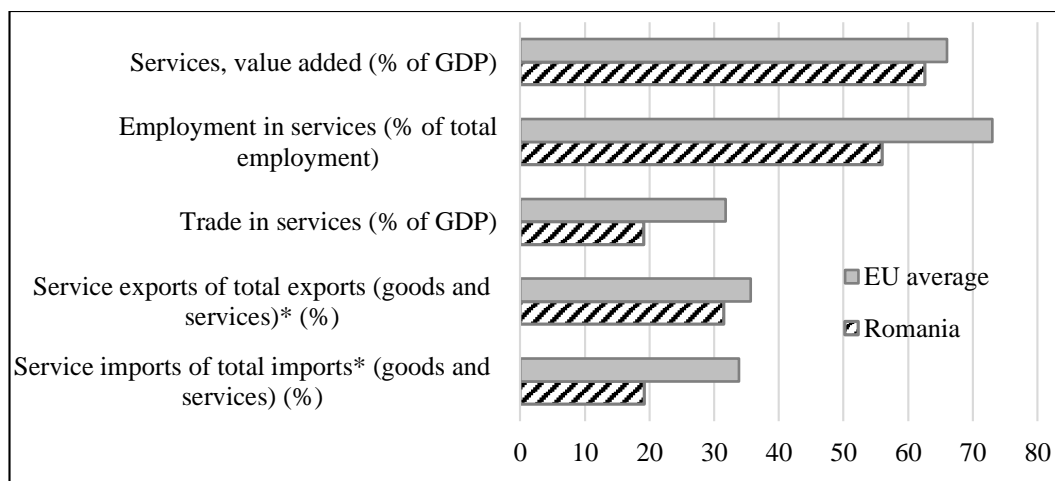
In light of the developments in the service sector and trade flows in services over the last decade, namely in the period between 2015 and 2024, the main objective of this paper is to highlight the capacity of Romania's trade in services to exploit its competitive advantages through EU accession, and in particular the participation in the single market for services with an impact on Romania's economic development, given the need to find sources of resilience to future challenges in the European economy.

2. DYNAMICS OF THE SERVICE SECTOR AND TRADE IN SERVICES OF ROMANIA

The evolution of the main indicators related to the service sector during the last decade highlights their continuous growth trend and contribution to the achievement of the Romania's macroeconomic indicators. In this regard, it is worth noting the trend of permanent growth of services industries' value-added share of GDP, reaching a maximum of 62.6% in 2024, its positive evolution rates in recent years diminishing the gap to the EU average, respectively 66% (Figure 1). Also, the growing role of the service sector in the Romanian economy has led to an increase in the employment, currently, service industries providing more than half of the total number of jobs at the national level (respectively 56%, but at a distance from EU average of 73%, in 2025). All these developments were also reflected in the increase in trade in services, in 2024 its share of GDP reaching 19.1%, compared to 31.8% of EU average (Figure 1). At the same time, in 2024, the service exports represented 31.5% of total exports of goods and

services, and service imports 19.2% of total imports of goods and services of Romania (WBG, 2026).

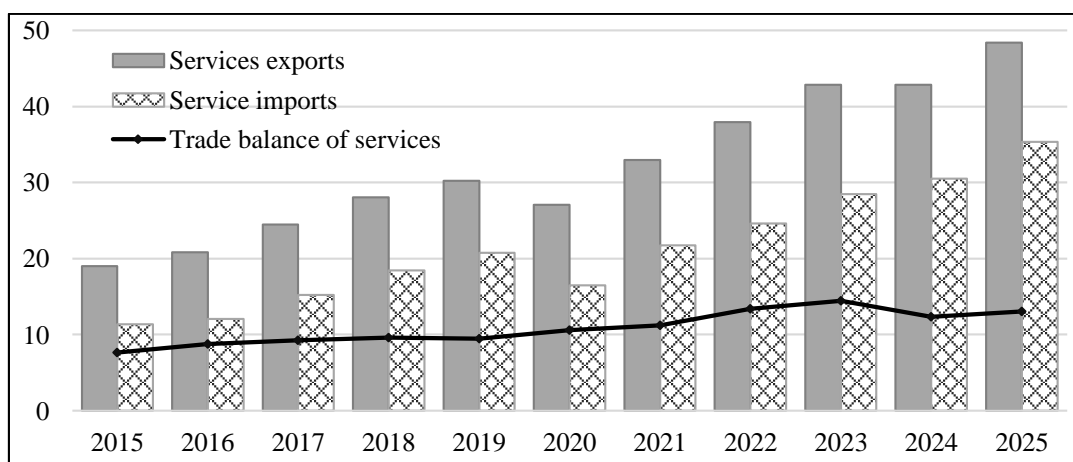
Figure 1. Service-related indicators in Romania and the EU average, in 2024 (%)



Note: *Data available only for extra-EU exports and imports.
 Source: Author representation based on WBG (2026) and Eurostat (2025).

Among the specific indicators of the service sector development, the trade flows in services are highlighted with records at every new year, both in exports and imports, in 2025 reaching new historical maximum values, respectively USD 48.4 billion for exports and USD 35.4 billion for imports. The same evolution is also followed by the surplus of the trade balance in services, its highest value being recorded in 2023 with USD 14.4 billion (WTO, 2026). The data revealed in Figure 2 highlights that, over the last decade, the pandemic crisis was the only major influencing factor affecting the evolution of Romania's trade in services, the losses recorded in 2020 being recovered the following year, so that trade flows in services have rapidly resumed their pre-pandemic growth trend.

Figure 2. Romania's trade flows in services, between 2015 and 2025 (USD billion)

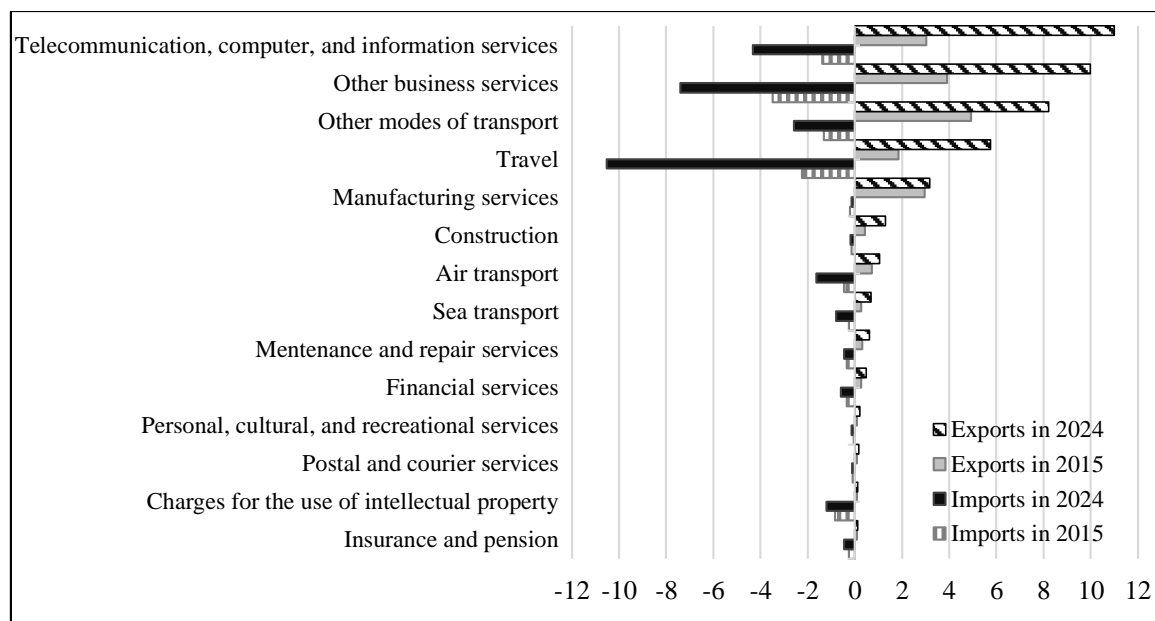


Source: Author representation based on WTO (2026).

The positive developments in trade in services have been accompanied by an improvement in its structure, reflected in the increase in the value and share of trade flows in services that capitalize on the advantages of the Romanian business environment, particularly

the skilled workforce in specific domains of business services related to the use of information and communications technology (ICT). The data represented in Figure 3 highlights the progress in the structure of service exports and imports over the last decade, with telecommunications, ICT and other business services dominating both exports (with 49% of the total value of service exports, respectively USD 21 billion in 2024), and imports (with 38.4% of the total value of service imports, respectively USD 11.7 billion) (WTO, 2026).

Figure 3. Romania's trade flows in services, by categories, in 2024 compared to 2015 (USD billion)

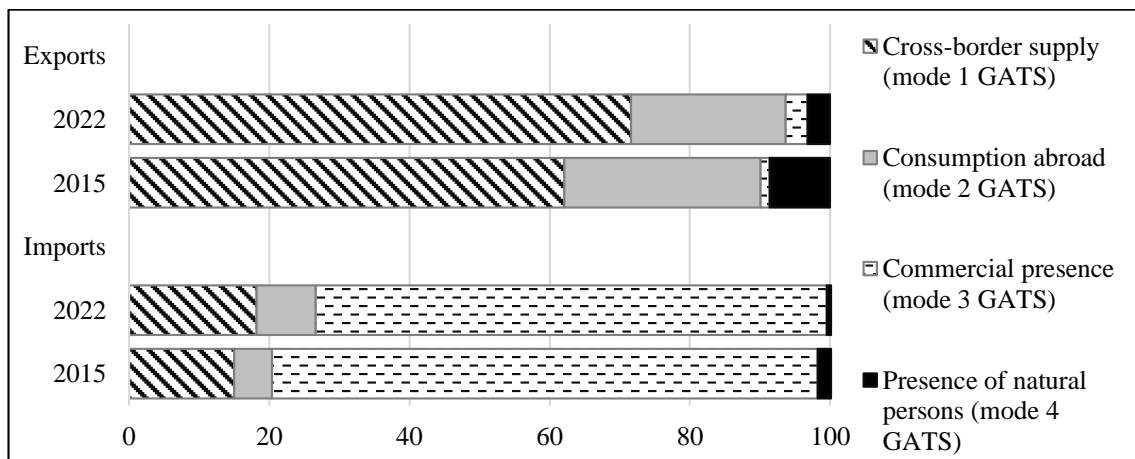


Source: Author representation based on WTO (2026).

The effects of the reforms undertaken in the economy after accession to the EU have been reflected on the modernization of service industries and the adoption of regulations favourable to trade in services, as well as the intensification of digitalization processes in recent years that have increased the capacity to use technological means in international trading of services. All these developments are also mirrored on the four modes of service provision, according to the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS/WTO). The data illustrated in Figure 4 highlights the dominance of cross-border trade (mode 1 according to the GATS classification) as Romania's main mode of service exports. Thus, in 2022, 71.8% of Romania's service exports were delivered by digital means, a noteworthy improvement from 62.1% in 2015. Services delivered through consumers traveling abroad (mode 2 GATS), predominantly used within trade flows in travel services, continue to keep on the second position as a mode of service exports, with 21.1% in 2022 compared to 28% in 2015. Commercial presence (mode 3 GATS), specifically for trading services based on internationalization through foreign direct investment (FDI), dominates Romania's service imports, this mode representing the way of trading highly complex and technology-intensive services. In this category of services are included telecommunications, financial and professional business services, requiring large capital investments, usually that cannot be supported by national companies. The presence of natural persons (mode 4 GATS), specific to services delivered by the movement of professionals as service providers abroad, has registered a decrease of its share of the overall service exports, this evolution being often associated with the migration phenomenon,

particularly the exodus of qualified professional labour from Romania seeking better job opportunities abroad (Racovițan & Chivu, coord., 2019).

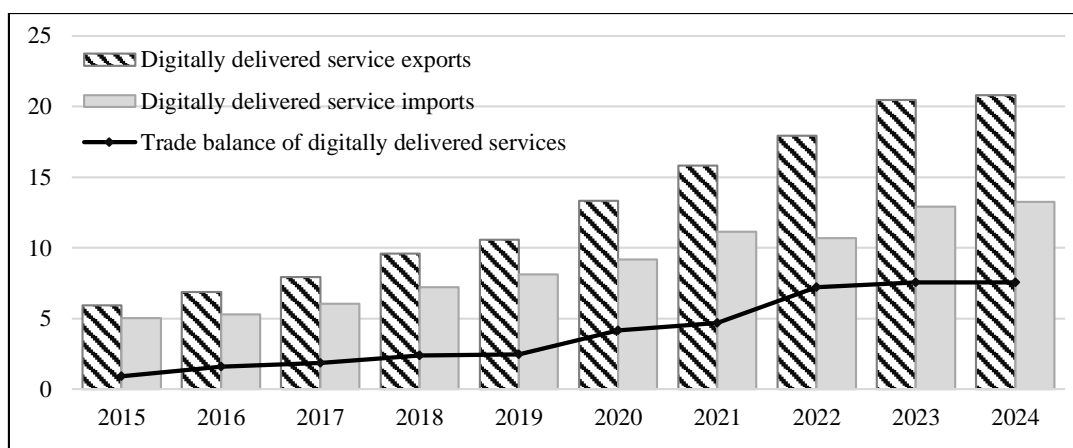
Figure 4. External service modes of supply of Romania, in 2022 compared to 2015 (% of total)



Source: Author representation based on WTO (2026).

Throughout the evolution of trade in services, the dominance of services traded through digital tools (platforms) is notable, which are increasingly based on technological innovations and recently the use of artificial intelligence, which are imposed at the level of global business models and have revolutionized both international trade and other areas of the world economy. In recent years, services traded through digital means have begun to increase (Figure 5), with an important role in Romania's economic development, in line with European trends, the industries of these service categories making important contributions to foreign trade and becoming an important support for the national economy.

Figure 5: Romania's trade flows in digitally delivered services, between 2015 and 2025 (USD billion)



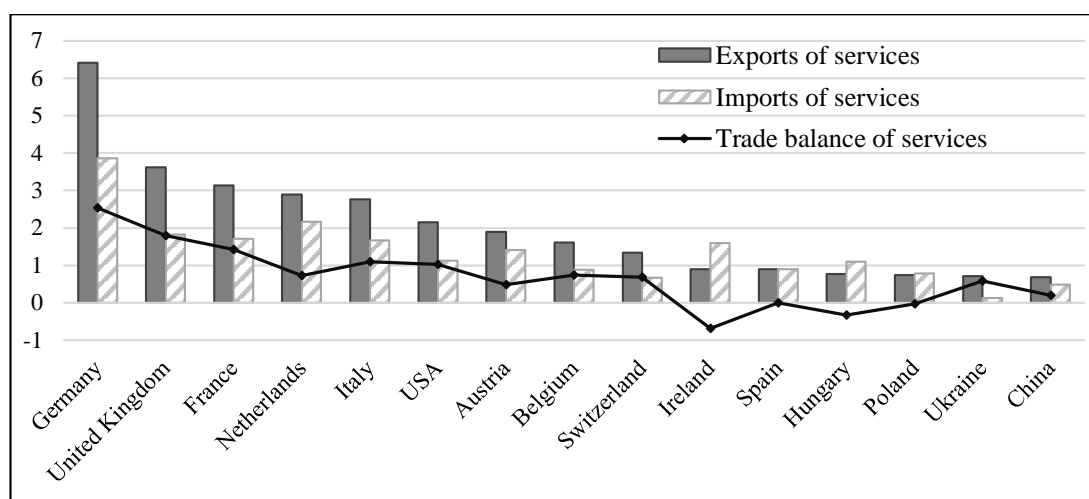
Source: Author's representation based on WTO (2026).

Trade in services traded through digital means can be considered as a resilience factor in the face of challenges in the global economy. The restrictions imposed during the pandemic had a favourable effect on those services provided remotely via the internet (such as information and communications technology, as well as professional services for businesses),

with Romania recording positive developments in digitally provided services. Therefore, telecommunications, IT and computer services continued their pre-pandemic upward trend, largely supported by good internet connectivity, which had a considerable effect on the expansion of Romania's overall trade flows in services.

The main partners in trade in services of Romania are the developed countries of Europe, America and Asia, the data represented in Figure 6 highlighting the surplus that Romania's trade in services records with most of its partners. These results are mainly supported by trade in intermediary services, Romania representing an attractive destination for the outsourcing of business services and consequently an important supplier of such services, particularly for the Western European markets. In this regard, business support services and ICT serve the activities of multinational companies from these countries investing in Romania.

Figure 6. Romania's main service trade partners, in 2024 (USD billion)



Source: Author representation based on WTO (2026).

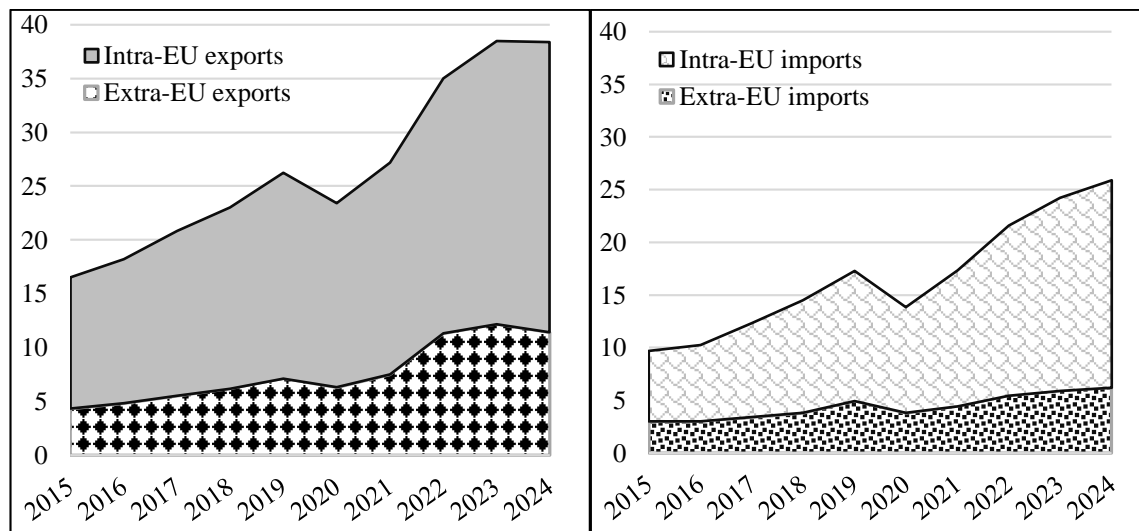
In summary, the current stage of development of Romania's trade in services reflects the effects of the broad transformation processes in the economy that have supported the increasing role of the service sector in the economy. Competitive advantages, mainly those related to geographical location and free access to the EU market, the level of education, professional skills and labour costs, the quality of telecommunications infrastructure, as well as the development potential of service industries, have created the conditions for the development of business models based on intermediary services and the integration of Romania's services sector into global business value chains, with the considerable contribution of multinational companies in Romania. According to NBR (2025), in 2024, 61.2% of the Romania's service exports and 43.2% of the Romania's service imports were achieved by foreign companies that invested and have operated different business models in the national economy.

3. CAPITALIZING ON THE ADVANTAGES OF ACCESS TO THE EUROPEAN SINGLE MARKET FOR SERVICES

The development of Romania's services sector and trade in services has been related to economic dynamism after EU accession, which opened access to the single market along with the implementation of a regulatory framework favourable to services transactions. According to the data represented in Figure 7, EU countries represent Romania's main trading partner in

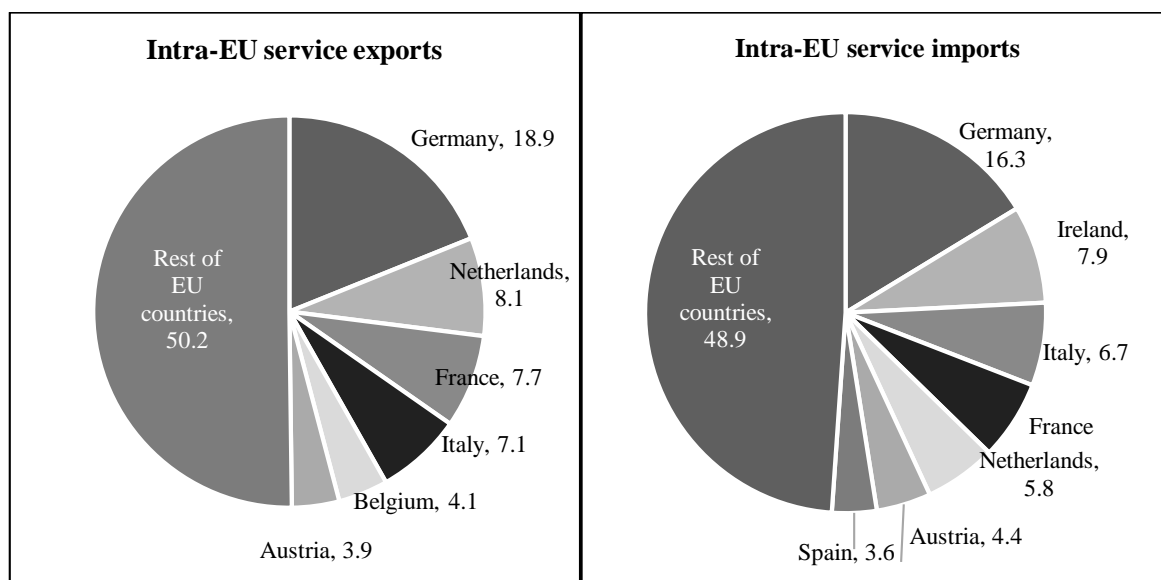
service trade, in recent years, 70% of Romania's service exports have been oriented to the EU market, and 76% of service imports have come from the EU countries (Eurostat, 2025).

Figure 7: Romania's intra- and extra-EU trade flows in services, 2015-2024 (EUR billion)



Source: Author representation based on Eurostat (2025).

The analysis of the main intra-EU destinations of service exports and, respectively, intra-EU sources of service imports, reveals a strong concentration, so that, in 2024, 49.8% of total service exports to EU countries went to a group of six countries, approximately the same countries representing the source of 51.1% of total service imports (Figure 8). It is also noted that the countries in the ranking of trading partners have relatively close shares in the two categories of flows, namely Germany (with 18.9% of total service exports to EU countries and 16.3% of total service imports to EU countries), France (with 7.7% and, respectively, 6.4%), Italy (with 7.1% and 6.7%), the Netherlands (with 8.1% and 5.8%), and Austria (with 3.9% and 4.4%) (NBR, 2025). The relative balance between the two categories of trade flows, as well as the registration of a trade surplus at the level of bilateral relations with each main partner (also highlighted in Figure 6), are explained by the business outsourcing models by companies from these countries to partners in Romania and which generate important service exports to their countries of origin. Competitive advantages, mainly those related to geographical location and free access to the EU market, the level of education, professional skills and labour costs, the quality of telecommunications infrastructure, as well as the development potential of service industries, have created the conditions for the development of business models based on intermediary services and the integration of Romania's services sector into EU business value chains, with the considerable contribution of multinational companies in Romania. Romania's high level of integration in intermediary services flows (in 2024, the intermediary services in Romania's total trade in services were over 65%; Eurostat, 2025) will support the development of Romania's services sector and trade in services, in the context of the prospects of increasing the role of trade in intermediary services in business development at international level (Baldwin, 2023).

Figure 8. Romania's EU partners in trade in services, in 2024 (% of total)

Source: Author representation based on NBR (2025).

The high shares of trade flows with EU partners highlight that Romania has managed to capitalize on the advantages of free access to the single market for services (intra-EU trade representing approximately 70% of Romania's total trade in services). The achievement of this objective must be assessed in the context in which, at the EU level as a whole, the similar growth rates of intra- and extra-EU trade flows have not generated the achievement of a higher share of intra-EU trade flows. The main explanation is related to the maintaining of a considerable growth rate of external demand for services provided by some member countries with a high level of development. However, although the level of economic integration between EU member states in trade in services is lower than that of goods, the internal single market has created one of the largest integrated markets in the world and a favourable environment for increasing the international competitiveness of EU service providers. Also, in this context, the increase in intra-EU trade flows in services and, respectively, the increase in the level of integration of the EU service markets will be considerably supported by future actions aimed at completing the regulatory framework at national sectoral level, given the wide variety of regulatory areas generating obstacles, mainly of an administrative nature, to intra-EU trade in services. Thus, the continued reduction of barriers and the harmonisation of regulations within the EU will contribute to the deepening of the integration of the internal market for services, which will generate increased added value in all sectors, strengthening competitiveness of EU economy and ultimately the level of welfare within the EU (Dorn et al., 2024). These aspects are also included in the EU's long-term competitiveness strategy beyond 2030, adopted in 2023 (EC, 2023), which sets ambitious performance indicators that could significantly stimulate cross-border trade in services within the single market (Cernat, 2023).

Almost two decades after Romania's accession to the EU, the investigation of Romania's trade with EU partners requires highlighting the effects resulting from participation in the single market for services. Thus, EU membership has ensured increased and free access for Romanian consumers and service companies to the service markets of other EU economies and implicitly the opening of national markets for consumers and service companies from EU countries. Stimulating competition and aligning with European standards and regulations have generated positive effects on the quality of services offered by Romanian service companies. In addition to the free movement of services, intra-EU trade in services also benefits from the

advantages of the free movement of capital and people, all supporting service providers to offer their services in any EU member state, with positive effects on the economic development.

In summary, the **advantages** arising from the participation in the single market for services are related to access to a wide range of services for Romanian consumers, as well as increased business opportunities for Romanian service providers, supported by the harmonisation of legislation and the removal of barriers to trade, with a positive impact on overall economic development. Like any economic phenomenon, the participation of consumers and service companies from Romania in the services markets of EU countries may also be accompanied by some deficiencies, generally associated with the differences in the levels of development between EU member states. In this regard, it is noted that the integrated business models developed in the field of services that support trade in services can also be a source of vulnerability, as fluctuations or challenges in the economies of the main partners can affect the national economy. Romania's trade in services is strongly dependent on the developments of the EU economies, the slowdown in activity in some economies that represent Romania's main partners can affect the demand for services and lead to a reduction in service exports. The synthesis presented in Table 1 highlights the main advantages and disadvantages of Romania's participation in the single market for services, structured according to the main categories involved, namely consumers, service providers as individuals and companies, as well as the national economy as a whole.

Table 1. The main advantages and disadvantages of Romania's participation in the single market for services

	Advantages	Disadvantages
For service consumers in Romania	(i) free access to a wide variety of services offered on the markets of EU member states; (ii) better quality services, due to high standards in the service areas, especially in EU well developed countries, but also on the national market offered by companies that have invested in certain service areas (e.g., banking); (iii) competitive prices due to the elimination of trade barriers generating additional costs within the single market.	(i) higher prices compared to the purchasing power of Romanian consumers for some categories of services; (ii) linguistic and cultural barriers, given the direct interaction required in the delivering of certain services.
For professionals, as individuals from Romania providing services on the EU market	(i) freedom of professional mobility; (ii) free access to the markets of EU member states; (iii) increased salary opportunities through access to markets with high remuneration levels and greater purchasing power; (iv) recognition of qualifications at EU level; (v) accumulation of professional experiences in different cultural environments and increased possibilities for building a professional career; (vi) access to various additional professional training programs;	(i) differences in remuneration for services provided; (ii) the possibility of encountering administrative barriers regarding cumbersome and lengthy procedures for equivalence of studies and qualifications in some member states, which could delay access to the labour market; (iii) the possibility of encountering barriers related to perceptions of inferiority and distrust in certain professional environments, mainly in developed countries; (iv) possible problems related to reintegration into the national market after returning to Romania,

	Advantages	Disadvantages
	(vii) access to projects and contracts at EU level.	at a social, cultural and professional level;
For Romanian service companies	(i) expanded business opportunities, due to the possibility of national companies to offer their services on an expanded market, having access to customers and partners from all EU countries, without trade barriers; (ii) cost reduction due to the elimination of trade barriers, with local companies being able to increase their competitiveness on the single market; (iii) access to qualified labour, due to the free movement of labour; (iv) harmonized quality standards that facilitate the export of services to the markets of other EU countries and the possibility of generating additional income; (v) access to EU funding programs and support instruments designed to adapt to the requirements of the single market or the development of innovative projects; (vi) stimulating innovation and improving the quality of services to increase competitiveness; (vii) the possibility of employee mobility; (viii) access to projects and contracts at EU level.	(i) competitive pressure (in terms of quality and price) on the national market from companies (especially multinationals) from developed countries, which mainly affects small local companies; (ii) the persistence of access barriers to the service markets of some EU countries, under restrictive national regulations and administrative practices; (iii) the possibility of maintaining barriers applicable to the relocation of workers; (iv) difficulties arising from the tax regulatory framework applicable to cross-border transactions; (v) gaps compared to European companies in terms of digitalization and innovation; (vi) difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified human resources, which may be much more attracted by the advantages offered by companies from developed countries, mainly multinational companies;
For the Romanian economy	(i) increased trade in services and its positive effects on economic growth; (ii) increased long-term competitiveness, due to access to a larger market and harmonized standards; (iii) stimulation of innovation at the national level, due to exposure to a high level of competition, including on its own market; (iv) increased national reputation.	(i) pressure from European competition, mainly from companies in developed countries, especially for small enterprises; (ii) vulnerability to the economic cycles of the main partners in trade in services, with the reduction in external demand affecting national companies dependent on service exports; (iii) outflow of skilled labour to well developed countries in the EU.

Source: Created by the author based on Honciuc (2023), Letta (2024), EU (2025), and CEU (2025).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The single market for services can be considered one of the great achievements of the European integration process, its success being based on the links between EU Member States, their degree of complexity and specialization in the field of services supporting the EU's dominant position in global trade in services (Cernat, 2023; WTO, 2026). Intra-EU trade in services is considerably influenced by the level of development of EU economies and the favourable regulatory framework, enhanced in recent years by the increasing degree of implementation of technologies in the service sector that have facilitated their cross-border trading. Also, except for the pandemic crisis that temporarily affected certain trade flows in

services, overall trade in services has proven the highest level of resilience to cyclical factors, so that in the last decade, intra-EU trade in services has doubled (as represented in Figure 7), Romania being part of the general dynamics of trade in services at EU level (Eurostat, 2025).

The recent positive developments in the service sector and trade in services of Romania have been sustained by the participation in the single market for services following EU accession. The extensive processes imposed by the status of a member state have supported the overcoming of deficiencies in the service industries and the increase in their competitiveness, which led to the expansion and diversification of trade flows in services with partners in EU countries. The process of integrating the Romanian economy into the EU was accompanied by the liberalization of trade flows in services and the implementation of reforms imposed by the need to adopt EU policies that sustained their expansion. The advantages of the national market, mainly in terms of workforce qualifications and competitive operating costs, were intensively exploited in trade and investment in the service sectors with Western European partners, Romania being very attractive to foreign partners in all services. Romanian service industries were integrated into the extended value chains at European level, national companies being attractive for outsourced services and related services used in the goods production processes. However, despite the significant progress of the service sector in recent years, the comparative evaluation with the EU market and the potential of the service sector require continued reforms with the adoption of policies and the completion of the institutional framework in order to strengthen governance, as well as increasing investments in infrastructure and improving skills specific to the service sector, in order to fully exploit their potential in the current global economic environment (Hollweg & Saez, 2019).

The dominant share of EU partners in Romania's overall trade flows in services and its continuous growth trend highlight that, from the perspective of trade in services, following EU accession, Romania has achieved its objective of capitalizing on the potential of participating in the single market for services. At the same time, the extra-EU demand for services reflects the high level of specialization of Romania's service industries, influenced by global economic conditions, trade policies and technological advances, which makes Romania an important business partner in the service sector. From this perspective, the consolidation of service industries and the intensification of trade in services are essential in order to capitalize on their advantages and increase the participation of services in Romania's economic development processes, in the context of an international context that requires increased economic resilience.

In conclusion, the prospects for Romania's services trade are strongly connected to international trends, as well as national policies, the last ones requiring to be focused on the competitiveness of service exports, especially those intensive in new technologies and human capital. New generations of reforms must be linked not only to the liberalization of trade flows in services, but also to improving the quality of regulations, investments in infrastructure and high-quality education, all supporting innovation in the service sector and the diffusion of digital technologies among Romanian companies. By improving competitive advantages in the field of services, it will be ensured that the potential of the service sector is exploited to generate a positive impact on sustainable growth of Romanian economy.

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