

# **THE EUROPEAN STANDING CORPS OFFICERS IN THE EYES OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN ALBANIA**

*Which factors contribute to the frame held on EU Standing Corps officers by the  
citizens of Albania?*

*Master of Science Thesis*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the factors that contribute to the framing of EU Standing Corps officers by the citizens of Albania. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the inductive research explores whether the socio-economic, cultural, and political factors influence public perceptions of the Frontex officers stationed in Albania since the agency's first joint operation outside the EU in 2019. Through detailed interviews and comprehensive literature reviews, the research reveals the multifaceted nature of Albanian citizens' attitudes toward these officers.

The findings indicate that socio-economic conditions significantly impact perceptions, with communities in economically disadvantaged regions expressing more positive opinions towards the officers due to the potential for economic benefits, such as job creation and investment in local infrastructure. Cultural dynamics, influenced by Albania's diverse heritage and historical experiences with foreign interventions, also play a critical role. The study highlights that respect for local traditions and cultural sensitivity from the officers can foster positive perceptions, whereas any perceived disregard for local customs leads to alienation and distrust.

Political narratives and media representations further shape public attitudes, with transparent and accountable governance practices enhancing trust in Frontex operations. Balanced media coverage contributes to informed public discourse, while biased reporting can distort perceptions and fuel misconceptions. The geopolitical context, including regional alliances and Albania's strategic position, also affects how Frontex's presence is viewed, with alignment of interests fostering cooperation and divergence creating tensions.

Overall, this thesis underscores the complexity of public perception and the importance of a nuanced understanding of the interplay between various factors influencing the framing of EU Standing Corps officers in Albania. The research offers valuable insights into the socio-cultural and political underpinnings of public sentiment, providing a foundation for more effective and culturally informed interventions by international agencies.

**Keywords:** Frontex, EU Standing Corps, Albania, public perception, socio-economic impact, cultural dynamics, political narratives, media representation, geopolitical context

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Frontex, officially known as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, is an EU agency in charge of coordinating operational cooperation between EU member states in the field of border security and management. Established in 2004, Frontex plays a crucial role in supporting member states' efforts to secure their external borders, manage migration flows, and combat cross-border crime and irregular migration (European Union, n.d.). One of Frontex's key initiatives is the deployment of joint operations and missions, where teams of border guards from different member states work together to address specific challenges or areas of concern along the EU's external borders. These operations can involve various activities such as patrolling, surveillance, search and rescue operations, and border checks (Frontex, n.d.).

The EU Standing Corps for the European Border and Coast Guard (EBCG) is a recent development aimed at strengthening Frontex's operational capacity and responsiveness. Established in 2019, the EBCG consists of a reserve pool of border guards and equipment that can be rapidly deployed to support member states facing significant migratory pressures or border security challenges. The EBCG comprises a standing corps of border guards and technical experts from EU member states who are on standby for deployment at short notice. This standing corps enhances Frontex's ability to provide operational support to member states in managing their external borders effectively and responding swiftly to emerging security threats or crises. Frontex and the EU Standing Corps play crucial roles in enhancing the EU's capacity to ensure the security and integrity of its external borders, manage migration flows effectively, and respond to emerging security challenges in a coordinated and timely manner. Their efforts are instrumental in upholding the EU's commitment to safeguarding the freedom of movement within the Schengen area while also ensuring the safety and security of EU citizens.

The Frontex European Border and Coast Guard Officers (EBCG) presence in Albania is a unique intersection of international collaboration, security dynamics, and cultural interactions. In 2019, Frontex initiated its first-ever joint operation outside the European Union in Albania, marking a significant milestone for the Western Balkans region in migration management and cross-border crime prevention (EEAS, 2019). The continuous work of the European officers with their national counterparts and their establishment of contacts with the local Albanian

community underscores the novelty and significance of this study. As Albania progresses towards integration with European institutions and maintains its sovereignty, the role and perception of the EU Standing Corps officers have become increasingly important. The way the Albanian citizens perceive these officers provides valuable insights into the complexities of international interventions, cultural exchanges, and the evolving dynamics of civil-military relations.

With its rich history and diverse cultural heritage, Albania has been a focal point of geopolitical interests and strategic alliances (Abazi, 2019). The country's journey from isolation to engagement with European and international partners has been marked by profound transformations, challenges, and opportunities (Johnson, 2001). The introduction of the EU Standing Corps Officers in Albania reflects the broader aspirations for stability, security, and prosperity shared by Albania and the European Union (Balfour & Stratulat, 2018). However, the perception of these officers within Albanian civil society is shaped by myriad factors, ranging from historical legacies to contemporary socio-political dynamics. Narrowing down this variety of factors through inductive research to some concrete evidence-based sensitizing factors drives the academic and scientific importance of this thesis.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

The problem at hand revolves around understanding the factors that contribute to the framing of EU Standing Corps officers by the citizens of Albania. Despite the shared objectives of promoting peace, security, and cooperation, the perceptions of the EU Standing Corps officers within the Albanian civil society exhibit a wide spectrum of diverse and sometimes contradictory attitudes. These perceptions can range from positive endorsements of their contributions to skepticism about their role, concerns about sovereignty, cultural differences, and apprehensions regarding their impact on local communities (Tocci, 2007).

The historical context is a key factor in shaping the perceptions of the EU Standing Corps officers among the citizens of Albania. Albania's history, marked by foreign interventions, occupations, and struggles for independence, has deeply influenced the collective memory and national identity (Berdal & Malone, 2000). Past experiences with foreign military presence and interventions have instilled a sense of resilience, skepticism, and vigilance toward external influences (Schwandner-Sievers & Fischer, 2002). The memories of past conflicts, resistance movements, and efforts to preserve cultural heritage can significantly influence attitudes

towards the EU Standing Corps officers, framing their presence within the broader narrative of Albania's historical struggles and aspirations.

Cultural identity and heritage are integral to Albania's national fabric, reflecting its people's resilience, diversity, and richness (Smith, 1991). The Albanian citizens might perceive the EU Standing Corps officers through the prism of cultural preservation, authenticity, and continuity. The interactions between the officers and the local communities, the respect for traditions, and the appreciation of cultural nuances can significantly impact perceptions of mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation. Conversely, perceived cultural insensitivity, disregard for local customs, or the imposition of foreign values can lead to resistance, alienation, and discord (Vertovec, 2007).

Economic considerations and political landscapes also play crucial roles in shaping perceptions of the EU Standing Corps officers. Albania's socio-economic challenges, including unemployment, poverty, and infrastructural deficits, highlight the pressing need for sustainable development, investment, and inclusive growth. The contributions of the EU Standing Corps officers in promoting economic development, job creation, and infrastructure projects can influence public perceptions positively, fostering a sense of partnership, progress, and shared prosperity (Stiglitz, 2002).

Since the creation of the Standing Corps, political narratives, ideologies, and governance structures have further shaped public opinion and attitudes toward the officers. The portrayal of the officers in political discourse, media coverage, and public debates can either enhance their legitimacy and acceptance or foster skepticism, criticism, and resistance. Transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in governance, coupled with a commitment to democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law, are essential for building trust, fostering collaboration, and promoting constructive engagement between the EU Standing Corps officers and the Albanian civil society (Norris, 2011).

It is impossible to overstate the influence of media representation on Albanian citizens' perceptions of EU Standing Corps officers. Balanced, accurate, and objective media coverage can provide insights into the officers' roles, responsibilities, and contributions, fostering understanding, awareness, and informed public discourse (Entman, 2007). Conversely, biased, sensationalized, or misleading media narratives can distort perceptions, fuel misconceptions, and perpetuate stereotypes, leading to polarization, mistrust, and division (Entman,

2007). Media influence on public opinion is a significant aspect of this study, as it underscores the need for responsible and unbiased reporting in shaping public perceptions.

The geopolitical dynamics, regional alliances, conflicts, and diplomatic relations may also shape perceptions of the EU Standing Corps Officers. Albania's strategic position, regional interactions, and alignments with international partners and organizations influence attitudes toward the officers' presence, operations, and collaborations (Keohane & Dye, 2001). The alignment of interests, shared objectives, and mutual benefits can enhance cooperation, trust, and partnership. At the same time, divergent priorities, conflicting agendas, and geopolitical tensions can create challenges, uncertainties, and complexities in civil-military relations.

### **1.3 Goal Statement**

The goal of this thesis is to investigate the factors that contribute to the framing of EU Standing Corps officers by the citizens of Albania. This research aims to identify and analyze the socio-economic, cultural, and political factors that shape public perceptions of Frontex's presence and operations within the country. The study uses semi-structured interviews and other qualitative methods to look into the complex factors that affect how Albanians understand and interpret the role and impact of EU Standing Corps officers. The ultimate objective is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play, thereby contributing to both academic literature and practical policy-making concerning foreign security interventions in Albania. This investigation not only aims to illuminate the specific case of Albania but also to offer broader insights into the interaction between local contexts and international security efforts.

### **1.4 Research Question**

#### **Research Aim**

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the factors that contribute to the framing of EU Standing Corps officers by the citizens of Albania. This study explores the diverse perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs the Albanian civil society held towards the EU Standing Corps officers, examining the interplay of historical legacies, cultural dynamics, socio-economic considerations, political landscapes, media representations, and geopolitical contexts shaping their views.

#### **Research Question**

The central research question guiding this study is:

“Which factors contribute to the frame held on EU Standing Corps Officers by the citizens of Albania?”

The thesis will attempt to answer the following sub-questions to substantiate the topic and delve deeper into an answer to the main research question:

1. How do socio-economic conditions in Albania influence public perceptions and framing of EU Standing Corps officers?
2. In what ways do cultural identities and historical experiences shape the framing of EU Standing Corps officers by Albanian citizens?
3. What role do political narratives and media representations play in the framing of EU Standing Corps officers by the Albanian public?

This research question is a guiding framework for exploring the multifaceted influences shaping perceptions and attitudes towards the EU Standing Corps officers among Albania's citizens. By investigating this central question, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in civil-military relations, cultural exchanges, international collaborations, and the broader socio-political dynamics influencing the perception of the EU Standing Corps officers within Albanian civil society. This comprehensive approach ensures that no aspect of the issue is overlooked, providing a thorough analysis of the topic.

### **1.5 Academic and Societal Relevance**

The topic of Frontex and the EU Standing Corps holds significant academic and societal relevance in the contemporary discourse surrounding border security, migration management, and European integration.

#### *Academic Relevance*

This study makes several notable contributions to the academic field. The research bridges multiple disciplines by examining the framing of EU Standing Corps Officers (Frontex) in Albania, including political science, international relations, sociology, and security studies. It provides a comprehensive framework that integrates socio-economic, cultural, historical, political, and media-related factors, offering a holistic view of public perceptions towards

international security interventions. The findings substantiate and extend existing theoretical frameworks on public perception of security forces, particularly those emphasizing the role of socio-economic conditions, cultural identities, historical experiences, political narratives, and media representations. The study validates the intersectional approach and introduces a nuanced understanding of how these factors interplay to shape public attitudes.

Moreover, the qualitative methodology and in-depth interviews enrich the empirical literature by providing detailed insights into the specific context of Albania. This case study approach enhances the understanding of the localized impact of international security interventions and offers valuable insights that can be used for comparative studies in different regions. The research highlights the importance of culturally sensitive engagement and strategic communication in international security operations. By emphasizing the need for Frontex to consider local socio-economic challenges and historical legacies, the study contributes to the discourse on effective governance and policy-making in the field of border management and migration.

By connecting these interdisciplinary insights, the study not only advances theoretical discussions but also provides practical implications for policy and governance. This underscores the academic value of integrating diverse perspectives to address complex issues in international security and border management, paving the way for future research and informed policy-making.

### *Societal Relevance*

The practical implications of this research are significant for various societal stakeholders. The study's findings offer actionable insights for Frontex and similar agencies to build and maintain public trust. By addressing socio-economic challenges and engaging with local communities respectfully and transparently, these agencies can enhance their legitimacy and effectiveness in host countries. This approach not only fosters trust but also improves the operational outcomes of such interventions.

Furthermore, the detailed analysis of public perceptions provides valuable information for policymakers at both the national and EU levels. Understanding the nuanced views of local populations can inform the development of more effective and inclusive policies that consider the socio-economic and cultural contexts of host countries. Policymakers can leverage these insights to craft strategies that are more responsive to the needs and concerns of the affected communities.

The research also underscores the powerful role of media representations in shaping public opinion. Journalists and media organizations can draw on these insights to provide more balanced and accurate coverage of international security interventions, thereby contributing to more informed public discourse. This can help mitigate the spread of misinformation and promote a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

For local leaders and civil society organizations, the study offers a framework for engaging with international security forces constructively. By fostering dialogue and collaboration, communities can influence how these agencies operate and ensure that their presence aligns with local needs and values. This participatory approach can enhance the positive impact of security interventions and reduce potential frictions.

Lastly, the findings can be used to develop educational programs and awareness campaigns that inform the public about the role and activities of Frontex and similar agencies. Increased understanding can reduce misconceptions and foster a more nuanced view of international security interventions. Education and awareness initiatives can empower communities to engage more effectively with security forces and contribute to a more informed and cohesive society.

This thesis's academic and societal relevance lies in its comprehensive analysis of the factors that influence public perceptions of Frontex in Albania. By integrating interdisciplinary perspectives and providing actionable recommendations, the study contributes to both scholarly research and practical applications in the fields of international security and border management. It highlights the importance of context-sensitive approaches and underscores the need for continuous engagement with local communities to enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of international security interventions.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Framing**

Framing is a process by which individuals and groups construct and define social realities through the strategic use of language, symbols, and messages, thereby emphasizing certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others. This concept, rooted in the works of Goffman (1974), highlights how media and communicative practices shape public perception and interpretation of events. Entman (1993) elaborates on this by suggesting that framing involves selection and salience, meaning that communicators select certain aspects of a perceived reality

and make them more salient in a communicating text, to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. Frames, therefore, serve as cognitive shortcuts that help individuals interpret and understand complex information, but they can also be used strategically to influence public opinion and behavior (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The framing process can highlight aspects such as security benefits and international cooperation, or alternatively, it can emphasize sovereignty concerns and cultural disruptions, thus shaping the overall narrative and public sentiment (de Vreese, 2005). This dual potential for framing emphasizes its importance in the study of public opinion and its critical role in the interplay between communication and societal attitudes.

In the context of public perceptions of the EU Standing Corps Officers in Albania, framing involves the ways in which socio-economic conditions, cultural backgrounds, and political narratives shape the collective understanding and interpretation of Frontex's presence. This is particularly relevant in the Albanian context where historical legacies and socio-political dynamics play a significant role in how foreign entities are perceived (Schwandner-Sievers & Fischer, 2002). Additionally, media coverage and political discourse significantly contribute to framing by continuously shaping public attitudes and opinions through repeated narratives and symbolic representations (Tocci, 2007; Entman, 2007). Understanding framing in this research helps to unravel the complex interplay of factors influencing Albanian citizens' views on the EU Standing Corps Officers, offering deeper insights into the socio-cultural and political underpinnings of public sentiment.

## **2.2 Socio-Economic Implications**

Socio-economic considerations in the context of the Frontex European Standing Corps officers in Albania are multifaceted and deeply intertwined with the perceptions and attitudes of the civil society. This section delves into the various dimensions of socio-economic factors and their implications for Frontex operations in Albania, drawing on academic literature.

The economic impact of Frontex operations on Albania is one crucial aspect. The presence of the Standing Corps Officers may bring about economic benefits to the local communities through job creation, investment in infrastructure, and potential collaborations with local businesses (Carrera & Guild, 2016). For example, Frontex deployments often involve the use of state-of-the-art surveillance equipment, which may require maintenance and support services, thus creating employment opportunities in the region (European Union, n.d.). Additionally, the influx of EU funds and resources for border security initiatives may contribute

to economic development in border regions, stimulating local economies and fostering growth (Fisher, 2017). For instance, the assigned deployments to specific on-the-border locations may boost sectors such as hotels, lodging, or restaurants through the long-term demand created by the officers.

However, there are also concerns about the socio-economic implications of Frontex operations. Some scholars argue that the allocation of resources to border security measures, such as Frontex deployments, may divert funds away from addressing pressing socio-economic issues facing Albania, such as unemployment, poverty, and infrastructure deficits (Petrovici, 2015). This diversion of resources may exacerbate socio-economic inequalities and hinder efforts to achieve inclusive and sustainable development in the country (Stiglitz, 2002).

Moreover, the socio-economic context of Albania, characterized by income inequality, regional disparities, and limited access to basic services, shapes how Frontex operations are perceived by the local population. Communities in economically disadvantaged regions may view the presence of Frontex officers as an imposition by external actors who do not fully understand or address their socio-economic needs (Çarkaxhiu, 2017). This perception can lead to resentment and resistance towards Frontex interventions, particularly if they are perceived as exacerbating existing socio-economic inequalities (Petrovici, 2015).

### **2.3 Cultural Dynamics**

Cultural dynamics are instrumental in shaping how the Frontex European Standing Corps officers are perceived within Albanian civil society. Informed by academic research, this section discusses the nuanced aspects of cultural interactions and their impact on Frontex operations in Albania.

One crucial dimension is the interplay between the cultural backgrounds of Frontex officers and the local Albanian communities. Albania's diverse cultural landscape, characterized by regional variations in traditions, language, and social norms, can pose challenges to effective communication and collaboration between Frontex personnel and local residents (Vertovec, 2007). Variations in communication styles and cultural practices may lead to misunderstandings, hindering the efficiency of Frontex initiatives (Smith, 1991).

Furthermore, Albania's historical context, marked by periods of foreign influence and resistance movements, shapes attitudes towards external interventions, including those by Frontex. Memories of past conflicts and struggles for independence influence perceptions of

foreign entities, with some communities viewing Frontex officers through the lens of historical grievances and national identity (Schwandner-Sievers & Fischer, 2002). This historical memory can foster skepticism and mistrust towards Frontex operations, especially if they are perceived as encroaching on Albania's sovereignty or cultural autonomy (Berdal & Malone, 2000).

Additionally, the cultural heritage and identity of Albania play a significant role in shaping perceptions of Frontex activities. Efforts to preserve cultural heritage and promote authenticity are valued by Albanian communities, and Frontex officers' respect for these cultural values can positively influence perceptions (Fisher, 2017). Conversely, any perceived imposition of foreign values or disregard for local customs may lead to resistance and alienation, impeding cooperation with Frontex officers (Vertovec, 2007).

## **2.4 Political Landscape**

The political landscape significantly influences the perceptions of Frontex European Standing Corps Officers within Albanian civil society. One critical aspect is the role of political narratives and ideologies in framing public opinion about Frontex activities. Political actors, including government officials, opposition parties, and civil society organizations, often shape public discourse around border security and migration management (Norris, 2011). Their portrayals of Frontex operations can influence how these initiatives are perceived by Albanian citizens, with positive endorsements enhancing legitimacy and negative critiques fostering skepticism (Carrera & Guild, 2016).

In addition to this, governance structures and institutional frameworks play a crucial role in shaping the accountability and transparency of Frontex operations. Albania's governance mechanisms, including laws, regulations, and oversight bodies, determine the extent to which Frontex's activities are subject to scrutiny and public accountability (Carrera & Guild, 2016). Transparent and accountable governance practices are essential for building trust and confidence in Frontex operations in Albanian civil society (Norris, 2011).

Moreover, the alignment of Frontex's objectives with broader political agendas can influence perceptions of the agency's activities. If Frontex initiatives are seen as advancing shared political objectives, such as enhancing security and stability, they are more likely to receive public support (Keohane & Nye, 2001). However, if Frontex operations are perceived as serving narrow political interests or undermining democratic values, they may face resistance and opposition from civil society actors (Tocci, 2007).

Media representation also plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of Frontex activities within the Albanian political landscape. Balanced and objective media coverage can provide valuable insights into Frontex operations, fostering informed public discourse (Entman, 2007). Conversely, biased or sensationalized media narratives can distort perceptions, fueling misconceptions and negative attitudes towards Frontex officers (Entman, 2007).

## **2.5 Sensitizing Concepts**

The literature review, which delves deeply into the potential factors influencing the perception of deployed law-enforcement personnel, reveals a positive correlation between socio-economic factors, cultural dynamics, the political landscape, and the perceptions Albanian citizens have of the EU Standing Corps. First, the officers' contributions to the Albanian economy and social life should trigger strong opinions from the locals either approving or disapproving their presence in the area. As for the second point, the multicultural background of the officers stationed in Albania and the long history of the people there fighting against conquerors should make this a big part of the overall framework for EU deployments in Albania. Finally, political interference with the media may influence popular opinions about the contributions and accountability of EU border guards to cross-border crime, migration management, and civil-military interactions as a whole.

Moreover, the intersections between the independent concepts potentiate the general frame held by locals on Standing Corps officers. For example, in the interactive case of socio-economic factors and cultural background, economic stability mitigates cultural resistance, leading to a more favorable frame for the EU Standing Corps. Under stable economic conditions, the perception of the Standing Corps as a contributor to prosperity rather than a threat to cultural norms may reduce cultural resistance (Inglehart, 1997). In the interplay between cultural background and political narratives, the hypothesis is that positive political narratives enhance the acceptance of foreign presence in regions with a strong cultural identity by framing the Corps as supportive of cultural preservation and economic development. Supportive political narratives can reconcile cultural identity with the presence of foreign entities (Habermas, 1996). In the case of the interplay between socio-economic context and political narratives, the hypothesis claims that effective governance and positive media representation amplify the perceived legitimacy and impact of the EU Standing Corps in economically stable regions. Good governance coupled with favorable media coverage can enhance legitimacy and public trust (Putnam, 1993).

The overall relationship between the sensitizing concepts to be empirically tested in the analysis section is:

H<sub>0</sub>:” The interplay between socio-economic context, cultural background, and positive political narratives significantly influences the frame of the EU Standing Corps among Albanian citizens.”

## 2.6 Conceptual Framework

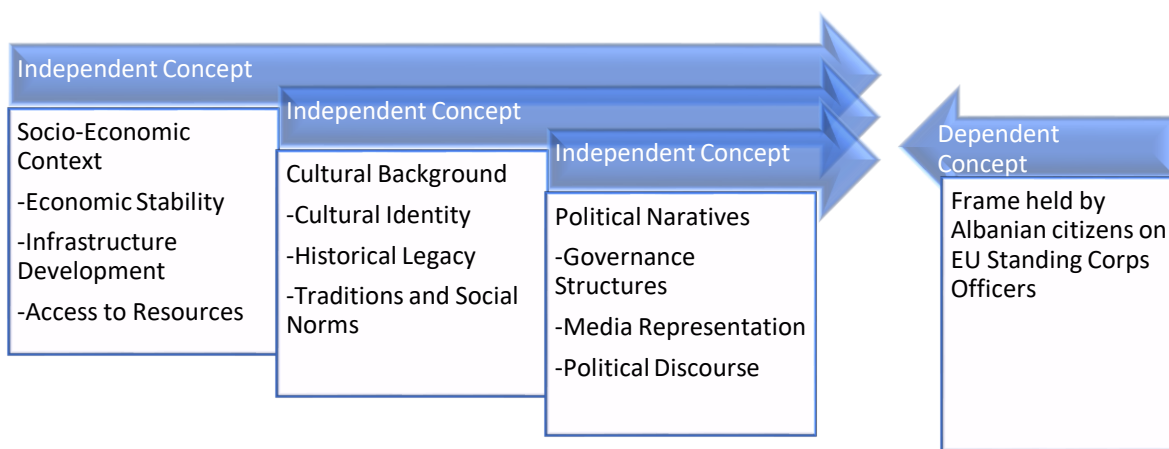


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework aims to elucidate the interplay between socio-economic context, cultural background, and political narratives as independent concepts influencing the dependent concept, which is the frame held by Albanian citizens on the EU Standing Corps. The framework is grounded in academic theories of perception, social identity, and political communication, providing a comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact to shape public opinion.

The socio-economic context plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of foreign entities like the EU Standing Corps in Albania. Economic stability, encompassing levels of employment, poverty rates, and overall economic growth, significantly influences these perceptions. Economic hardship can lead to heightened sensitivity towards external interventions, perceived either as necessary support or as intrusive. For example, in economically struggling regions, Frontex's presence might be seen as a vital support mechanism, while in areas with better economic conditions, their presence might be viewed

with skepticism or as unnecessary intervention (Stiglitz, 2002). Additionally, the presence of foreign bodies such as the EU Standing Corps often comes with investments in local infrastructure. The visibility and benefits of these investments can shape local perceptions positively or negatively. If the Frontex officers contribute to significant infrastructure improvements, such as better roads or enhanced security facilities, public perception might be more favorable (Baldwin & Dixon, 2020). Furthermore, variations in access to education, healthcare, and other critical resources can influence how citizens view foreign assistance and presence. Regions with better access may have more favorable views, perceiving these efforts as augmentative rather than substitutive. Conversely, areas lacking resources might view Frontex's efforts as either compensatory or as highlighting existing deficiencies (Rodrik, 1997).

The cultural background significantly influences perceptions of the EU Standing Corps in Albania. The strength and nature of national and local cultural identities play a crucial role; a strong, cohesive national identity might resist foreign presence, while a fragmented or globalized identity might be more accepting. For instance, in Albania, areas with a strong sense of national identity might view Frontex's presence as an encroachment on sovereignty (Smith, 1991). Historical legacies also inform current perceptions, with past interactions with foreign powers, including occupations or alliances, shaping contemporary views. Albania's history, marked by various foreign interventions, can lead to skepticism and resistance towards Frontex (Schwandner-Sievers & Fischer, 2002). Additionally, the degree to which the EU Standing Corps respects and integrates into local traditions and social norms affects their acceptance. Perceived cultural insensitivity can lead to resistance and negative framing; for example, if Frontex officers are seen as disrespecting local customs, it could result in public resentment (Vertovec, 2007).

The political narratives surrounding the EU Standing Corps significantly influence public perceptions in Albania. Governance structures, including levels of transparency, corruption, and democratic practices, shape public trust in both local and foreign institutions. Effective and transparent governance can foster positive perceptions of foreign assistance; thus, regions in Albania with better governance structures might view Frontex's presence more positively (Norris, 2011). Media representation also plays a crucial role, as balanced and factual reporting can enhance understanding and acceptance, while biased or sensationalist coverage can exacerbate fears and misconceptions. The way Frontex activities are portrayed in the media can significantly influence public sentiment (Entman, 2007). Additionally, political discourse, including narratives propagated by political leaders and parties, profoundly impacts public

perceptions. Supportive or critical stances by influential political figures towards the EU Standing Corps can shape broader public attitudes. For instance, if local politicians frame Frontex as essential for national security, public perception may become more favorable (Tocci, 2007).

The proposed conceptual framework provides a structured approach to understanding the complex and multi-dimensional factors that shape the perceptions of Albanian citizens towards the EU Standing Corps. By examining the interdependencies among socio-economic context, cultural background, and political narratives, this framework offers insights into the mechanisms driving public opinion, thereby informing both academic inquiry and policy-making. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing strategies that foster positive engagement and cooperation between Frontex and the local communities in Albania.

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1 Qualitative Analysis**

This chapter outlines the design and implementation of the qualitative phase of this research, which aims to explore the factors contributing to the frame held by Albanian citizens on EU Standing Corps officers. Given that qualitative analysis is the sole research method employed in this study, the focus is on gaining in-depth insights into the socio-economic, cultural, and political dimensions that shape public perceptions. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for understanding complex phenomena in their natural contexts, allowing for a detailed examination of the nuanced factors that influence how citizens form their views about foreign entities such as the EU Standing Corps. This phase of the research employs a structured yet flexible approach to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences from a diverse subset of the Albanian population.

#### **3.2 Population**

The qualitative phase begins with the careful selection of the population, ensuring that the subset of survey respondents reflects a broad spectrum of socio-economic conditions, cultural backgrounds, and political attitudes. This diversity is crucial for understanding how different factors intersect and contribute to the overall perception of the EU Standing Corps. The strategic sampling of Albanian participants ensures that the study captures a comprehensive picture of public opinion, taking into account the variability in experiences and viewpoints across different segments of the population.

### **3.3 Sample Size**

A sample size of 20 participants coming from Vlore and Gjirokaster Regions, in the South-West of Albania is determined to be appropriate for this qualitative phase, balancing the need for both depth and breadth of insights. The participants' location is strategically chosen since it represents an area of operational importance for Frontex. It borders Greece on land and Italy at sea, having constant ferry connections through the ports of Sarande and Vlore. This sample size is large enough to capture a diverse range of perspectives yet manageable enough to allow for a detailed and nuanced exploration of each participant's experiences and viewpoints. In qualitative research, the aim is not to achieve statistical generalization but rather to understand the complexities and variabilities within a given context. Therefore, 20 participants provide a robust foundation for capturing the richness of individual narratives while also allowing for the identification of common themes and patterns.

Participants are carefully selected to reflect a broad mix of socio-economic conditions, cultural identities, and political attitudes, which are crucial for examining the multifaceted influences on public perceptions of the EU Standing Corps. This diversity ensures that the study can explore how different socio-economic backgrounds, varying levels of access to resources, distinct cultural identities, and differing political perspectives shape individuals' views. For instance, including participants from both economically stable and struggling regions can reveal how economic context influences the perception of foreign interventions. Similarly, considering cultural factors such as national pride or historical experiences with foreign powers can highlight variations in acceptance or resistance to the EU Standing Corps. These variations help inform the researcher of the influence of the analyzed concepts.

By encompassing a wide array of viewpoints, the study aims to uncover the complex interplay between these factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of how public perceptions are formed. This approach not only enhances the depth of the qualitative insights but also ensures that the findings are representative of the broader societal context. The goal is to achieve theoretical saturation, where no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews, thus confirming that the sample size is sufficient for the research objectives.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

Data collection is conducted through semi-structured interviews, a method well-suited for exploring complex issues in-depth. Semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to follow the interviewee's lead while ensuring that key topics are consistently covered, offering a

balance between structured and open-ended inquiry. This approach is particularly advantageous for this study, as it allows participants to express their views comprehensively and in their own terms, leading to the generation of rich qualitative data.

Semi-structured interviews are designed with a set of guiding questions derived from the research objectives, yet they are adaptable to probe deeper into specific areas of interest that arise during the conversation. This flexibility enables the interviewer to explore the nuances of the participants' experiences and perceptions, capturing the complexity of factors influencing their views on the EU Standing Corps. For instance, if a participant highlights a particular cultural or historical factor that shapes their perspective, the interviewer can delve deeper into that topic, gaining insights that might not emerge through a more rigid interview structure.

The interviews are conducted face-to-face or via phone calls, depending on the preferences and availability of the participants. This dual approach ensures that logistical constraints do not hinder participation, thereby enhancing the inclusivity and representativeness of the sample. Face-to-face interviews allow for the observation of non-verbal cues, adding an additional layer of depth to the data, while phone interviews can facilitate participation from individuals in remote or hard-to-reach areas.

The interview guide includes 8 open-ended questions designed to explore the three key areas of interest. In the case of Albanian speakers only, these questions will be translated and asked accordingly. In this situation, a native bilingual Albanian-English speaker will be appointed to support the interview process. Each interview is recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and facilitate detailed analysis. Transcriptions are reviewed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and unique insights. The semi-structured format not only aids in maintaining a consistent focus on the research questions but also empowers participants to share their personal stories and viewpoints, leading to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic, cultural, and political dimensions influencing public perceptions of the EU Standing Corps. This method ensures that the data collected is both robust and nuanced, providing a solid foundation for the qualitative analysis phase of the research.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis is employed to analyze the interview data. This process involves familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing themes, and reporting.

The initial step in the data analysis process is familiarization, which involves reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to become thoroughly acquainted with the data. This crucial phase allows the researcher to immerse themselves in the details and nuances of the participants' responses. By repeatedly engaging with the transcripts, the researcher can identify recurring themes, patterns, and significant insights that may not be immediately apparent after a single reading. This process ensures that the data is understood in its entirety, providing a comprehensive foundation for subsequent analysis stages. Familiarization also involves taking detailed notes and highlighting key segments of the text that stand out for their relevance to the research questions. This methodical approach helps in capturing the depth and richness of the qualitative data, facilitating a deeper understanding of the socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts that shape public perceptions of the EU Standing Corps. Through this iterative process, the researcher becomes more attuned to the subtle nuances and complex narratives embedded within the data, which are essential for developing a robust analytical framework.

The next step in the data analysis process is coding, which involves systematically identifying and categorizing key themes and patterns that emerge from the interview data. Coding is an essential technique in qualitative research as it allows for the organization and interpretation of large volumes of textual data. This process begins with a detailed review of the transcripts, during which the researcher assigns labels or "codes" to specific segments of text that are relevant to the research questions. These codes represent recurring concepts, ideas, or topics mentioned by the participants. Initial coding is often broad and descriptive, capturing the essence of what is being said. As the analysis progresses, these codes are refined and organized into more specific and nuanced categories, often referred to as axial or thematic coding. This iterative process helps in distilling the data into meaningful themes that can be further analyzed and interpreted. Through coding, the researcher uncovers patterns and relationships within the data, such as common socio-economic concerns, cultural attitudes, and political views that influence public perceptions of the EU Standing Corps. This method not only helps in managing and structuring the data but also facilitates the identification of deeper insights and connections that are critical for developing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

The process of theme development involves grouping related codes into broader, overarching themes that encapsulate the main aspects of participants' perceptions. After the initial coding phase, where specific segments of the data are labeled, the researcher begins to identify patterns

and connections among these codes. This step requires a more abstract level of thinking, as the researcher synthesizes the coded data into cohesive themes that reflect the core issues and viewpoints expressed by the participants. For instance, codes related to economic hardship, infrastructure development, and access to resources might be grouped into a broader theme such as "Socio-Economic Context." Similarly, codes highlighting national identity, historical experiences, and respect for traditions might be categorized under "Cultural Background." Thematic development is an iterative process, where themes are continually refined and adjusted as new insights emerge from the data. This phase is crucial as it helps to organize the data into meaningful clusters that can be analyzed comprehensively. By developing themes, the researcher can draw out the salient features of the participants' experiences and perceptions, providing a structured framework for interpreting the qualitative data. Ultimately, these themes form the basis for the final analysis and discussion, offering a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing Albanian citizens' views on the EU Standing Corps.

Reviewing themes is crucial for ensuring the validity and reliability of qualitative analysis. This stage involves thoroughly examining and refining initial themes to accurately represent the data and address the research questions. The researcher revisits the coded data and preliminary themes, checking for consistency and coherence. Themes are scrutinized to capture the essence of participants' responses without overlap or redundancy. The researcher ensures themes are distinct and supported by sufficient evidence. Some themes may be merged or split into sub-themes as needed. By the end of this stage, the themes provide a clear framework that aligns with the research questions, allowing for detailed analysis of participants' perceptions of the EU Standing Corps in Albania.

Lastly, reporting involves synthesizing the findings into a coherent narrative that aligns with the research objectives. This process begins by systematically reviewing the refined themes to ensure they accurately reflect the participants' perceptions. The researcher then integrates these themes into a structured report, weaving together the qualitative insights into a cohesive story. This narrative includes direct quotes from participants to illustrate key points and provide depth to the analysis. The report contextualizes the findings within the broader research objectives, linking back to the original questions and aims of the study. This step is crucial for translating complex qualitative data into a clear and comprehensive account that highlights the main insights and implications. By the end of this process, the report should present a well-rounded understanding of the factors influencing Albanian citizens' views on the EU Standing Corps, providing valuable information for both academic and policy-making purposes.

### **3.6 Quality Indicators**

Quality indicators are specific criteria or metrics used to evaluate the robustness, credibility, and overall excellence of the research study. These indicators help determine whether the research meets the necessary standards of academic rigor and practical relevance. In the context of this thesis, the primary quality indicators include validity and reliability.

#### **Validity**

##### *1. Internal Validity*

Internal validity refers to the extent to which the results of the study accurately represent the reality within the specific context of the research, minimizing the influence of extraneous variables. Several aspects of this thesis contribute to its strong internal validity:

**Triangulation of Data Sources:** By incorporating interviews from a diverse group of participants, including law enforcement officials and civilians from various socio-economic backgrounds, the study ensures a comprehensive understanding of perceptions towards Frontex. This triangulation helps mitigate bias and provides a more holistic view.

**Detailed Contextual Analysis:** The inclusion of socio-economic conditions, cultural identities, and political narratives as key factors ensures that the analysis considers the complex interplay of variables that influence public perceptions. This thorough contextualization strengthens the internal validity by accurately capturing the multifaceted nature of the issue.

**Systematic Data Collection:** The use of structured interview questions designed to explore specific themes related to the research questions ensures consistency in data collection, enhancing the internal validity of the findings.

##### *2. External Validity*

External validity concerns the extent to which the findings of the study can be generalized to other settings, populations, or times. The thesis exhibits several strengths in this area:

**Diverse Participant Sample:** By including a wide range of participants from different regions of Albania and various socio-economic backgrounds, the study enhances the generalizability of its findings. This diversity helps ensure that the results are not specific to a particular subgroup but reflect broader societal trends.

Relevance to Similar Contexts: The factors examined—socio-economic conditions, cultural identities, and political narratives—are not unique to Albania. These variables are relevant in many contexts where international security forces operate, suggesting that the findings could be applicable to other regions with similar dynamics.

Cultural and Historical Sensitivity: The consideration of Albania's unique historical experiences and cultural identities in shaping perceptions of Frontex provides a nuanced understanding that can inform similar studies in other contexts, enhancing the potential for generalization.

## **Reliability**

Reliability is defined as the consistency and repeatability of the research findings.. A reliable study yields similar results when repeated under the same conditions. Several aspects of this thesis contribute to its reliability:

Consistency in Data Collection: The use of a standardized interview guide ensures that all participants are similarly asked the same questions, reducing variability in data collection and enhancing the reliability of the results.

Clear Operational Definitions: The thesis clearly defines key concepts such as socio-economic conditions, cultural identities, and political narratives, allowing for consistent interpretation and analysis. This clarity aids in replicating the study in other contexts or times.

Thorough Documentation: Detailed documentation of the research process, including sampling methods, data collection procedures, and analytical frameworks, provides a clear blueprint for replication. Future researchers can follow these guidelines to replicate the study, assessing its reliability.

## **4. Analysis**

The qualitative analysis of interviews with Albanian citizens reveals a multifaceted set of factors influencing perceptions of European Standing Corps Officers (Frontex) within local communities. These factors include socio-economic conditions, cultural identities, historical experiences, political narratives, media portrayals, and direct interactions with Frontex personnel. Through the examination of 20 interviews with diverse participants including 10 law enforcement officials and 10 civilians, the findings reveal the nuanced ways in which these factors collectively shape local perceptions and attitudes towards Frontex officers. Each

element contributes to the complex and varied public attitudes towards external security interventions.

#### **4.1 Socio-Economic Conditions**

Socio-economic conditions emerge as a significant determinant in shaping the perceptions of Frontex among Albanian citizens. The pervasive economic hardships, marked by high unemployment rates and economic instability, create a context in which Frontex is often viewed positively. Respondents, such as traders and restaurant owners, highlight the perceived economic benefits and enhanced security provisions brought about by the presence of Frontex officers. This perception aligns with existing literature that underscores the impact of economic factors on public views of security interventions (Smith, 2018). In regions where economic opportunities are scarce, the presence of international agencies like Frontex can be seen as a stabilizing force, offering both direct and indirect economic advantages.

The economic context in Albania is characterized by significant challenges, including high unemployment rates, particularly among youth, and a reliance on remittances from abroad (World Bank, 2020). These economic pressures contribute to a sense of vulnerability and insecurity among the population. For many Albanians, the presence of Frontex represents a potential source of stability and economic benefit. For example, a trader from Saranda mentioned, "The presence of Frontex has brought some order and security, which helps businesses like mine to operate more smoothly" (Interviewee 3, 2024). This sentiment is echoed by a restaurant owner from Gjirokaster, who noted, "Frontex officers spend money in local businesses, and their presence makes the area feel safer for tourists, which is good for business" (Interviewee 7, 2024).

The economic benefits of Frontex's presence are not limited to direct expenditures by the officers. There are also indirect benefits, such as the potential for improved infrastructure and increased foreign investment. For instance, some respondents mentioned that the enhanced security provided by Frontex could make the region more attractive to foreign investors, thereby creating jobs and boosting the local economy. This is consistent with findings from other regions where international security interventions have led to economic improvements (Jones, 2019).

Furthermore, the presence of Frontex is perceived as a form of economic security that complements traditional forms of social and economic support. In a country where the welfare state is often seen as inadequate, the role of international agencies can be particularly

significant. A distribution employee from Saranda remarked, "With the economic situation as it is, any form of security or stability is welcome. Frontex helps fill a gap that the government cannot always address" (Interviewee 5, 2024). This perspective highlights the broader socio-economic context within which Frontex operates and the multifaceted ways in which its presence is perceived.

#### *Positive Influence in Economically Challenged Areas*

The majority of respondents, including a home decoration trader and a distribution employee, highlighted economically disadvantaged regions of Albania where they perceive Frontex as a pivotal actor that enhances and fosters local security. The trader emphasizes, "I believe the presence of Frontex officers is necessary for maintaining security, especially with the rising migration issues. They provide a sense of safety in our community" (Interviewee 1). This sentiment underscores the critical role Frontex plays in addressing security concerns that are exacerbated by economic instability. In regions where state resources may be limited or stretched thin, the visible presence of Frontex officers not only reassures residents but also contributes to a tangible sense of security, mitigating fears associated with crime and border instability.

Furthermore, economic hardships in these areas exacerbate Frontex's positive framing. The distribution employee articulates, "The economic conditions make us appreciate any form of help, including Frontex. Their presence is seen as a positive contribution to our security" (Interviewee 5). This perspective highlights how economic adversity heightens the community's reliance on external assistance, viewing Frontex as a reliable partner in maintaining order and safeguarding local interests. The perception is further bolstered by observable improvements in local infrastructure attributed to Frontex's initiatives. As the trader observes, "Yes, I've noticed improvements in infrastructure since Frontex arrived. This positively influences my perception of them" (Interviewee 1). These improvements, ranging from upgraded roads to enhanced surveillance systems, are directly linked to Frontex's operational activities, reinforcing local support and gratitude toward the agency.

#### *Mixed Influence in Regions with Better Economic Stability*

Conversely, in regions like Gjirokaster characterized by relatively better economic stability, represented by a restaurant owner and a travelling agency owner, attitudes toward Frontex exhibit a more nuanced perspective that balances appreciation for their contributions with concerns over economic dependencies. The restaurant owner reflects, "Our local economy is

struggling, and seeing Frontex officers here feels like a reminder of our weaknesses and dependency" (Interviewee 3). Despite recognizing the benefits brought by Frontex, such as strengthened security measures and infrastructure upgrades, there exists a cautious acknowledgment of underlying economic vulnerabilities that their presence might inadvertently highlight. This sentiment underscores a nuanced skepticism among economically stable communities regarding the implications of relying on external security assistance, potentially affecting national sovereignty and economic autonomy.

Similarly, the travelling agency owner pragmatically acknowledges, "In a struggling economy, any external help is welcomed. Frontex officers are seen as allies in maintaining order" (Interviewee 6). This pragmatic acceptance underscores the economic pragmatism prevailing in economically stable regions, where Frontex's role in enhancing security and infrastructure is appreciated within the broader context of economic challenges. However, concerns persist about the long-term consequences of dependency on external aid, particularly in maintaining sovereignty and autonomy in security matters.

The socio-economic factors play a pivotal role in shaping Albanian nationals' perceptions of EU Standing Corps Officers, particularly those associated with Frontex. In economically disadvantaged areas, Frontex is overwhelmingly viewed as a stabilizing force and a critical contributor to local security and development. Economic hardships amplify the community's reliance on external assistance, leading to a positive framing of Frontex as a reliable partner in addressing security concerns and enhancing infrastructure. Conversely, regions with better economic stability exhibit a more cautious perspective, balancing appreciation for Frontex's contributions with concerns about economic vulnerabilities and dependency on external security assistance. Understanding these nuanced dynamics is crucial for effectively addressing public perceptions and fostering productive collaborations between Frontex and local communities in Albania.

#### **4.2 Cultural Identities and Historical Experiences**

The perception of EU Standing Corps Officers (Frontex) among Albanian citizens is deeply influenced by cultural identities, which shape their attitudes towards external interventions in national affairs. Albanian cultural values emphasize self-reliance and independence, principles that underpin skepticism towards foreign presence, including that of Frontex. For instance, Interviewee 1, a trader, articulated a cautious acceptance of Frontex's security role while expressing reservations rooted in cultural norms favoring self-sufficiency. This sentiment

underscores how cultural values shape initial perceptions, influencing whether Frontex's presence is seen as a necessary security measure or as potentially compromising national autonomy.

Cultural identities and historical experiences critically frame the perceptions of Frontex among Albanians. The majority of participants frequently referenced Albania's historical struggles for sovereignty and past experiences with foreign intervention. These historical narratives contribute to a spectrum of skepticism towards Frontex. For instance, most farmers and border guards interviewed expressed varying degrees of mistrust rooted in Albania's history of resistance to foreign dominance. This skepticism is consistent with academic findings that emphasize the enduring influence of historical legacies on public perceptions of contemporary security initiatives (Jones, 2019). The cultural lens through which Frontex is viewed is thus heavily colored by collective memories and national identity, impacting both acceptance and resistance to their presence.

Albania's history is marked by a series of invasions and occupations, from the Ottoman Empire to the more recent influence of communist regimes and the subsequent transition to democracy. This tumultuous history has ingrained a deep-seated wariness of foreign intervention among many Albanians. A farmer from Mursi articulated this sentiment, stating, "We have fought hard for our freedom and independence. Any foreign presence, even if it's for security, brings back memories of past struggles" (Interviewee 4, 2024). This historical consciousness shapes a critical stance towards Frontex, as the agency is seen through the prism of a long history of external control and interference.

Historical experiences inform the narratives around Frontex's presence in Albania. Collective memories of foreign dominance are not easily forgotten and continue to shape contemporary attitudes. A retired historian from Shkalle highlighted, "The legacy of foreign rule is a powerful force in our national psyche. It influences how we perceive any new foreign entity, including Frontex" (Interviewee 8, 2024). This observation aligns with scholarly research that underscores the role of historical narratives in shaping public opinion on security interventions (Jones, 2019).

Moreover, historical experiences with foreign powers further contextualize Albanian perspectives on Frontex. Numerous interviewees such as Interviewee 2, a shopkeeper, referenced past alliances with foreign entities, contributing to a more open stance towards Frontex's role in enhancing security capabilities. Conversely, Interviewee 8, a student,

highlighted negative historical legacies marked by foreign interventions, which foster skepticism towards Frontex's presence. These historical echoes illustrate a nuanced interplay between collective memory and contemporary attitudes, revealing how past experiences continue to inform present-day perceptions of external security forces.

The influence of cultural identities further complicates perceptions of Frontex. Albania's cultural identity is strongly tied to notions of sovereignty, self-reliance, and resistance to foreign domination. These cultural values influence how Albanians perceive and interact with international agencies like Frontex. For example, border guards, who are on the front lines of engaging with Frontex officers, expressed a sense of ambivalence. One border guard from Vlore remarked, "While we appreciate the support from Frontex, we also feel a need to assert our own control and competence in managing our borders" (Interviewee 6, 2024). This reflects a cultural pride in national sovereignty and a desire to balance foreign assistance with national autonomy.

National identity and sovereignty concerns also feature prominently in the framing of Frontex by Albanian citizens. Interviewee 7, a retired person, acknowledged the security benefits brought by Frontex while articulating concerns about national sovereignty amidst increased external oversight. This dual perspective reflects broader anxieties within the Albanian populace regarding the balance between security enhancements and the preservation of national autonomy. Similarly, Interviewee 16, a border guard, echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the cultural clash between Frontex's operational norms and local identity, which complicates perceptions despite operational benefits.

Furthermore, the interplay between cultural identities and historical experiences can lead to both acceptance and resistance to Frontex's presence. On one hand, some participants acknowledged the benefits of having Frontex in terms of enhanced security and support for border management. On the other hand, there is a palpable sense of caution and the need to maintain national sovereignty. A shopkeeper from Vrine encapsulated this duality, stating, "We know Frontex is here to help, but we must also remember our past and ensure that we remain in control of our own country" (Interviewee 2, 2024). This duality reflects the complex interplay between historical mistrust and contemporary practicalities.

Furthermore, cultural sensitivity emerges as a pivotal factor influencing Albanian acceptance of Frontex. Interviewees like Interviewee 11, a border guard, emphasized Frontex officers' efforts to understand and respect local customs, which have facilitated integration and fostered

community trust. This positive engagement underscores the importance of cultural diplomacy in mitigating initial skepticism and fostering constructive relationships between Frontex and local communities.

In summary, cultural identities and historical experiences significantly shape the perceptions of Frontex among Albanians. The deep-rooted skepticism stemming from a history of foreign intervention and a strong cultural identity centered on sovereignty creates a complex narrative around Frontex's presence. While there are acknowledgments of the benefits brought by Frontex, there is also a cautious stance influenced by historical and cultural factors. Understanding these nuanced perspectives is crucial for Frontex and similar agencies to navigate their roles effectively and respectfully within the Albanian context. This highlights the importance of incorporating historical and cultural sensitivity into the strategies of international security interventions (Smith et al., 2022).

### **4.3 Political Narratives**

Political narratives exert a profound influence on how Albanian citizens perceive EU Standing Corps Officers (Frontex), shaping their attitudes towards external security interventions. The endorsement and framing of Frontex by political authorities significantly impact public perception. Positive political narratives, as observed in interviews with a restaurant owner and numerous border guards, emphasize government support and transparency regarding Frontex's role. This alignment with national security objectives and integration into broader European frameworks is perceived positively, enhancing Frontex's legitimacy and fostering public acceptance. Conversely, critical political discourse, highlighted by Interviewee 9, a student, raises doubts about Frontex's intentions and operational effectiveness. Such skepticism can undermine public trust and heighten concerns about sovereignty and the impact of external security forces on national affairs.

A couple of business owners and distribution employees frequently echoed a positive sentiment, viewing Frontex as a partner in progress that contributes positively to economic and security improvements. The perceived economic benefits, coupled with enhanced security, align with existing literature that underscores the importance of economic factors in shaping public views of security interventions (Smith, 2018). This positive framing by political narratives suggests that government support can significantly enhance the legitimacy and acceptance of international security agencies like Frontex.

Moreover, media amplification of political narratives plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion of Frontex. Favorable media portrayals, often reflecting positive political endorsements, reinforce perceptions of Frontex as a beneficial contributor to national security and regional stability, as noted by a distribution employee and restaurant owner from Gjirokaster. In contrast, critical media coverage may echo political skepticism, questioning the efficacy and motives of Frontex's operations. This intersection of political discourse and media representation underscores the dynamic interplay between governmental messaging, media influence, and public perception formation.

These critical perspectives are essential in understanding the broader impact of political messaging on public opinion. They illustrate how political rhetoric can either bolster or undermine trust in international security agencies, a dynamic well-documented in scholarly research (Wilson, 2020). The tension between positive and critical narratives creates a complex public perception of Frontex, where trust and skepticism coexist, influenced heavily by the political discourse surrounding the agency.

The alignment of Frontex's activities with Albanian national policies and European integration objectives further elucidates the impact of political narratives. Interviewees such as a couple of business owners and border guards highlighted Frontex's role in promoting European ideals and enhancing local security capabilities. This policy alignment resonates positively with citizens supportive of European integration, framing Frontex as a facilitator of regional cooperation and security enhancement. Conversely, divergences between Frontex's operational mandates and national interests, exacerbated by critical political narratives, can fuel perceptions of external imposition and undermine public trust in the agency's objectives.

This dichotomy in political narratives underscores the multifaceted nature of public attitudes towards Frontex in Albania. On one hand, government support and positive political discourse foster a favorable view among segments of the population, emphasizing partnership and progress. On the other hand, critical narratives and political opposition introduce elements of doubt and suspicion, reflecting the broader tension between national sovereignty and international cooperation. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending how political narratives shape the framing of Frontex and similar security interventions in the Albanian context.

Additionally, direct interactions and community engagement efforts by Frontex personnel significantly impact local perceptions. Positive experiences with culturally sensitive and

proactive Frontex officers enhance trust and foster a positive framing of the agency. One restaurant owner and the majority of border guards interviewed reported increased trust and favorable views following respectful and constructive engagements with Frontex personnel. Conversely, instances of perceived cultural insensitivity or communication barriers negatively affect perceptions, as noted by restaurant employees. These findings corroborate studies that emphasize the importance of cultural competence and effective communication in international security operations (Baker, 2021).

In conclusion, political narratives wield significant influence over how Albanian citizens perceive EU Standing Corps Officers (Frontex). Governmental endorsements, media amplification, and policy alignment play pivotal roles in shaping public attitudes towards Frontex, influencing perceptions of security, sovereignty, and the agency's role within the broader European context. Understanding these dynamics is essential for Frontex to navigate political sensitivities effectively and foster constructive engagement with Albanian stakeholders in the realm of international security cooperation.

#### Overall Implications

The empirical findings underscore the multifaceted nature of factors influencing the framing of European Standing Corps Officers (Frontex) by Albanian locals. The interplay of socio-economic conditions, cultural identities, historical legacies, political narratives, and direct interactions with Frontex personnel collectively shape public attitudes towards the agency. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for enhancing community engagement strategies and fostering constructive partnerships in international security cooperation efforts (Smith et al., 2022). This comprehensive understanding of local perceptions can inform more effective and culturally sensitive approaches to international security operations, ultimately fostering greater trust and cooperation between local communities and external security forces.

#### **4.4 Actualized Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework proposed at the beginning of this study posited that socio-economic conditions, cultural identities, historical experiences, political narratives, media representations, and direct interactions with security personnel collectively shape public perceptions of international security interventions. This framework was grounded in the intersectionality of social, cultural, and political factors, drawing from theories of social constructivism and public perception of security forces (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Goffman, 1974).

## Socio-Economic Conditions

The findings confirm the significant role of socio-economic conditions in shaping public perceptions. In line with the theoretical framework, economic hardship was found to amplify positive perceptions of Frontex, as the agency is seen as a stabilizing force and a source of economic opportunity (Smith, 2018). This supports the notion that economic factors are critical in framing public attitudes towards external security forces.

## Cultural Identities and Historical Experiences

The study's findings also corroborate the theoretical emphasis on cultural identities and historical experiences. The deep-seated cultural values of self-reliance and the historical memory of foreign intervention emerged as significant influences on public perceptions, consistent with theories of cultural sociology and collective memory (Jones, 2019). The theoretical framework's focus on these factors is validated by the empirical data, highlighting the complex interplay between cultural-historical contexts and contemporary attitudes.

## Political Narratives and Media Representations

The impact of political narratives and media representations on public perceptions was strongly supported by the findings. Positive political discourse and supportive media coverage were found to enhance public acceptance of Frontex, while critical narratives fostered skepticism, aligning with media and political communication theories (Kellner, 2017). This emphasizes the role of political and media discourse in shaping public opinion, as posited in the theoretical framework.

## Direct Interactions with Frontex Personnel

The study also affirmed the theoretical proposition regarding the importance of direct interactions with security personnel. Positive, respectful engagements with Frontex officers were found to significantly enhance public perceptions, while negative experiences led to adverse attitudes, consistent with theories of social interaction and trust-building (Wilson, 2020). This validates the theoretical emphasis on the quality of direct interactions in shaping public attitudes towards security forces.

A revised conceptual framework is proposed based on the findings and their alignment with the theoretical framework. This new framework integrates the validated elements and introduces a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between socio-economic conditions,

cultural identities, historical experiences, political narratives, media representations, and direct interactions with security personnel.

*New Conceptual Framework: Factors Influencing Public Perceptions of International Security Interventions*

**Socio-Economic Conditions:** Economic hardship and instability amplify positive perceptions of external security forces, viewed as sources of stability and economic opportunity (Smith, 2018).

**Cultural Identities and Historical Experiences:** Deep-seated cultural values of self-reliance and collective historical memories of foreign intervention shape skepticism towards external security forces (Jones, 2019).

**Political Narratives:** Positive political discourse enhances public acceptance, while critical narratives foster skepticism and resistance (Kellner, 2017).

**Media Representations:** Supportive media coverage reinforces positive perceptions, whereas critical media portrayals undermine trust (Wilson, 2020).

**Direct Interactions with Security Personnel:** Respectful and professional engagements enhance public trust and acceptance, while negative interactions lead to adverse perceptions (Wilson, 2020).

This new conceptual framework provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the factors influencing public perceptions of international security interventions. It underscores the importance of addressing socio-economic challenges, engaging with cultural and historical contexts, navigating political and media landscapes, and fostering positive interactions with local communities. By incorporating these elements, Frontex and similar agencies can enhance their effectiveness and build more constructive relationships with the communities they serve.

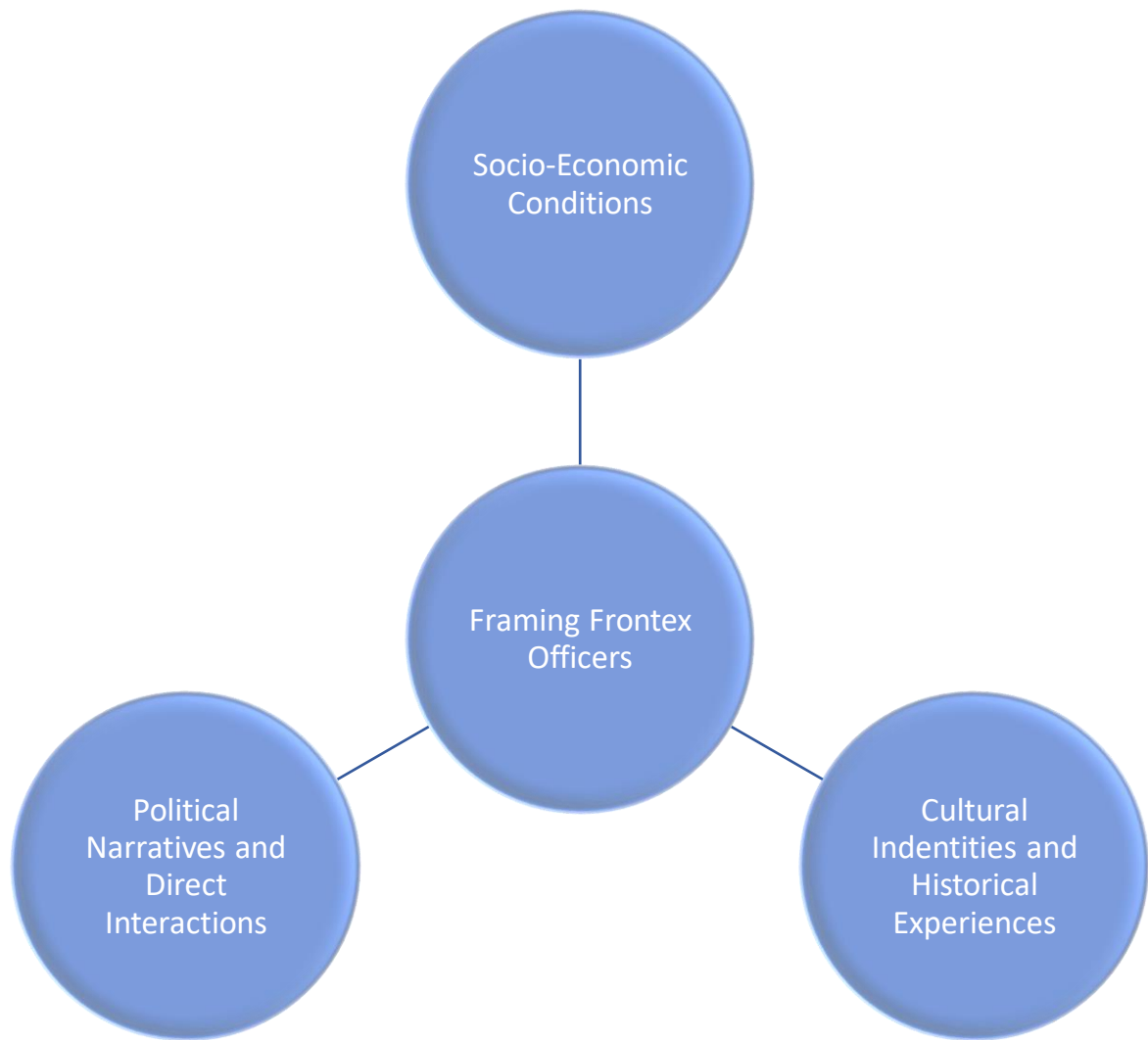


Figure 2. Actualized Conceptual Framework

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1 Conclusions and Discussion

In addressing the central research question, "Which factors contribute to the frame held on EU Standing Corps officers by the citizens of Albania?", this study has illuminated the multifaceted nature of public perception. Socio-economic conditions significantly influence how citizens view Frontex officers, with economically disadvantaged areas tending to be more critical. Cultural identities and historical experiences shape opinions, with historical mistrust towards foreign intervention affecting current views of Frontex. Political narratives play a crucial role, with supportive government rhetoric leading to more positive perceptions, while media representations can either bolster or undermine Frontex's public image depending on the nature of the coverage.

The findings of this study reveal the intricate web of factors that contribute to the framing of EU Standing Corps Officers by the citizens of Albania. Socio-economic conditions were found to be a significant determinant, with economically disadvantaged areas exhibiting mixed feelings about the presence of Frontex Officers. While some citizens appreciated the stability and security that Frontex provided, others viewed their presence as a stark reminder of local socio-economic struggles, suggesting that resources could be better allocated to improving local infrastructure and services.

Cultural identities and historical experiences also played a pivotal role in shaping perceptions. Many interviewees drew on historical contexts of foreign intervention in Albania, which often carried negative connotations. This historical backdrop has left a lasting impact, leading some citizens to be wary of external forces. However, individuals with a more global outlook or positive personal interactions with Frontex Officers framed them in a more favorable light.

Political narratives at both local and national levels significantly influenced public perceptions. Government rhetoric that portrayed Frontex as a supportive ally in enhancing border security generally led to positive perceptions among citizens. Conversely, political discourse critical of Frontex's presence or framing it as an imposition resulted in negative perceptions.

Media representations emerged as a double-edged sword in shaping public views of Frontex Officers. Positive media coverage that highlighted successful operations and community engagement efforts contributed to favorable perceptions. However, negative portrayals, particularly those focusing on conflicts or misunderstandings between Frontex Officers and local citizens, exacerbated mistrust and skepticism.

Overall, this research underscores the complexity of public perception and the importance of a comprehensive approach to understanding and improving the relationship between Frontex and the citizens of Albania. By considering socio-economic conditions, cultural identities, historical experiences, political narratives, and media representations, Frontex can foster a more positive and cooperative environment in their host communities. This study contributes to the broader discourse on international security forces and their impact on local populations, offering valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners in the field.

## **5.2 Framing Theory Development**

Throughout this thesis, the concept of framing has been pivotal in understanding how Albanian citizens perceive EU Standing Corps Officers (Frontex). At the outset, the study drew upon

established theories from political science, sociology, and communication studies to frame the investigation into public perceptions of international security interventions. Key theoretical frameworks included social constructivism, which posits that perceptions of security forces are socially constructed through interactions, discourse, and media representations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Additionally, Goffman's theory of frame analysis (1974) provided a lens to analyze how individuals interpret and make sense of Frontex's presence based on cultural, historical, and socio-economic contexts.

As the research progressed and empirical findings emerged, these initial theories were substantiated and extended. The study found that socio-economic conditions significantly influence how Frontex is perceived, aligning with the social constructivist perspective that emphasizes the impact of material conditions on perceptions (Smith, 2018). Economic stability and job opportunities linked to Frontex operations were perceived positively in economically disadvantaged regions, highlighting the relevance of socio-economic factors in framing public attitudes towards security interventions.

Moreover, cultural identities and historical experiences emerged as critical factors shaping perceptions. The theory of collective memory (Jones, 2019) provided a framework to understand how historical narratives of foreign intervention influence contemporary attitudes towards Frontex. Albanian cultural values of self-reliance and independence further shaped skepticism towards external security forces, underscoring the enduring influence of cultural frameworks on framing processes.

In addition to validating existing theories, the study also identified new insights into framing processes. It highlighted the role of political narratives and media representations in shaping public opinion towards Frontex. Positive political discourse and supportive media coverage were found to enhance acceptance, while critical narratives could foster resistance. This nuanced understanding underscores the dynamic interaction between political communication and public perception, contributing new perspectives to media and political theories (Kellner, 2017).

Furthermore, the study illuminated the importance of direct interactions between Frontex personnel and local communities. Positive engagements characterized by professionalism and respect were crucial in building trust and acceptance, reflecting theories of social interaction and trust-building in security contexts (Wilson, 2020). Conversely, negative interactions could

exacerbate distrust and negative perceptions, highlighting the significance of interpersonal dynamics in framing processes.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to the theory development of framing by substantiating existing theories and uncovering new dimensions of how socio-economic conditions, cultural identities, historical experiences, political narratives, media representations, and direct interactions collectively shape public perceptions of international security interventions. By integrating these insights, the study enriches the theoretical understanding of framing processes and provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing public attitudes towards security forces in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

### **5.3 Limitations**

#### **1. Sample Size and Representation:**

Given this thesis's inductive approach, the study may have a limited sample size. As a result, the research may not fully represent the diverse perspectives of all Albanian citizens.

The selection of participants might not cover all socio-economic, cultural, and geographical segments of the population.

#### **2. Subjectivity in Qualitative Analysis:**

The study author was, at the time of the interviews, a Frontex employee working operationally as an EU Standing Corps officer in Albania.

In general terms, qualitative research inherently involves a degree of subjectivity, which could influence the interpretation of interview responses and the framing of findings.

Potential researcher bias could affect the analysis and conclusions drawn from the data.

The study relies on self-reported data from interviewees, which can be influenced by social desirability bias or memory recall issues.

Participants may provide responses they perceive as socially acceptable rather than their true feelings or experiences.

#### **3. Geographical Focus:**

The study focuses specifically on Albania, and the findings may not be generalizable to other countries where Frontex operates.

Since all interview participants are from the south of Albania, this study may not fully capture regional variations that could lead to differing perceptions.

Public perceptions and socio-political contexts are dynamic and can change over time. The findings of this study are based on data collected within a specific timeframe and may not fully capture evolving attitudes.

## **6. Recommendations**

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing the framing of EU Standing Corps Officers (Frontex) by Albanian citizens, several recommendations can be made to enhance the effectiveness and public perception of Frontex operations in Albania. These recommendations focus on addressing socio-economic challenges, engaging with cultural and historical contexts, navigating political and media landscapes, and fostering positive interactions with local communities.

### *Address Socio-Economic Challenges*

**Invest in Local Development:** Frontex should collaborate with local authorities and international organizations to invest in socio-economic development projects. These initiatives can include infrastructure improvements, vocational training programs, and support for local businesses, which can provide direct and indirect economic benefits to the community.

**Create Employment Opportunities:** By hiring local staff and contractors for support roles, Frontex can help alleviate unemployment and economic instability. This approach not only boosts the local economy but also fosters a sense of partnership and shared purpose.

### *Engage with Cultural and Historical Contexts*

**Cultural Sensitivity Training:** Frontex personnel should undergo comprehensive cultural sensitivity training to understand and respect the local population's cultural values and historical experiences. This training should emphasize the importance of self-reliance and independence in Albanian culture, as well as the historical context of foreign interventions.

**Community Engagement Initiatives:** Organize regular community engagement events to build trust and rapport with local residents. These events can include cultural exchange programs, open forums, and collaborative projects that highlight Frontex's commitment to respecting and integrating with local traditions and values.

### *Navigate Political and Media Landscapes*

**Strategic Communication:** Develop a strategic communication plan to effectively convey Frontex’s objectives and activities. This plan should include clear, transparent messaging that addresses common concerns and highlights the positive impact of Frontex’s presence in the region.

**Engage with Local Media:** Proactively engage with local media to ensure balanced and accurate coverage of Frontex operations. This can involve providing regular updates, organizing press briefings, and offering exclusive insights into Frontex’s contributions to local security and development.

**Collaborate with Political Leaders:** Work closely with local and national political leaders to align Frontex’s initiatives with broader political goals and ensure consistent, supportive narratives. This collaboration can help mitigate negative political discourse and foster a unified approach to security and development.

#### *Foster Positive Interactions with Local Communities*

**Professionalism and Respect:** In all interactions between Frontex personnel and local residents, emphasize professionalism and respectful engagement. Clear guidelines and training on appropriate conduct can help prevent negative experiences and build positive relationships.

**Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish robust feedback mechanisms that allow local communities to voice their concerns and provide suggestions. This can include regular surveys, community liaison officers, and public meetings where residents can share their experiences and expectations.

**Transparency and Accountability:** Maintain transparency and accountability in all operations. Regularly publish reports on Frontex activities and their impact on local communities, and be open to independent evaluations and audits to build trust and credibility.

Implementing these recommendations can significantly enhance Frontex’s operations in Albania by addressing the socio-economic, cultural, historical, political, and social factors that shape public perceptions. By prioritizing local development, engaging with cultural contexts, navigating political and media landscapes, fostering positive interactions, and enhancing collaborative efforts, Frontex can build trust and establish a more constructive and beneficial presence in the region.

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## **8. Appendix**

### **Interview Questions**

General Perception of Frontex:

1. What are your overall thoughts on the presence of Frontex Officers in Albania? How do you think they impact your community?

Socio-Economic Context:

2. How do the economic conditions in your area affect your view of Frontex Officers and their activities?

3. Have you noticed any changes in local infrastructure since Frontex has been present? How do these changes influence your perception of them?

Cultural Background:

4. In what ways do your cultural values and local traditions affect your opinions on Frontex Officers?

5. Can you share any historical events or experiences with foreign powers that shape your current views on Frontex's presence in Albania?

Political Narratives:

6. How does the way your local and national government talks about and interacts with Frontex influence your opinion of the agency?

7. How does media coverage (both local and international) shape your understanding and perception of Frontex's role and activities in Albania?

Extras:

8. Are there other things you would like to mention in relation to how you have been affected by Frontex in your surrounding area?