

Unconditional Trust? Public Opinion Towards the EU in Romania

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Abstract: *Building on the largely acknowledged fact that attitudes towards the European Union are multidimensional (Hobolt 2014; Hartevelde et. al. 2013), this paper aims at exploring the relationship between three important and presumably related dimensions: trust in national institutions, trust in the European Union, and confidence regarding the future of the European Union. Based on some relevant questions from the Standard Eurobarometers implemented between 2007 and 2015, I pose that Romanians (still) perceive the European Union as a “lifebuoy”, as a better potential alternative to the national system of governance. I argue that the source of the Romanians’ Euro-enthusiasm has national, rather than European, roots. This phenomenon – which I call rational extrapolation – is emblematic for the countries where citizens see the European Union as a panacea for domestic problems that cannot be effectively addressed within the nation state. One important implication of this paper is that national proxies play a leading role in shaping EU-related opinions and attitudes.*

Keywords: *European Union, national government, trust, public opinion.*

Introduction

There are few moments in the history of the European Union when public opinion towards the European Union has ever attracted more scholarly interest.

And this happens due to several facts, which could be easily categorized under what Jurgen Habermas called “the crisis of the European Union”. Technically, the EU has been facing various types of crises since 2005, when two “veterans” of European integration - the Netherlands and France – voted “No” in the referenda for the Constitutional Treaty. The failed constitutionalization of the EU has obliged the European leaders to re-think the design of a much-dreamed “European Constitution”. But this has been mainly through “informal incrementalism and semi-permanent reform, rather than explicit public endorsement and a ‘constitutional moment” (Christiansen and Reh 2009, 2).

What started as an economic crisis back in 2007, turned into a never-ending quest for the lost logic of European integration, which – as it became more and more evident – could not be taken for granted anymore. Nowadays, the strength of the European project is put under severe scrutiny. As Jan Zielonka put it, the EU “proved poorly prepared for navigating through the stormy weather and it lost the confidence of Europe’s citizens” (2014, 3). The austerity measures, the Greek bailout, the Ukrainian conflict, the Brexit, and, now, the refugees crisis, have triggered waves of public discontent. All these moments have made the EU more vulnerable than ever; they have widened old gaps and generated new ruptures. Despite EU officials’ repeated calls for solidarity and their declared commitment to a prosperous European future for all Member-States, fractures have continued to appear. Now we are dealing with a European Union, which only serves as a shelter for individual countries and/or clusters of countries, grouped based on their financial and/or political positioning in the EU. There is the cluster of “net contributors” or “net creditors”, composed mainly of Western and Northern states, such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands. The opposing cluster belongs to the “net spenders” or “net debtors”, consisting of the poorer countries in South and East.

The North-South cleavages rival with the East-West gap. The “new member-states” are antagonists – in terms of political and financial performance – to the “old member states”. The “wasteful” Easterners are sometimes presented, as the “black sheep” of the EU, for these countries are only proficient at one thing – spending the European money, the wise Westerners say. Then, another dichotomy emerges: the “Eurosceptic” countries, which oppose the naïve “euro-enthusiast” states. Eurosceptics think that the EU needs an overhaul, and they partly blame the European “mess” on the East enlargement that weakened the Union and basically spoiled its harmony (Toshkov *et. al.* 2014). On the other hand, Euro-enthusiasts still see European governance as a better alternative to their national democracies – young democracies, which still have a lot to learn from their far more experienced Western peers. The Easterner could be portrayed as a young teenager hopelessly in love with his beautiful yet inaccessible teacher. In mid-2015, a new

antagonism has been revealed: Member-States that welcome refugees vs. Member-States that do not welcome refugees.

One thing is sure: today's Europe is full of cleavages. Mass media and scholars alike seem to have engaged into a competition for trying to organize Member-States into "camps" or clusters, based on various criteria (i.e. economic performance, fiscal soundness, public opinion towards the EU, measures concerning refugees, position towards the Ukrainian "issue"). But how relevant is this? And what is the baseline against which we could do these measurements so that we are sure that we haven't established a false standard? I believe that clustering is a dangerous practice; for it might contribute to oversimplifying what it should be the very complex image of a multicultural and diverse Europe. Despite its organizing force, clustering creates labels and stereotypes, with a very limited explanatory power, preventing us from building valid cases and addressing the right problems to be solved. I will illustrate this by looking at the Romanians' public opinion towards the EU and, more specifically, at how Romanian citizens trust the EU.

Affective vs. Instrumental Approaches in Explaining Euro-opinions

The most important European crisis seems to be "one of cohesion, imagination, and trust", the latter being "obviously harder to address" (Zielonka 2014, 3). As Eurosceptic voices gain grounds in many Member-States, understanding EU-related opinions and attitudes becomes of topical importance. Defining Euroscepticism is difficult because – given its British genealogy - this concept bears an essentially anti-EU legacy. Looking at it as a mere opposition towards European integration (Taggart, 1998; Gabel, 1998; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2002) seems like a limited approach, since this Euroscepticism has been used to signal distrust, cynicism, opposition or plain detachment. Taggart (1998) proposed a definition of Euroscepticism as "a contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration" (p. 366). Thus, Euroscepticism designs a spectrum of opinions and attitudes towards the EU and the integration process.

Existing studies examining public opinion towards different aspects of the integration process have demonstrated the influence of three groups of explanatory factors – economic interests, group identities and political 'cues' (McLaren, 2006; Hooghe and Marks, 2005, 2004; Carey, 2002; Gabel, 1998; Anderson, 1998). The economic and political explanations fall under an instrumental approach, whereas identity-related studies subscribe to a more cultural perspective on European integration. In a nutshell, we can differentiate between two "schools" in the study of EU-related opinions and attitudes: rational choice – also known as utilitarian – approaches vs. affective approaches (Hobolt, 2014). The first approach consists in a pragmatic assessment of European integration. The underlining assumption

is that trade liberalization and the free movement of people favor citizens with average to high skills and income, who, as a consequence, will be more supportive of European integration (Anderson and Reichert, 1996; Gabel, 1998). This instrumental perspective focuses on some very concrete gains of membership, such as the possibility to participate in exchange programs and to study abroad, the opportunity to work in any Member-State, or the capacity to use EU funding for developing relevant projects. In brief, the more a Member-State will benefit from European integration, the more EU-oriented its citizens will be (Anderson and Kaltenthaler, 1996). In employing the utilitarian logic, it is useful to differentiate between macroeconomic and microeconomic evaluations, the latter being more relevant for understanding how EU-related opinions are shaped. Macroeconomic factors (such as inflation and unemployment) are important (e.g. Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993), but micro economy and, more specifically, people's perceptions of their own wellbeing are powerful predictors of Euro-enthusiasm or Euroscepticism (Gabel, 1998). In particular, the 'subjective utilitarian model' – anchored in behavioral economics – suggests that European integration is supported if perceptions and future evaluations of the economy are positive (De Vreese *et. al.* 2008; Bargaöanu *et. al.* 2013). This also implies that, once these benefits are contested or simply vanish away, the public support for integration drops almost instantly. Following this utilitarian logic, Member-States could be clustered into "winners" or "losers" of the integration process: "winners" are those where the net transfers flow, whereas "losers" are the so-called net creditors or donors, as they fuel the Union with the needed resources for increasing regional convergence. This has important consequences: if pragmatic benefits become scarce, then many Member-States will be tempted to ensure that their own countries hold the best positions in a given context, no matter if this would imply to hamper others' access to strategic resources. Noteworthy, according to the 2013 YouGog poll, over 70% of Germans objected to any suggestion of direct fiscal transfers to euro-zone partners, while 52% opposed any further loans (Zielonka, 2014). Bargaöanu *et. al.* (2014) revealed that the crisis has prompted Europeans to reconsider their attitudes towards the EU and the integration from a utilitarian perspective, which has led to an increase of Euroscepticism. In a recent study, Sara Hobolt demonstrates that "the winners of the integration process want to consolidate and strengthen the union, but close the door to additional (poorer) member states" (2014, 678). Thus, the principle of European solidarity becomes fuzzy in the utilitarian logic, since it is this very solidarity that will be the first to be sacrificed in favor of national financial stability and domestic prosperity. This is why "membership of the euro-zone seems to have become more crucial than membership of the EU, and the frontier between these two zones is solidifying." (Zielonka 2014, 19).

At the other side of the opinion spectrum lies the affective set of theories, which underline that people with post-materialist values are more strongly in favor of integration (Inglehart, 1977; Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000). Identity-related theories assume that attitudes towards the EU are not shaped only by a simple cost to benefit ratio, but involve a series of more subtle, yet complex, concepts, such as cognitive capacity, culture and sub-culture, national values, or religion. Inglehart's basic assumption is that "given individuals pursue various goals in hierarchical order giving maximum attention to the things they sense to be the most important unsatisfied needs at a given time" (1971, 991). Building on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Inglehart assumes that each generation faces specific challenges that are shaped under the pressure exerted by its most unmet – yet critical – needs. For example, those that are faced with financial insecurity will tend to pursue their financial wellbeing throughout their existence; whereas individuals who take their own economic security for granted, face different – more sophisticated – needs, such as self-affirmation or self-development. This entails a whole range of variables that might influence EU-related attitudes and, therefore, deserve a close investigation. Individuals' attachment to their nation or their perceptions of people from other countries are only two of such variables. The concept of identity became particularly useful, because it helped scholars engage into a contentious debate on the compatibilities between national identity and European identity, which have been tested in various studies. For example, Christin and Trechsel (2002) demonstrated that Swiss citizen's strong national identity and national pride trigger anti-EU attitudes makes them very unlikely to be in favor of EU membership. Similarly, Carey (2002) showed that national attachment combined with national pride has a significant negative effect on support for European integration. According to De Vreese and Tobiasen (2007), the way citizens frame their national identity has affected the results of the European elections organized in 2004 in Denmark. Based on a study conducted in 13 countries from Central and Eastern Europe, Elgun and Tillman (2007) revealed that negative attitudes towards others (generated by racial, cultural, and religious differences) are strong predictors of anti-Europeanism. Inquiring into the nature of public oppositions to Turkey's ascension, researchers highlight the role of "soft" factors and conclude, "in relation to an issue that touches on economic, political, and social and cultural dimensions, the latter outweigh the first in terms of importance for understanding public opinion" (De Vreese *et al.*, 2008, 523).

However, strong national identities do not automatically collide with the very idea of European integration. According to Thomas Risse, "individuals and social groups hold multiple identities and the real question to be asked concerns, therefore, how much space there is for <<Europe>> in collective nation-state identities" (2001, 199). That is why the distinction between exclusive and inclusive identities

is particularly important: “citizens who conceive of their national identity as exclusive of other territorial identities are likely to be considerably more Eurosceptical than those who conceive of their national identity in inclusive terms” (Hooghe and Marks, 2004, 2). Furthermore, history counts, in the sense that it creates the grounds on which national identity might be or not compatible with the European “we-feeling”. For instance, Diez Medrano (2003) found that English Euroscepticism is rooted in Britain’s imperial history, that West German pro-Europeanism reflects World War II guilt, and that the Spanish tend to support European integration because of its modernization and democratization values.

The “Sleeping Giant” is now awake

Explanatory models (i.e. utilitarian vs. affective) are very helpful in building and systemizing coherent explanations regarding Euro-opinions. But are they as helpful in creating complete cases? Inevitably, economy affects identity and vice-versa. If citizens feel that they have to compete with “others” (i.e. immigrants, citizens from “new member-states”, “Easterners”) for obtaining access to some scarce strategic resources, then they might manifest an exclusive – rather than inclusive – identity. For instance, McLaren (2007) shows that attitudes towards enlargement are determined by a combination of economic and symbolic factors: the more citizens fear economic malaise as a result of immigration, the more they oppose enlargement of the EU. Similarly, De Vries and van Keerbergen (2007) reveal that the more economically disadvantaged is an individual, the more nationalist he tends to be. In a more recent study, van Spanje and de Vreese (2011) combine economic and affective considerations to identify five predictors of the Eurosceptic vote in the 2009 parliamentary elections: 1. EU’s democratic performance; 2. negative evaluations of EU membership; 3. negative feelings towards the EU; 4. opposition to EU enlargement and 5. lack of European identity.

Furthermore, drawing on Inglehart (1971), explanatory models are strongly influenced by the “state of the Union”, in the sense that their validity is influenced by contextual factors, such as economic wellbeing or political performance. Thus, if the EU is doing well, then identity-related explanations might be powerful enough to explain opinions and attitudes towards the EU; if the EU is doing badly, then the utilitarian model will most probably offer the most reasonable explanations for the drop in public support towards the EU. The “overlapping crises” of the EU have determined scholars to acknowledge the real depth and implications of the debate on EU’s legitimacy (Dobrescu and Palada 2012). Highlighting the complex nature of the EU-related opinions and attitudes, Trenz and DeWilde (2009) consider that – when addressing Euroscepticism - it is more correct to speak about a “general dynamics of contesting and justifying European integration that cannot be controlled by a single actor’s strategy and choice.” (Trenz & DeWilde,

2009). According to Crespy and Verschueren (2009), the very concept of “euro-scepticism” is too shallow; they propose the phrase “resistance to European integration” as a means of capturing a “flexible and unified approach to diverse empirical realities” (2009, 381).

Thus, both the utilitarian and affective theoretical models are limited, in the sense that they afford generalizations to a certain extent and under specific circumstances. Stepping out from the rational vs. affective dichotomy, this paper focuses on the role played by national proxies in shaping Euro-opinions in Romania. My approach is premised on the idea that attitudes towards the EU are multidimensional and that Euroscepticism designates a vast array of individual preferences, vulnerabilities, and inclinations, which are highly influenced by how citizens assess the performance of the incumbent government, as well as by salience of European topics.

Many refer to Romania as a pro-European country, which lacks Eurosceptic trends and extremism. Is that 100% accurate? Do Romanians genuinely and consciously trust the EU? Or do their EU inclinations reflect a flawed trust in the national system of governance? Research has demonstrated that national proxies, such as the performance of the domestic system of governance, impact upon citizens’ attitudes and opinions towards the EU. These proxies are typically anchored in the national political arena (Anderson 1998; Franklin *et. al.* 1994). In particular, the public support for incumbent political parties and government has been analyzed. More specifically, Franklin *et. al.* (1994) found that when a pro-European government calls a referendum on an issue of European integration, supporters of that government are more likely to follow in favor of a pro-European proposition.

EU issue voting has emerged as a concept meant to clarify how parties capitalize on existing opinions towards European integration (see, for example, the research done by Tillman 2004; De Vries 2007; Schoen 2008). Briefly put, “some parties can strategically use the EU issue to their electoral benefit” (De Vries 2010, 111). In the same vein, De Vries and Hobolt (2012) argue that the inter-play between mainstream and challenger parties impact upon how European integration is positioned on both the political and public agendas; noteworthy, challenger parties are more likely than mainstream parties to employ issue entrepreneurship strategies (i.e. European integration or crisis) in order to mobilize new issue demands among a small portion of voters. Consequently, mainstream parties tend to adjust their positioning so that the gap between their own discourse and that belonging to the challengers does not endanger their electoral success. This goes hand in hand with the concept of “contagious Euroscepticism” (Meijers 2015), which describes the phenomena in which “Eurosceptic challenger support is capable of influencing mainstream position shifts on European integration provided that Eurosceptic challengers on average regard EU issues to be important.” (Mei-

gers 2015, 2) Thus, "the electoral success of Eurosceptic challenger parties can provoke mainstream parties to be less supportive of European integration." (Meijers 2015, 9).

"Contagious Euroscepticism" is rooted into the fact that European integration is - as Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) argue - a "*sleeping giant*". This is not simply due to the latency of negative attitudes among citizens. It is a sleeping giant especially because the search for democratic legitimacy opens a competitive field for the evaluation of the EU. Or, in a clearer note, "the existence of a justificatory discourse through which the EU defines its democratic legitimacy is rather the enabling condition for the rise of Euroscepticism." (Trenz and De Wilde 2009, p. 8) Thus, the more salient the European issue in the national public sphere, the higher the probability for people to react and resist to European integration. But, in the realm of what seems to be a never-ending crisis of the European Union, the "*sleeping giant*" has been awakened and has unleashed some "mythical creatures" - such as populism and right-wing extremism - which will ultimately test the strength of the European project. In this vein, Leconte wisely concludes "the study of Eurosceptic discourses and mobilizations cannot be separated from the realm of domestic politics, where the notion of populism has long been used." (Leconte 2015, 259).

"In EU We Trust!"

In order to illustrate the interplay between national and European influencers in shaping Romanians' prospective "Euroenthusiasm", I have conducted a secondary analysis of Eurobarometers between 2007 and 2015. The vast majority of research on EU-related attitudes and opinions focuses on regions or events that are emblematic for their rather negative connection to the European project. The referenda for the Constitutional Treaty, the economic crisis, the Eastern Enlargement, the European Elections, as well as other moments when the EU has been uncomfortably placed under public scrutiny, have attracted a vivid scholarly interest. Not surprisingly, most of the research focuses on the Member-States that played important parts in the EU contestation play, such as The Netherlands, Denmark, or the United Kingdom. Little research is dedicated to countries where EU is still regarded as a "*savior*" (Bargaoanu et. al, 2010) and where citizens are still committed to trust the European project, despite economic turmoil, rigid austerity, and poorly addressed regional disparities.

Since Euro-opinions are multi-faceted, I chose trust as a dimension that captures the very essence of attachment towards the EU. More specifically, I look at Romanians' trust in the EU and I compare it against trust in the incumbent government. I also look at confidence levels in the future of the European Union. I build on the research done by Harteveld *et. al.* (2013), who test three explanations

of trust in the European Union. First, subscribing to the utilitarian paradigm, the rational trust originates from actual and perceived performances and benefits of European integration. Second, trust within the logic of identity depends on citizens' emotional attachments to the European Union. Last, the logic of extrapolation regards trust as "an extension of national trust and therefore unrelated to the European Union itself." (Harteveld et. al., 2013). My assumption is that, in the case of Romania, citizens' trust in the EU is a mix of instrumental and national motivations, resulting into a phenomenon which I call "rational extrapolation."

Methodology

To understand the changes registered in the European citizens' attitudes toward the EU since 2007, I employ secondary data analysis starting from data from Eurobarometers. I use standard Eurobarometers since EB 67, spring 2007, up to EB83, autumn 2015 (the last EB available), from where I selected the questions related to the general level of trust in the European Union, in the national and European main institutions (Government and Parliament), and optimism about the future of the European Union. The general research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How did Romanians and Europeans' trust in the European Union changed since 2007 (integration of Romania in the European Union)?

RQ2: How did Romanians and Europeans' trust in the European and national institutions changed since 2007 (integration of Romania in the European Union)?

RQ3: How did Romanians and Europeans' perceptions about the future of the European future changed since 2007 (integration of Romania in the European Union)?

The research aims at understanding both the trends of evolution of general attitudes towards the European Union and perceptions about its future, but at the same time to understand if there is a general correlation (and thus a possible explanation) between the levels of trust in the European institutions as compared to the Romanian ones. I argue that those trends followed the logic of the evolution of the economic crisis. At the speculative level, I also argue that we are at the dawn of a new crisis, of a totally different nature, which will probably bring about new dramatic shifts in the general perceptions of the Europeans. This urges EU to capitalize on the very few islands of Euro-enthusiasm that still exist.

Findings

Generally speaking, the level of trust in the European Union since 2007 has dropped significantly among the citizens of the member states. As data show, Romanians were and still are above the average levels of trust in the EU, with more than 15%. Nowadays Romanians trust the EU even more than they did before the beginning of the economic crisis. (Figure 1).

The evolution of attitudes toward the EU has seen two significant moments since 2007: the end of 2009, when the effects of the economic crisis became more than salient in the lives of the Europeans and the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014, when there has been evidence that the crisis is approaching its end. A clear positive trend registered at the European level ever since, continuing for three or even four Euro-barometers in a row.

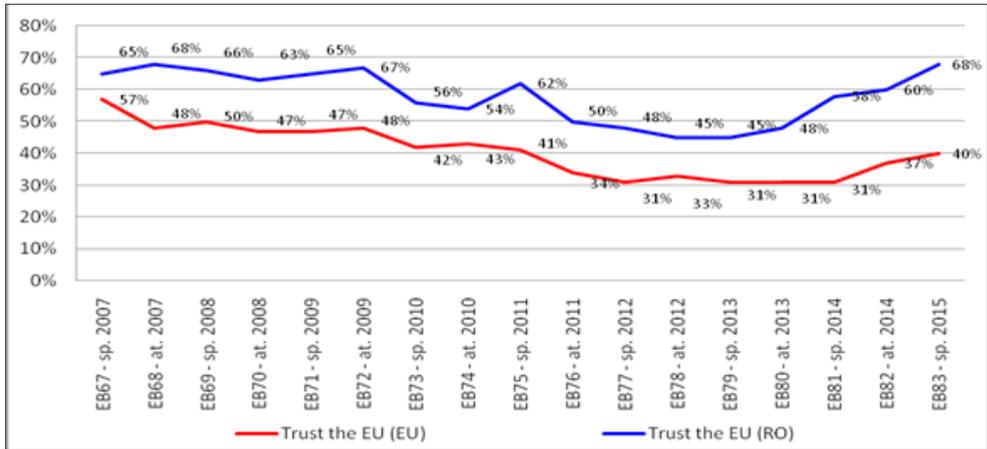


Figure 1. The general level of trust in the European Union (Romania vs. the EU average)

When looking at the Romanians’ trust in the Union, one could notice that the “recovery” from the historical lows between 2009 and 2013 was spectacular, with more than 20% in less than two years. Ever since its adherence to the EU, Romania was among the most euro-enthusiast countries of the European Union, scoring much above the average level of trust of the European citizens. Following the accentuated descending trend during the crisis, Romania has again gained momentum after 2013, the levels of trust at the beginning of 2015 being *the highest since its integration in the Union*.

We argue that there is a correlation between the general levels of trust – trust in the main national and European institutions (and hopes for the future), mainly explained by the fact that Romanians (and other euro-enthusiast European countries) still believe that “salvation” comes “from above”, that is to say the EU is still somewhat perceived as a savior. The correlation though does not entirely stand, because in the last two years, the levels of trust in the national institutions have raised as well, even though they remain much lower than the trust in the European institutions. However, it should be noted that the trust in the Romanian institutions has just slightly increased, whereas the percentages for the European institutions trust raised with no less than up to 17 points.

As shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3, all general trends of trust in the Romanian and European Governments (national Government and the European Commis-

sion) and Parliaments increased since the end of 2013, both at the national and the European levels. But the only spectacular “recovery” registered after the fall of 2013 concerns the Romanians’ trust in the European institutions, with an increase of 17% for the European Commission, and, respectively, 14% for the European Parliament. Thus, in Romania we can see one of the widest gaps between trust in EU institutions, on the one hand, and trust in Romanian institutions, on the other one.

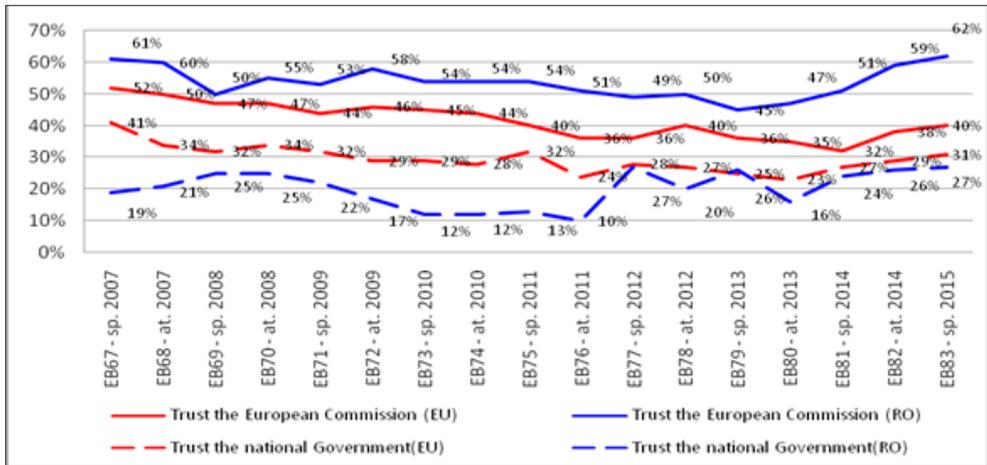


Figure 2. The level of trust in the national and European Government/Commission (Romania vs. the EU average)

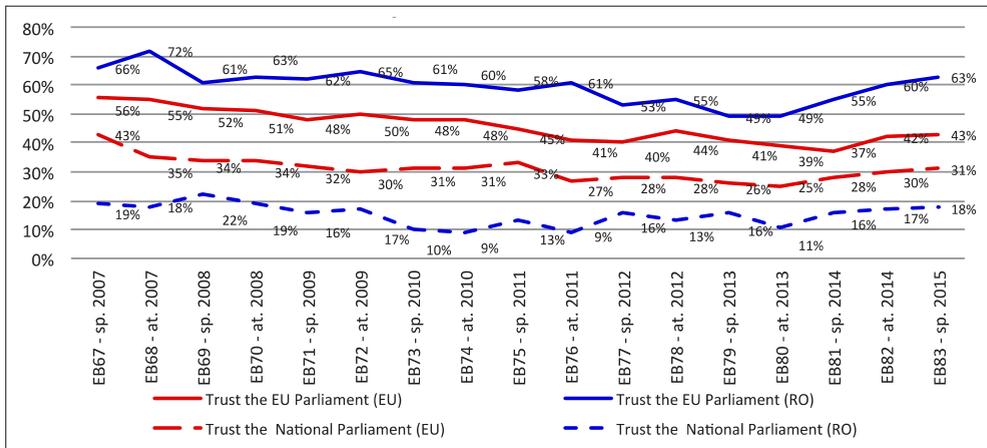


Figure 3. The level of trust in the national and European Parliament (Romania vs. the EU average)

Another important aspect related to the general perceptions regarding the European Union and its institutions is the fact that the means of trust of all Europeans show that the citizens of Europe trust more (on average with 12% for the Com-

mission and with 14% for the Parliament) the European institutions than their own countries' institutions. Of course things should be nuanced: there are several countries (Germany being on top of the list) for which the trust in the national institutions is much higher than in the European institutions. However, these cases are rather the exception that makes the rule.

At this point in the history of the EU there is only place for speculation, but we have reasons to believe that the following barometers will show new dramatic changes in the citizens' attitudes towards the EU because of the new crisis of migrants taking place as we speak.

These arguments are also supported by the evolution of perceptions about the European Union's positive image. Starting 2008 both the European and the national trends regarding the EU image became descendant, touching the lowest peak in spring 2013, followed by a clear and steady recovery ever since. As in the case of trust, Romanians are more optimistic than the average Europeans, the difference of percentages from fall 2013 up to date being of 21% among Romanians and only 11% among Europeans in general. (Figure 4).

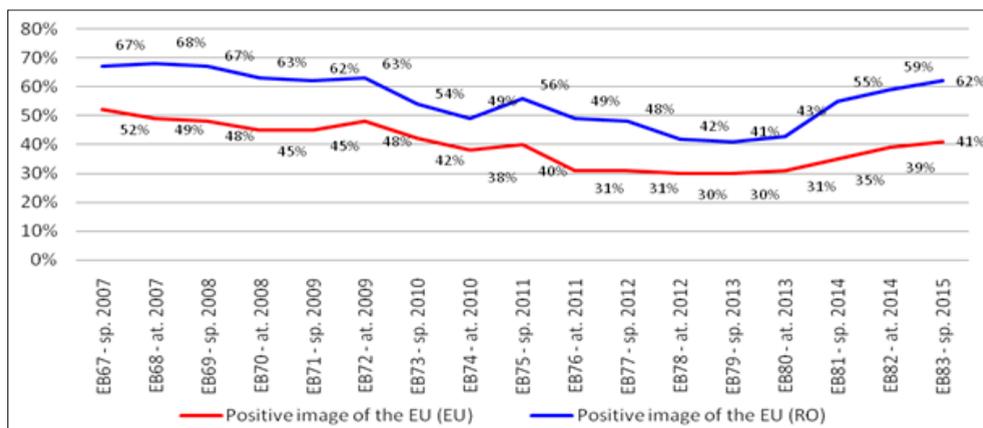


Figure 4. Perceptions about the positive image of the EU (Romania vs. the EU average)

In terms of average distance between Romanians and Europeans since 2007, the general mean (in percentages) of people rather perceiving the EU in a positive way is 40% at the EU level and 56% at the level of Romania. This also shows the wide gap of perceptions about the EU among the European citizens.

As far as the future of the EU is concerned, the levels of optimism are slightly more inconsistent across time: there is a slight decrease in people's optimism about the future of the EU since 2009 and a rather abrupt decreasing trend since 2011. After 2013, the trends are also positive (as for all other indicators), both at the national and at the European levels.

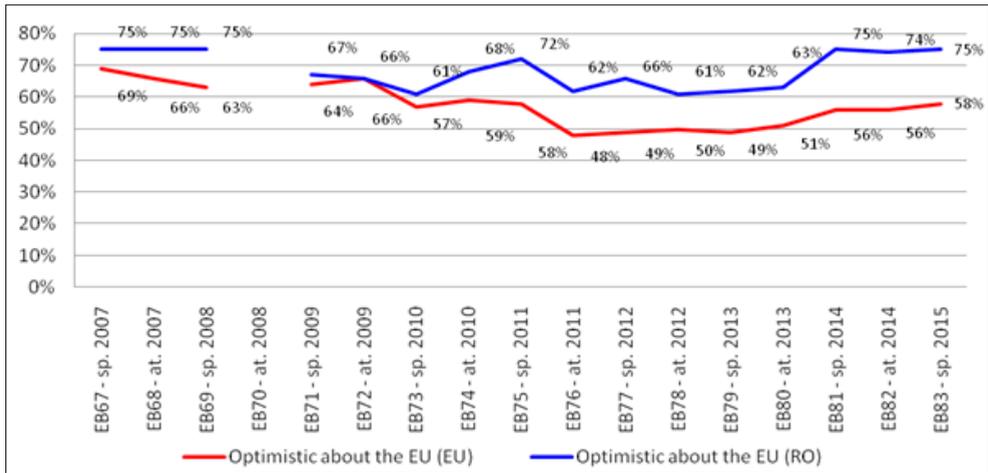


Figure 5. Perceptions about the future of the EU (Romania vs. the EU average)

Across time, a general average of 71% of the Romanians are optimistic about the future of the European project, whereas 60% of the Europeans share the same view. As for the other indicators analyzed in this paper, the positive trend in the last two years is more salient for the Romanians (an increase of 13%) than for the Europeans in general (9%).

Summing up, it is clear that the general levels of trust and optimism for the future at the level of the European Union since 2007 followed the logic of the economic crisis, with low peaks at the moment when citizens started to feel the effects of the crisis and a soft but steady recovery since the second part of the year 2013. At this point, predictions for the future are very hard to make, since a new severe crisis will most probably follow, but of a totally different nature. I believe though that people's perceptions and expectations about the future of the European project follow a cyclical evolution, reflecting their fears and hopes. This is the reason why we expect again a disruptive moment in what concerns the trends related to the various attitudes towards the European Union among its citizens.

Discussions

When analyzing the attitudes toward the European Union as reflected by the data in the Eurobarometers, one should notice that, since 2007, data followed the logic of the economic crisis. This is also consistent with some of our previous findings (see, for example, Bârgăoanu *et. al.*, 2014). The end of 2009 was the moment when Europeans became aware that the economic crisis that started across the ocean had hit them as well and the levels of trust dropped abruptly accordingly. A similar trend could be observed in the case of Romanians' attitudes towards the EU, the difference remaining though in terms of the wide gap between the much

higher levels of trust in the European project among Romanians, even at the lowest peak of this descending evolution of trust.

When looking at the main institutions, both at the national and at the European level, data show some correlation between the very low levels of trust in the Romanian institutions and the much higher levels of trust in the European institutions among Romanians. On the other hand, at the level of the European Union, the “average European” still trusts more the EU institutions than its own country’s institutions, but – in what concerns Romania - the trust void between national and European dimensions is one of the biggest in the EU. Of course these are average trends; in order to fully understand them, a future analysis should split results by countries or groups of countries, thus accounting for the “multi-speed” European economic evolution.

As far as the optimism about the future is concerned, Romanians are more optimistic than the average at the EU level, this difference remaining constant across time, with the general “shape” (lows and highs) of the general evolution trends in this regard being similar.

At this point it is difficult to anticipate how things will evolve at the level of the EU in the near future, especially since there is no data available to reflect people’s attitudes towards the EU after the beginning of the migrants’ crisis. However, we can only speculate that, following the logic of the “crisis”, we expect new disruptive negative evolutions in all trends, following peoples’ fears regarding the outcomes of the new crisis, which seems not to have reached its climax, yet.

This secondary analysis reveals that, despite tough times, Romania is a still Euro-enthusiast country. We might rightfully conclude that it is an island of Europhilia in an ocean of distrust. Drawing on relevant research, there are three key explanations for this phenomenon.

Firstly, the “the sleeping giant” has not awakened in Romania, yet (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004). As previous research shows, the salience of European issues on the media agenda (Corbu *et. al.* 2011; Radu and Stefanita 2012), as well as in the in the public discourse (Radu and Bargaoanu 2015) is extremely low even during European events, such as the 2014 European Elections. In Romania, even European topics are framed in a national logic. Following Trenz and De Wilde’s logic (2009), since there is no justificatory discourse through which the EU defines its democratic legitimacy, Euroscepticism is simply not enabled. Salience of Euroscepticism over the last years is anchored precisely in the fact that many actors capitalize on European integration issue and its huge mobilization potential. Thus, resistance to European integration is not simply due to the latency of negative attitudes among citizens; rather, the search for democratic legitimacy opens a competitive field for the evaluation of the EU (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004),

which is not often exploited at its benefit. The conflicting potential of European integration for many years suppressed, only starts to be exploited.

Secondly, national proxies are not interested in dismantling the European idea, yet. Considering that political parties do respond to public opinion concerning the EU, “when aggregate Euroscepticism is higher, larger parties will have more Eurosceptic manifestos than smaller parties there” (Williams and Spoon 2015, 187). This phenomenon, which is known as *mainstream responsiveness*, is absent in Romania. By mainstream responsiveness, it is meant “a situation where growing skepticism over integration pits an EU-critical camp of both extreme and mainstream parties against a group of pro-EU parties.” (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2015, 2). In Romania, smaller and ideologically narrower parties are hardly functioning, or, if they do, their agendas are quasi-invisible and largely unknown to the general public. Since the media salience of the EU at such or of European topics is very low (see above) and, thus, do not constitute an object of debate and reflection, the mainstream parties are bound to no interest in approaching or contesting the EU. This is also in line with the assertion that parties will alter their positions to match the stances of their proximate voters (Downs 1957). For mainstream parties to grow more eurosceptic, two conditions must be met: a) voters to become more opposed to European integration – a trend that has been identifiable since 2007–2008, and b) media to regard the issue with greater salience (Roth *et al.* 2013). If these conditions are met, spatial reasoning theory “predicts that mainstream parties should also have become more skeptical about integration to ward off competition from challenger Euro-skeptic parties” (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2015, 3). In Romania we do not have any mainstream responsiveness, yet – and this is mainly due to low salience of European topics and to the very structure of the Romanian political system. Our statement is also consistent with Rohrschneider and Whitefield, whose research reveal that “rising public Euro-skepticism has been met mainly by growth in Euro-skepticism among extreme parties, with only modest evidence that mainstream parties have responded by muting their support for integration” (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2015, 19).

Thirdly, Romanians’ discontent with the performance of the incumbent government and parties impacts upon how EU-related attitudes are shaped. As repeatedly confirmed by Eurobarometers, the majority of Romanians distrust the national system of governance. Thus, in line with the rational trust model, “citizens might actually start trusting the European level because it provides them with an alternative source of – potentially better – governance”. (Harteveld *et al.* 2013, 8). Romanian citizens continue to approach the EU as a lifebuoy, which means that the Romanians do not trust the EU for its very nature, for its policies or institutions, but, rather, on grounds of a presumably inefficient national system of governance.

Concluding remarks

In a nutshell, by combining the explanatory streams above, there is evidence that Romanian Euro-enthusiasm is an aggregate result of three factors: low salience of European issues, lack of mainstream responsiveness, and a weak system of governance. Noteworthy, Romanian Euro-enthusiasm does not reflect genuine Europhilia. Romanian citizens' trust the EU is not entirely tributary to the rational trust model, because it does not involve solely a positive assessment of the benefits related to European integration. It is (highly) influenced by national proxies and especially by public opinion towards the performance of the national democracy. Thus, we might say that Romanian citizens' trust in the EU is based on a mix of utilitarian and national factors; it could not be explained solely on instrumental grounds and it could not be 100% correlated to national proxies.

In the original extrapolation model, "EU citizens' trust in the EU should at least be highly predictable on the basis of their trust in other institutions." (Harteveld *et. al.* 2013, 6). However, in the case of Romania, trust in EU is an inverse consequence of trust in national institutions: if citizens cannot invest their trust capital in national actors, then they choose to invest it into a remote entity, which they often perceive as being better and more effective than the incumbent government, that is the EU. Citizens see the EU as a model of better governance, thus extracting some indirect benefits from it, such as the idea of stability, modernization or prosperity. I call this phenomenon rational extrapolation. In this vein, trust might seem as unconditional – even naïve - but it is actually conditioned by the citizens' need to believe in a higher sense of political order and in the very idea of democracy.

However, Romania is not entirely incompatible with Euroscepticism. As soon as Europe becomes more salient and political actors are more tempted to exploit its turmoil at their own electoral advantage, resistance to European integration might emerge here, too. And this assertion becomes particularly valid in the current context, when the EU is literally torn apart by conflicting views, ultimate gestures, and external pressures.

This study has some obvious limitations, such as the lack of the qualitative dimension, in order to be able to better explore citizens' motivations accounting for their relatively low levels of trust in the national government. Is it due to poor performance or to other type of reason? Also, a comparison with other "New Member-States" would have been particularly helpful in identifying some patterns of trust and distrust.

Uncovering the mechanisms of trust in "Euro-enthusiast" countries has important implications, for it might support policy-makers in finding some ways for reinvigorating the European idea. EU contestation strategies are part of the democratic game. So should be the EU legitimizing strategies. National proxies seem to have an important say in legitimizing the EU. Of course, I do not mean that Euro-

pean citizens should grow more skeptical in what concerns the national systems of governance in order to learn how to appreciate the benefits of the EU. Rather, I pose that it is high time for national political actors to find some ways of making the electoral logic more compatible with the European idea. In the words of the World's most renowned contemporary philosopher, "both, the terror and the refugee crisis, are – *perhaps for the last time* – dramatic challenges for a much closer sense of cooperation and solidarity than anything European nations, even those tied up to one another in the currency union, have so far managed to achieve" (Habermas 2015). This is a matter of more political wisdom, than political power.

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