

EUROSCEPTICISM - THE NEW POLICY OF THE EUROPEAN POPULISTS

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Abstract

Migration flows, distrust in European institutions and transnational governmental ineffectiveness and low economic performance have become a favorable ground for the so-called populist governments that are widely using Eurosceptic and populist rhetoric today. Voters perceive traditional elite as powerless in front of contemporary socioeconomic problems. Consequently, populist leaders, at the regional level, have opposed the policies of European institutions. Populism has developed and become part of every European Union (EU) member state and today is gathering more and more Eurosceptic components too. This study refers to how populism and Euroscepticism are part of the political and social life of countries on our continent.

Keywords: Euroscepticism, populism, European institutions, elections, political discourse.

Classification JEL: A13, A14

1. INTRODUCTION INTO THE BEGINNINGS OF EUROSCEPTICISM

In the years that have elapsed since the first signs of economic instability, people in Europe witnessed budgetary adjustments or banks recovery programs through financial support from the state. Each of them has seen these events as a debtor or creditor depending on the country of origin. All these, together with the lack of visible improvements caused a massive decline of confidence in the European Union as an institution and its ability to achieve targets.

It is therefore interesting to investigate the reasons leading to this phenomenon. Inside the Union, Europeans' fears, for example, are linked to the changes in unemployment and general economic insecurity in the country of origin. Europeans feel victims of unfair policies, and the responsibility of this situation belongs to their state union. Moreover, not even local governments enjoy the same popularity, which negatively influences the hopes and expectations for the future. Insecurity felt in the European Union is indeed a problem that affects its image; however, we can not overlook the fact that over the years Eurobarometer investigations have brought to light results that draw attention to other shortcomings.

The word *eurosceptic* is a neologism quickly and definitively adopted, which, according to Larousse dictionary as a noun or adjective, denotes or characterizes a person who doubts the viability or usefulness of the European Union. The word *eurosceptic* is formed by merging the prefix *euro-* respectively *sceptic*. Today, in all languages, *skepticism/scepticism* is mistaken with distrust or suspicion. Or, the word *sceptic* (fr. *sceptique*, engl. *sceptic*), entered the European languages during Renaissance, comes from the Greek *skeptikos* that in the original language meant *observer, examiner*. Therefore, *sceptic* should express only a reasonable doubt that refuse dogmatism.

The noun *eurosceptic* tends to become a kind of barometer that might measure, in a population or an entire country, the non adherence to the European Union. French linguist and lexicographer Alain Rey has a memorable quote concerning the role of words .

Euroscepticism is one of the biggest challenges for the architects of the new Europe, and nowadays, the international press has lately devoted significant space to a phenomenon that few expected. This phenomenon, euroscepticism, being recently called economic protectionism, has become one of the most important concerns on the agenda of many politicians, analysts and ordinary people. Being associated with the idea of disagreement regarding the goals of the European project, radical Eurosceptics are frightened not only of the economic effects concerning EU enlargement, but also to a great extent, of national sovereignty for the states that decide or have decided to enter the European area. Euroscepticism is stronger in northern EU countries. But why here in the developed countries and not elsewhere? Usually both countries outside the EU, as well as those already member states, focus on various disadvantages of integration. In the United Kingdom, Sweden and Denmark, the project of economic and monetary union is the main plot for eurosceptic attitude. For example, in Sweden and in the UK, only three out of ten citizens of this country agree that membership brings benefits. Western countries that are not members of the EU - Norway, Iceland, Switzerland - also have strong eurosceptic attitudes. In those countries that are already members of the EU but kept their own currency instead of euro (UK, Denmark, Sweden), euroscepticism focuses on the disadvantages of the euro and also on other aspects of EU involvement. Some arguments against the Economic and Monetary Union are built on the complaint that the stability and prosperity pact was inconsistently applied due to poor performances of the euro area compared with other economies that have chosen to remain outside. While many skeptics consider particular characteristics of Europe as such, many maintain the principle idea that Europe is an invention of bureaucracy that search to form a bureaucratic and undemocratic superstate or even a dictatorship.

The creation of the European Union aimed primarily to stimulate the exchange of goods and economic progress in EU member states. Another purpose of the EU creation was diminishing the influence of national factor in relations among states. Passing through the tragic lessons of the two world wars, both with strong ethno-nationalist accents, the Europeans saw the creation of shared community space, as a way to reduce socio-economic and national egoism specific to sovereign states. Focusing on prioritizing economic interests, the architects of the European Union have relied on the fact that the general welfare will lead to a general tolerance. It was a perfectly rational argument. But they underestimated the irrational force of people and ethnicities. We notice the presence of several positive premises contributing to European consolidation: traditions of an economic and political exchange; steady economic progress experienced by all EU members until a few years ago (the global financial crisis of 2008); the same cultural heritage; predominantly Christian religion; the desire of the EU elites to continue development; the existence of a common currency unit, a flag, a space of free movement, that make open boundaries. But the evolution of socio - economic and political parameters was joined not just as a complement to the development of a combination of demographic, migration, identity and ethnocentric aspects in Europe. Namely because of immigration and nationalism firmly rooted in the mentality of peoples, the European Union will not be able to create a sense of a common nation, and failing that, we can not discuss about the EU's sustainable future . Rather, we expect a decline and disintegration of the European Union, especially in the context of financial crises.

The more the EU action is higher and ambitious, the more the opposition and skepticism of citizens concerning the European project are becoming more alarming for the political class. The European Union is increasingly challenged because it is perceived to have become a too complex political project. Citizens feel away from institutions and integration process. The use of referenda as tools for support or legitimacy of major changes highlighted the risk of negative public reaction. The Maastricht Treaty in 1991, not only ended the era of permissive consensus, but it also marked the ratification referendums giving up, their results clearly showing that European political elites can no longer afford to rely on the support of the population regarding the integration project.

Since then, there have been attempts to regain the trust of citizens. The European Commission has developed the so-called Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, which identified in the democratic shortcomings and lack of information, the leading causes of skepticism. Paradoxically, however, the rejection by France and the Netherlands, of the Constitutional Treaty (whose objectives are the strengthening of citizen participation in decision-making at EU level), took place after a highly disputed public campaign. The very wording of the draft treaty was carried out according to a new and opened mechanism in order to enhance democracy and transparency. It seems, however, that the result was just the opposite. In other words, the efforts of the political class have not had much influence on public opinion who was increasingly contesting the Union.

Initially, euroscepticism has been perceived as a British syndrome. Nowadays, however, this syndrome overwhelmed the whole continent. Among all major criticism for EU action is the democratic deficit, lack of transparency, lack of flexibility, complicated language, the trend of creating a highly centralized superstate, fear of a symbolic threat to the national communities. The major obstacle in relations with the European institutions seems to be the impossibility to identify suitable ways of managing the relationship national vs. supranational at the level of governmental responsibilities.

2. EUROSCEPTICS AND POPULISTS AFTER THE LAST EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

More and more EU citizens have lost confidence in the institutions of this entity because of the financial insecurity, distrust in institutions, governmental ineffectiveness and low economic performance. This has become today a favorable ground for the populist parties to campaign against. In case of low institutional trust voters perceive traditional elites as being powerless in front of numerous contemporary socioeconomic problems.

Since institutional trust is a dynamic relationship of the individual and the institution relevant to the life of the individual, the scope of institutions to be trusted varies from individual to individual. The primary institutions to be considered in this regard are police, the legal system overall, healthcare and education system and finally the groups (institutions) involved in policy-making. In this latter group some individuals only consider local and national institutions, others, on the other hand, include here the institutions of the European Union as well.

Although trust - at least to a certain extent - is mostly a personal feature (some people are rather trusting while others are not so easy to trust), the level of trust is also influenced by individual experiences and his/her social surrounding. When there is a lack of direct personal experience, stories of others, rumors and official broadcasts are much more appreciated. In such cases the trend and disposition of political discourse of the actual political elite can be determining. While institutional trust is strongly related to power dynamics, including (but not limited to) forms of power (social and political), it has major implications regarding the power base of the political elite as well.

Institutional trust is often expressed through value judgment. The nature of the relationship can be qualified as supportive, neutral or opposing. The magnitude of institutional trust however is very hard to quantify. Same as all individual inclinations it does not only differ from individual to individual, but is heavily influenced by the actual mood, time and personal (direct or indirect) experiences.

Institutional trust gains extreme importance in the light of the European integration process, which is often placing the interest of one country against the interest of another, or in occasions against that of the whole European Union. The situation is even more tricky, if we consider the Eurosystem for which the countries gave up their monetary sovereignty, which has led to a certain discontent towards the political system, thus feeding the rhetoric of populist parties and undermining democracies and the European integration project as such.

Consequently, populist parties, at the regional level, have been opposing the policies of European institutions, creating, or fostering mistrust in the institutions of the European Union. Thus, Eurosceptic discourse, using a narrative with a realistic background, has become a crucial component of campaigning for rising populist parties. Euroscepticism has developed to become part of every European Union (EU) member party system, while sometimes Euroscepticism has also elements of populism in it.

Populism can be defined in terms of ideology but is also conceived as a political strategy for certain leaders to get power and win. Populism can be seen as an ideology and as a political strategy, but not necessarily these two go together .

The European Parliament elections on May 2014 have been the première of a powerful wave of euro populist and euro-extremists. Euroscepticism will increase, although it already has its representatives in Parliament, albeit in low numbers. Where before there could not be a sustainable and distinct euro populist group in the European Parliament, operating in parallel with the major European political families, after the 2014 elections have become an important force in the European Parliament.

The reason is the strong growth of populists and extremists both in big and small EU member states. Romania might escape the trend, but in France the National Front wreaks havoc; Movement 5 Stars in Italy remains high in the polls; UKIP scores as such that it may become the main party in the European elections in the UK; there is the Dutch populist Wilders, who will also likely score high; as well as several countries in Eastern and Southern Europe (including Poland) where there are extreme alternatives, besides existing ones (i.e. Greece and Hungary).

Whether we speak of populism or extremism, for the elections these parties have not only target the so-called “corrupt political elite”, but also Brussels, a demonized entity, asking “repatriation” of powers or a stronger national voice. It is a hypocritical position, because states already have a voice in Brussels, namely through the EU institutions, and strategy of international representation compared with national resources depends only on the states themselves.

The fact is that populists and extremists would not have much success if our European political “mainstream” class, be it left; right; or centrist, would handle the crisis across the EU better. This crisis is not just one of the Eurozone, but one experienced by other large blocks of the world as well. This provides an opportunity for reconfiguration to be even more competitive in the near future. It’s an economic, social and structural crisis. The difference with other big countries or trading blocs is that the EU has the resources to turn this crisis into opportunities, to strengthen it even more. We don’t yet have an overview of the effects the crisis has, but the current political class must gain more understanding of what we need, so that we can ‘restart’, because previous models are no longer valid.

Regarding the EU citizens, they do not show euroscepticism in equal doses, and certainly not hard-core euroscepticism. There are Europhiles in Britain – albeit with minimum participation, in Germany, Poland, and Romania. So we could consider this “soft” euroscepticism, maybe also because the European Union is a slow project, and people do not have patience. It was founded to soothe citizens’ anxiety, a change of address from “austerity” to “fiscal consolidation”. But actually the way things are done really matter, we need to show substance – not just form. The fact is that the European economy will restart with entrepreneurship in the foreground, for when there are few

jobs; there is no other opportunity but to become your own boss. Sure, the crisis decreased confidence in the EU, but the question is whether you sit and let things go, or roll up your sleeves and get to work. And this applies both to politicians, and citizens.

Finally, if we look at Romania, we see that Romanians still are more optimistic than the European average in terms of the EU's future, even if there is a decreased euro-enthusiasm. This has many causes, and it all starts with our expectations about the EU: more money, freedom of movement and labour, influence in Brussels. All these areas disappoint in practice, and so it's normal for the enthusiasm to drop. The theme of European money will remain on the agenda, whereas the topic of freedom of movement will fade into the background to eventually disappear entirely. Regarding the development of a stronger voice in Brussels, it remains to be seen whether this will be played moderately, or if this will go toward a more nationalistic tone, like "the European Commission should leave us in peace".

Romanians went from being euro-enthusiast to euro-realist, and the next step is to manage the relationship Brussels-Bucharest in the best way there is. Let's hope that our political class will have the wisdom to manage the relationship with Brussels properly.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Under the pressure of populists and extremists, we learn that the lessons history teaches us are still taken into account. The EU project must become more ambitious, as going back is not a solution. Sure, communicating a federal project, a United States of Europe, must be more intelligent and articulate, empathetic and firm at the same time. Otherwise, the structure will sink, due to the shots fired at "corrupt elites" and Brussels will continue in the absence of the praetorian guards of the European project.

Euroscpticism has neither started nor worsened lately by chance. The European project has been and continues to be taught by specialists in European integration as an economic project with many benefits such as: single market for citizens, single currency, and free movement in an enormous space. Initially, the project started on a small group of countries and freedoms. In more than 50 years the project has evolved from a mere free trade area to a customs union, then to a common market and tends towards an economic and monetary union, while significant efforts being made for a political union. At first sight, United Europe means greater freedom. Unfortunately we can not but note that the European project has long ceased to be an economic project and its benefits are just a few.

Europe, so far, has meant an oasis of stability and some more freedom, especially for the countries of Eastern Europe. The costs of integration for those countries have been huge. Stability of the union is severely tested now by the political concessions made to certain countries, which from the very beginning thought integration as a form of redistribution without too much effort. Union has become a multi-speed group: some countries are in the Euro area, others are systematically refusing to participate in the monetary union (United Kingdom, Sweden); some countries have total freedom of labour movement, others are still kept apart by the restrictions and unjustified barriers; some countries spend plenty of union resources being net recipient of funds, others systematically pay bills and the needs of other countries. These speeds of different European countries participating in the project are a source of instability at the moment.

In addition to greater stability brought by the European Union, our freedom is also seriously questioned. Although, we are not fully aware, taxes and impending inflation surround us every day like barbed wire. We are now working for two masters: the local and European ones. We have freedom of speech; we have freedom of movement in the European concentration camp. But what's the use if our labour is confiscated in a growing proportion. Therefore, we have every reason to be rather Eurosceptic than eurofanatics, especially when we see how few good things happen to us from this ambitious project, which seems stumbled in its own bureaucracy and rather sentenced to disintegration. For a while, socio-economic policies of the EU do not create consensus and

enthusiasm. It works more often by constraints and warnings to implement decisions with economic, civil and political character. European Union becomes more bureaucratic and centralised, while at the horizon is lurking a resurgence of passions and adverse claims - the identity, regional and ethno –national ones, with which the project of European Union member states will enter into an inevitable conflict.

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