

EUROSCEPTICISM – THE NEW FEAR OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract

The European Union is dominated by permanent change and diversity so that public opinion regarding different EU-related issues follows a similar trend. Within this continually changing context, there are two important interconnected things to be considered: first, public opinion towards the EU represents the core of political and academic debates over the present and future of the European integration. Second, the favorable attitudes and opinions towards the EU have increasingly changed into disapproving or sceptic attitudes in the last years. Although there are studies on Eurosceptic attitudes and their causes in almost all EU member states, only a few of them offer a clear overview of this issue. The aim of this paper is to examine the theoretical foundations of Euroscepticism and to provide insightful information to be used in future studies.

Keywords: public opinion; Euroscepticism; Eurosceptic attitudes; European integration.

1. Introduction

The value of the present study consists of bringing together new theoretical approaches and visions in the field of public opinion towards the EU. More specifically, the paper aims at creating a working overview regarding (negative) attitudes towards the EU that could be used in future empirical or theoretical studies of the complex concept of Euroscepticism. The paper will seek to provide answers to the following questions: What do we know about Euroscepticism when we study it?; How is Euroscepticism “working” in the entire European Union?; How is it “working” in Romania?; What should be done to overcome growing Euroscepticism? These questions will guide the following sections of the present article.

The literature on the topic of public opinion towards the EU has known a significant development in the last decade. Furthermore, since the beginning of the financial and economic crisis, the questions and observations regarding this issue have been continually accompanying scholars’ work on EU-related topics .

In this context, early studies of public opinion regarding European integration have used the concept of EU support to characterize citizens’ attitudes towards the EU, but more recently the research literature uses the concept of Euroscepticism to refer to the same phenomenon (Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas, & de Vreese, 2011). The concept of Euroscepticism was originally used to characterize the way in which political parties faced the process of European integration . Moreover, Boomgaarden et al. (2011) stress the idea that, since the process of European integration has a multifaceted nature, the same complex nature should be considered when addressing the attitudes towards the process. That is why the authors’ definition of Euroscepticism as “opposition towards a specific policy or integration effort” sees Euroscepticism as one of many other engines which drive public opinion.

2. Different visions about Euroscepticism

Considering the complexity of EU-related attitudes, more recent approaches to Euroscepticism have tried to offer a more organized picture of this concept. Some attempts (Boomgaarden et al., 2011) are valuable and need to be mentioned

– they specify the importance of the object of mass attitudes, the type and origin/nature of the attitude involved. In this context, Eurosceptic attitudes differ according to the object to which they are addressed – authorities, regime or community; they are dependent on the type of opposition – diffuse or specific and they are different due to the nature of public opinion – utilitarian or affective.

With reference to the objects of support, the above mentioned authors focus on the difference between attitudes towards the regime and towards the community. In this sense, the regime-specific attitudes are those related to regime principles, processes and institutions – which measure general membership support and the benefits supposed to come from a country's membership. Furthermore, the regime-support attitudes include approval for further enlargement, the transfer of policy-making competencies from the national to the EU level, trust in the EU institutions, evaluations of the functioning of the regime, as well as emotional responses towards the EU. On the other hand, EU attitudes to the community refer to the attitudes which have their roots in citizens' perceptions that EU functions as a community-driven force and it may be a threat to national interests. In this sense, attitudes to the community are measured in terms of identification with the EU and attachment given to the European community as a whole.

From the empirical point of view, Boomgaarden et al. distinguish five attitude dimensions which represent “unique components of the overall notion of EU attitudes” (2011, p. 258). The five dimensions include emotional responses – feelings that the EU represents a dangerous entity or a threat to the member states; a sense of European identity – this last dimension is gaining importance due to the discussion about the legitimacy of the EU; the performance and the democratic functioning of the EU and its institutions; utilitarian attitudes such as general support and benefit evaluations towards the EU and a strengthening of the EU in the future – which includes support to further European integration.

Given the work of Boomgaarden et al., we can conclude that negative attitudes towards the EU are inappropriately called Eurosceptic, since the EU attitudes have a multifaceted nature and Euroscepticism represents only “one facet of public opinion towards the EU” (2011, p. 242).

Going one step further, one can acknowledge that Euroscepticism roots in the events that happened in the 1990s, in the period immediately after the ratification of the “Maastricht Treaty” or the Treaty on the European Union. The Maastricht Treaty has changed the primarily economic role of the EU into a political one and has encouraged the widening of the EU through enlargement. Thus, the already established order of cost-benefit evaluations was seriously outbalanced by political and social variables, such as citizens' identity and political institutions. This led to an important mutation of the factors behind public opinion support or lack of support towards the EU (Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007). This evolution of the public opinion towards the EU, from supporting views at the beginning and negative and questioning views remains a process which should be studied since it might reveal valuable considerations on the legitimacy of the EU as a whole.

Thus, there are different causes of Eurosceptic attitudes that have strong implications in determining the type of Euroscepticism. In what follows, four types of Euroscepticism will be reviewed – utilitarian-based Euroscepticism, identity-based Euroscepticism, politically-based Euroscepticism and culturally-based Euroscepticism.

The utilitarian-based Euroscepticism was coined in the literature in the field by Gabel and Palmer (1995). The authors show that the public support for the European integration is different according to “mercantilist or security benefits” (1995, p. 12) of each member state. They also show that income, occupation, political skills and the “proximity to foreign markets” (1995, p. 8) are positively associated with an attitude of support towards EU integration. Then, following the same line of thought, Gabel (1998) suggests that the utilitarian-based model offers clear clues about the variance of public support within member states – the citizens who discover real and immediate benefits of the European integration are more likely to develop a supporting attitude towards the EU integration.

As mentioned above, Eurosceptic attitudes can take different faces all around the EU, depending on socio-economic, cultural, political or contextual factors. But what happens in Romania? Research on Euroscepticism at the EU level comprises little if no data on Eurosceptic attitudes in Romania. Thus, aiming to develop a clear overview regarding Eurosceptic attitudes all around the EU, the study of Euroscepticism in Romania could add significant value to the research literature in the field. It could reveal the trend of attitudes in a country whose citizens seem to lack interest in EU-related issues; this lack of interest towards the EU problems can be seen as a sign of support.

In the following section of the paper, I will first try to offer an overview of attitudes towards the EU by comparing Euro barometers from 2010 and 2017. I will try to raise some questions that might be answered or at least taken into consideration by future research. Secondly, I will analyze and comment on the results of a relevant research on Romania’s accession to the Schengen Area. In 2010, Romania was among the five countries with the highest degree of optimism. According to the 2010 Euro barometer, the highest current optimism index was in Sweden (+38), followed by Denmark (+33). Spain, Ireland (both +29) and Romania (+28) all have optimism indexes over ten points higher than that for the EU as a whole. On the other hand, in 2017, due to the economic crisis, Romanian citizens seem to be less optimistic and to list the country’s economic situation as their most important concern, followed by concerns about inflation and unemployment. This trend is a general one at the EU level. But, the question is this: are Romanians worried about the economic situation at the EU level? Or is it just a national trend? In other words, is the degree of sceptic attitudes towards the EU fostered by internal factors or by community issues?

Another interesting thing to be mentioned is a 2010 Euro barometer result which shows that over 7 in 10 Romanian respondents (72%) have a trusting outlook regarding the EU institutions – European Parliament and the European Commission. On the other hand, the 2017 Euro barometer results show that the general trend of all the EU members is to develop an attitude of distrust both in the national and the EU institutions. This trend may offer a clue that an answer to the political issues must be looked up for in other segments probably in non-political areas. Put it in other words, is trust in the EU institutions a sign of supporting attitudes towards the EU? Or is it just natural to place trust in supra-national/ European institutions?

One key factor in the contemporary reality which shapes the attitudes towards the EU is the economic and financial crisis. The 2010 Euro barometer suggests that “the possible rippling effects of the so called ‘sub-prime’ crisis in the US are as yet not fully played out, yet may well contribute to a feeling of uncertainty about the future”. In other words, the dangerous effects of the crisis are taken into consideration even in its early stages, but the type of attitudes and opinions is an issue that feeds a lot of uncertainties. On the other hand, the 2017 Euro barometer shows that Romania is among the three countries maintaining that the impact of the economic crisis has not reached its peak and that the worst is still to come. The questions here are: Is the economic crisis the only

impediment in creating a supporting attitude towards the EU? Or are there other more important factors to be considered?

All these questions above are only a part of the multiple interrogations that accompany the issue of Euroscepticism. Consequently, we consider that not only answering a set of questions, but also raising them is an important step forward in understanding the process of building Eurosceptic attitudes at the EU level, which should not ignore the study of these attitudes in countries like Romania.

In the following section, I will discuss the findings related to Euroscepticism of a research on Romania's accession to Schengen. The research was carried out by the Center of Research in Communication, and it focused on the Schengen-related debates taking place from December 21, 2010 to January 21, 2011, in Romania. The study included three perspectives: the presence of the Schengen topic in the media, as well as the understanding and the interpretation of the topic; the mass and elites opinions about the postponement in Romania's adherence to the Schengen area and the impact of this decision on the country's position in the EU (Negrea, 2011, p. 179).

The main results of the research stressed the idea that the Schengen topic is able to offer valuable data on the intensity of public support towards the EU and the EU integration, in Romania. The interest in the Schengen case was mentioned as an important predictor in the discussion about the evolution of Eurosceptic attitudes towards the EU. In this context, strictly referring to the Schengen topic and its impact on public opinion in Romania, the survey showed a decrease of Euro enthusiasm towards the EU, but this trend is also revealed by the Euro barometers measuring public opinion at the EU level (Negrea, 2011, p. 179).

From a more general perspective, the results on Euroscepticism in Romania are consistent with both the results in other member states and the factors presented and analyzed above. In other words, Romanian public opinion follows the EU level trend regarding the factors that explain the intensity of supporting attitudes towards the EU. Moreover, the intensity of the Romanian supporting attitudes towards the EU varies according to the cognition of the benefits of being a member state and it is seriously influenced by the emergence of the “double-identity perception” (Negrea, 2011, p. 184). In this context, the Schengen topic does not seem to have a strong influence on the development of Eurosceptic attitudes, probably due to its low degree of visibility in the national media and because of the emotional point of view from which it was discussed in the public space.

Following the discussion of the factors and causes that generate Euroscepticism at the EU or the Romanian level, this section focuses on future implications of Euroscepticism. Thus, I will analyze and critically review some recent approaches regarding the issue of Eurosceptic attitudes towards the EU and their impact on the future of EU integration.

Considering Euroscepticism as an issue which developed according to different time phases, Vasilopoulou (2013, pp. 163–164) shows that from the early 1990's onwards the nature and scope of Eurosceptic attitudes towards the EU has changed dramatically, rising new conceptions of integration which portrayed the EU as a “multispeed community”. Thus, the author suggests that the post-Maastricht period was one of long debates regarding the EU's legitimacy and it generated a fertile ground for the exhibition of the pervasive nature of Euroscepticism. More recently, the latest phase of Euroscepticism seems to be located in the outbreak of the financial crisis and it can be distinguished as a combination among mass Euroscepticism and protest, elite Euroscepticism and anti-referendum attitudes of EU leaders.

In this context, the author suggests that the latest Euroscepticism seems to have “far-reaching implications for the process and direction of European integration, domestic national politics and the development of EU studies” (2013, p. 164). Moreover, the author underlines that the current Euroscepticism is nurtured by the desire to consider supra-nationalism as a prevailing model – in

this context, Eurosceptic voices tend to direct their strongest opposing views towards the “entire EU institutional framework rather than specific policies” (2013, p. 164). The author also suggests a possible solution to this problem, which is trying to avoid perceiving the EU as a supra-national political union. However, it is crucial that the EU is seen as a viable system through which its citizens can access political, economic and social resources more easily. By doing so, both the citizens and the EU as a whole would be in a win-win situation.

Usherwood and Startin go even further and suggest that Eurosceptic attitudes seem to threaten the “status quo that has protected the EU so far” (2013, p. 13). They base their assumption on the idea that it is possible to mobilize popular attitudes against the Union within a country in a relatively short period of time. Moreover, they advance a possible solution to the more and more present issue of Euroscepticism, suggesting that it should be the EU itself that which deals with sceptics if it wants to ensure a secure legitimacy and success. The authors suggest that a failure to deal with Euroscepticism as Europe enters an uncertain economic period “could have serious consequences for the European project as a whole” (2013, p. 13).

Other contributions to the literature on Euroscepticism emphasize the same reality in different words, but with an almost identical warning connotation. For example, following a very similar line, Krowel and Startin claim that failure to “convince Europe’s citizens of the merits of the EU’s role in an increasingly globalized world, could cause irreparable damage to the future of the European project” (2013, p. 82).

In conclusion, Euroscepticism is an issue that needs the EU’s attention since it may have serious short term and long term implications on the future of the Union. Coping with Euroscepticism may assure citizens that the EU cares not only about things that they cannot have a direct access to, but also about issues that are more adjacent to their private interests, such as jobs or salaries. Thus, the today’s struggle to deal with Eurosceptic attitudes should be seen as a matter of tomorrow’s victory.

Conclusions

This article explored some of the most relevant theoretical and empirical work on Euroscepticism, in an attempt to offer some clarifications and interpretations of this concept with a multifaceted nature. Reviewing and critically analyzing the literature on Euroscepticism, the paper proposes an overview of attitudes and factors beyond Euroscepticism, types of Euroscepticism, Eurosceptic attitudes in the EU as a whole and in Romania, in particular, as well as some ideas about short and long term implications of Euroscepticism.

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