

## Euroscepticism Across Europe: Drivers and Challenges

Monica CONDRUZ-B CESCUS

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania  
monicabacescu@yahoo.com

### Abstract

*This paper addresses the issue of euroscepticism expansion across Europe. This phenomenon has steadily grown into one of the biggest challenges to the European construction, and has consequentially become a major concern to politicians, as well as regular citizens. This analysis uses data from Eurobarometer surveys regarding the decline of public trust in the European institutions. The findings suggest that some of the main drivers of eurosceptics stands include: disagreement with EU policies, economic challenges associated with the enlargement process, as well as the extent of national sovereignty within the EU. Thus, while European leaders develop policies to improve economic crisis, ordinary citizens are beginning to question the legitimacy of the EU, feeling they have been forced to accept things they did not want. This paper argues that the beliefs of the EU member states' citizens confirm the fears of political actors. It seems extensive bureaucracy, and political failures seem to diminish the trust of the European citizens in the positive effects of further integration, and might support the opposite - disintegration.*

**Keywords:** euroscepticism; integration; leaders; national sovereignty; public trust;

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### 1. Origins and Evolution of the Euroscepticism Phenomenon

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" (Le Petit Larousse, 2011, p.101). 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 *euro-sceptic* 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 „*Le langage ne sert pas uniquement à s'exprimer, il sert aussi à mentir, à influencer, à se faire valoir*”. (Rey, 1998, p. 523) Or perhaps the ones who introduced the word *euro-sceptic* in the usual language of so many millions of people know very well what Alain Rey speaks about.

Euro-scepticism 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, euro-scepticism, 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 Euro-sceptics 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. Euro-scepticism 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 euro-sceptic 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 euro-sceptic attitudes. In those countries that are already members of the EU but kept their own currency instead of euro (UK, Denmark, Sweden), euro-scepticism 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 (Chalmers, 2013). Rather, we expect a decline and disintegration of the European Union, especially in the context of financial crises.

## **2. Euroscepticism - a new doctrine in Europe?**

As European Union powers and abilities expanded, it also increased the interest of citizens for EU issues and integration. In the 60s, 70s and 80s, the development of the European project was based, more or less, on an obedient population. Political elites enthusiastically supported the integration process, and managed to attract the popular support in this matter. Consequently, for years, the public has not been given much importance. This corresponded to neo - functionalist theory that noticed, in the attitude of the political elite, the key to European integration. In other words, public opinion was seen as having some input in policies formulation at national level, but not determining substantially the way of European projects unfolding.

“But since the 90s (the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty), when the EU has started to involve not only in economic issues but also political ones, the EU has faced great difficulties” (Peterson and Shakleton, 2001, p. 89). The union started to be regarded as lacking legitimacy, which made its action to be labelled as having a serious democratic deficit. Polls have shown a decline in public support for European integration. Regarding the direction this project is heading, it seems to be a gap between population and political elite. This situation has given rise to the concept of euroscepticism. The phenomenon has become increasingly problematic for the EU, especially when the Netherlands and France rejected the project of a European constitution or when the Lisbon Treaty was ratified.

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 (Habermas, 2013).

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.

Most theorists believe that there are several definitions and degrees of Euroscepticism, from the critical attitude towards some aspects of EU action, but favourable idea of European integration, to the total rejection of the project. According to published studies on this topic four types of scepticism have been identified:

**Table 1. Types of euroscepticism**

Euroscepticism based on economic criterion	Euroscepticism based on the criterion of sovereignty	Euroscepticism based on democratic criterion	Euroscepticism based on political criterion
Quantifies pragmatically the major benefits and costs arising from EU membership, resulted or not from a cooperative process.	Considers that, at EU level, cooperation should not be a challenge to national sovereignty. These eurosceptics support supranational cooperation in matters that the state can not manage alone (such as environmental issues and the fight against organized crime), but wish to preserve national skills for socio-cultural policies.	Perceives the current institutional structure of the Union as inadequate in terms of representation and democratic participation of citizens.	Assesses EU action based on the doctrine of belonging to a political family; analysts believe that the dominant form of this disproof is social.

Source: Adapted from Chalmers, 2013; Habermas, 2013

It is considered that the integration process has strengthened the executive powers of the EU to the detriment of national parliaments. European Parliament, the only elected institution is perceived as having a relatively weak position in the institutional configuration of the Union, unable to fulfil the primary function of executive control and censorship of actions. The European institutions are seen as too far from the people that do not understand the EU system. Policies adopted at this level have not the support of the majority population and “the neo-liberal character of the Single Market and European Monetary Union seems to have deviated from the preferences of voters who generally favour a more social Europe” (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2005, p.52).

Most often, euroscepticism is assumed by the protesting political parties, at the periphery of the current system and outside governments. This attitude is not necessarily their primary objective, but is seen as bringing benefits in terms of elections. Such eurosceptics

speculate the general decline of trust in government and in political institutions and use public policy alienation and cynicism for their own parties.

Euroscepticism reasons are different in old and new member states of the European Union. Much talked about post-accession syndrome to the EU in Central and Eastern Europe has its springs in the disappointment caused by the economic development impact on political confrontation. To compensate for the lack of freedom at national level, it is often used a type of *soft euroscepticism* as a strategic tool, along with *hard euroscepticism*, articulated by the right parties.

According to the latest data published by Eurobarometer, everyone seems to have lost confidence in the European project, both the main creditor states and the debtor ones, the euro area countries and also the candidate countries. The current economic crisis has deepened differences between countries. Thus, citizens belonging to creditor states refuse to finance the debts of other countries, in the absence of mechanisms to control expenditure. For a growing number of citizens of the southern part, European Union actions increasingly show more of what the IMF has done in South America: a golden straitjacket that narrows their policies and empty space democracies of national content. In this new situation, governments seem to come and go, but the policies remain the same.

Some proposals have been advanced in order to improve the democratic deficit by reforming the institutional mechanism of decision-making at EU level, such as the increased role of national parliaments (currently, they do not have the power to include topics on the European agenda, nor to initiate or revise EU legislation; in this way, the mechanism of decision would become broader and more transparent, and the European Commission would lose its initiator monopoly) or the introduction of support for a majority of two thirds of national parliaments to a Commission proposal.

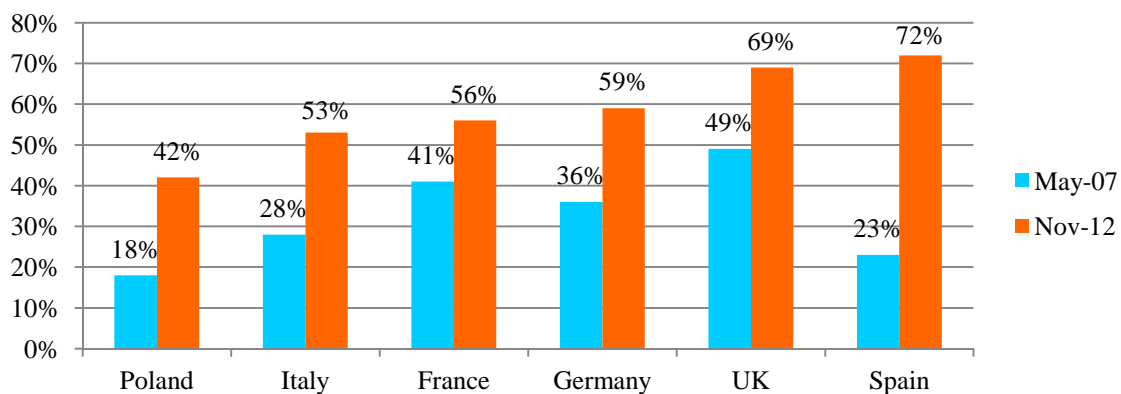
“In a functional national political system, parties should be able to express different positions, to act as an arbitrator and to find a common platform”. (Prisecaru and Idu, 2003, p. 130) But this is exactly what is missing in European political system. In the absence of genuine political parties and functional governments, the European Union can not compensate for the failure of national democracies. Instead of representing a place of ideas confrontations, the EU is struggling in a vicious circle, marked by anti-European populism and technocratic agreements of member states that fear the reactions of their citizens. There is the hope that, once economic growth resumes, euroscepticism will diminish. But the collapse of confidence in the European Union means more than that. Enthusiasm for the European project will not return unless the EU will significantly change how it relates to the Member States and their citizens.

Eurobarometer has published results of a survey conducted in November 2012 in several European countries. The study aimed to measure confidence in the European Union of its current and future citizens. The investigation has gathered clear statistics data stating a wide diffusion of Euroscepticism. The results concern the European community, especially since the pro-European countries like Germany, recorded a decrease in people's trust in the Union. Moreover, the study shows that in comparison with 2007, the number of pessimists regarding the future of the EU doubled. In the years that have elapsed since the first signs of economic instability, Europe's citizens have witnessed budgetary adjustments or the recovery programs of banks through the financial support of the state. Each of them saw this event as a debtor or creditor depending on the country of origin. All these, together with the lack of visible improvements caused a massive decline in the European Union confidence as an institution and its ability to achieve targets.

For a better visual representation of the situation described above, we summarized the Eurobarometer statistics in the chart below for six countries surveyed - Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Poland and the UK. “The six countries surveyed are the EU's biggest, jointly making up more than two out of three EU citizens or around 350 million of the EU's 500 million population. The findings represent a nightmare for Europe’s leaders, whether in the wealthy north or in the bailout-battered south, suggesting a much bigger crisis of political and democratic legitimacy” (Traynor, 2013, p. 1).

The decline of public trust in the European institutions would not only be a cause for concern if we did not consider the fact that the phenomenon of Euroscepticism has spread rapidly in countries whose aggregate population exceed half of the total EU population. Thus, while European leaders develop policies to improve economic crisis, ordinary citizens are beginning to question the legitimacy of the EU and feel they have been forced to accept things they did not want.

**Figure 1. Lack of trust in the EU. Percentage of nationals who said they tended not to trust the EU, as an institution**



Source: EU Eurobarometer (2007, 2012)

Opposition to foreign intervention in the economy of the members or even those still under accession is a widespread attitude among citizens. Now, the greatest danger is to save the euro at the expense of losing its own citizens. This point of view is shared by many Germans who believe their country should give up salutary policies directed to other states and should focus on its own people who believe that resources are not used in their favour. The figures collected by the study are not surprising and confirm many of the fears of Union leaders and not only. By far the most dramatic change in perception occurred in Spain, where the number of people who tend not to trust EU institutions tripled within five years. Spaniards have a predominantly negative view regarding the Union, but this attitude is largely determined by the overall economic situation of the country. Statistics record for Spain a percentage of 50% (Eurobarometer, 2012) for citizens who tend to believe that in the next twelve months the living standard will decline significantly as a result of rising unemployment and inflation. The image of the European Union has changed in countries like Italy, France and Poland, however the differences in percentage are considerably smaller. Poland is the only state where eurosceptics are still in the minority. Great Britain also underwent a significant increase in population’ distrust regarding the European Union. Despite Euroscepticism reaches record levels here, the percentage of 69 % recorded by Eurobarometer is only a new confirmation of the country's traditional position in relation to the European Union.

On the other hand, it is interesting to investigate the reasons leading to this phenomenon. Inside the Union, Europeans fears are linked, for example, to the fluctuations in

unemployment and general economic insecurity in the country of origin. After more than five years since the global economic crisis, Europeans feel victims of unfair policies, and the responsibility for this situation belongs, from their point of view, to the state. Moreover, not even local governments enjoy the same popularity, a fact that negatively influences the hopes and expectations for the future. As an example, a percentage of 53 % (Eurobarometer, 2012) of the total EU population believes that things are currently in the wrong direction.

Beyond the statistical results of the investigations carried out in Europe in recent months, it should be noted that the predominantly negative attitude to the European Union is a real phenomenon that grows steadily in intensity and is most likely present in the mind of every citizen. Insecurity felt inside the European Union is indeed a problem that adversely affects its image; however, we can not overlook the fact that over the years investigations have brought to light Eurobarometer results that draw attention to other shortcomings. In areas of Eastern Europe, a high percentage of citizens say they do not know closely the functioning of the European institutions and their powers, while in northern Europe the opposite occurs. Therefore, it is very possible that the unequal distribution of information on the continent to have a share in the current decline in confidence in the European Union.

Results from the surveys are increasingly worrying in all Member States, expressing that while common values are stated, interests are more divergent, especially in times of crisis. In Romania things aren't different. Whether in 2004, the confidence score in the European Union, according to the first Eurobarometer report for Romania, was 74 %, today, this score decreased to less than half. Poverty is the absolute enemy of freedom. You can have freedom of choice, of expression, but sooner or later you will realize that freedom is important when you have the resources to live. Unfortunately, after a period of political exuberance, after realities and illusions, after economic growth and credit with the identity card, after hopes, accession, free travel and second hand cars, the threat of poverty is now lurking for many Romanians, but also for many Greeks, Spaniards, Italians, Portuguese, and Cypriot. And the question of who should pay for the crisis, for austerity, unemployment, for family drama, the answer is obvious. Romanians paid, to a certain extent; for them the purchasing power, in relation to other European citizens, fell and the lack of perspective generates a high distrust in the European way. It is a lesson of history that shows us that nothing is irreversible. "What appeared to be a permanent achievement, unchangeable, a final pass over the barrier without the possibility of returning to history, now seems to be just the peak of a fluctuating rhythm" (Lacroix and Nicolaidis, 2010, p. 78). Anyway, it's clear, the ghost of skepticism is haunting Europe.

### **3. Conclusions**

Euro-scepticism 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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