Abstract

Euroscepticism is a term used loosely used to define opposition to the European Union and its policies, thus including a vast range of attitudinal dimensions. Taking into consideration the distinction between EU-scepticism (opposition to the EU per se), and current-EU-scepticism (scepticism to its current political direction), we investigate from a qualitative and quantitative perspective the attitudes of a specific socio-demographic group (the young generation of students aged 22 to 26 years old) towards the European Union. We have carried out our research in a particular political context: the events surrounding the attempted impeachment of the Romanian president Traian Băsescu and the reactions of EU officials to that matter (June-August 2012). The results suggest that the young generation displays not genuine Euroenthusiasm, but more of a naive Eurooptimism, or even Euroapathy in disguise.

Keywords: public opinion towards the European Union; Euroscepticism; Eurobarometer; Euroenthusiasm.

Romanians are Euroenthusiasts “by definition”. In every public opinion survey carried out by the European Commission since the country’s accession in 2007, the Romanian citizens have stayed above the average in terms of trust, optimism and satisfaction with the direction in which the European Union is going. In this article we investigate, both from a qualitative and quantitative perspective, the attitudes of a specific socio-demographic group (the young generation of students aged 22 to 26 years old) towards the European Union. We have carried out our research in a particular political context: the events surrounding the attempted impeachment of the Romanian president Traian Băsescu and the reactions of EU officials to that matter (June-August 2012).

1. Euroscepticism – an Old, but Never Outdated Issue

Euroscepticism is a rather recent term. For obvious reasons, it was not used during the first decades of European integration, when opponents of integration were referred to as nationalists, “anti-marketeers” (for opponents to the common market in the UK) or downright communists, Gaullists, etc. (Leconte, 2010). Its origins can be traced to the British political discourse, having to do with the British public debate on the European Commission in the...
mid-1980s. The term was popularized later by Margaret Thatcher’s so called “Bruges speech”, given in 1988 at the College of Europe (Leconte, 2010, p. 3) and where she expressed the core tenets of her vision of the future of the EC: “[W]e do not want] a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels... Our aim should not be more and more detailed regulation from the centre” (Thatcher, 1988).

In her speech, M. Thatcher emphasizes on the identity factor, implying to some point a dichotomy between the national and European identity: “Europe will be stronger precisely because it has France as France, Spain as Spain, Britain as Britain, each with its own customs, traditions and identity. It would be folly to try to fit them into some sort of identikit European personality”. (Thatcher, 1988)

From the early 1990s on, as domestic debates on the EU became increasingly polarized in the context of the Maastricht Treaty’s ratification process, the E. expanded to continental Europe, where it became a “catch-all” synonym for any form of opposition or reluctance towards the EU (Leconte, 2010, pp. 3-4).

The literature on Euroscepticism has developed under the influence of several factors: the decline of the permissive consensus (starting with difficulties in ratifying the Maastricht treaty); the tendency to resort to referenda to ratify treaties, which offered citizens an opportunity to express their feelings of discontent or scepticism; the Eastward enlargement; and most recently, the crisis of the European Union and the protracted period of economic hardships.

In everyday language, even in some pieces of academic writing, the term of Euroscepticism is loosely used to define opposition to the European Union and its policies, thus including a vast range of attitudinal dimensions. Some scholars have tried to shed some light in this general confusion and have made valuable distinctions on the issue.

In a study from 2011, de Vreese et. al are against the use of the umbrella-term “Euroscepticism” – “In this study we posit that – given the complex nature of the European integration project – it would be naive to speak about EU attitudes as a one-dimensional concept” (de Vreese et. al., 2011, p. 244). Instead of identifying Euro sceptic attitudes in general, the authors map five attitude dimensions, as unique components of the overall notion of EU attitudes. Emotional responses represent the first of these dimensions, referring to feelings of fear of and threat by the EU. The second dimension refers to a sense of European identity. The third dimension relates to the performance and the democratic and financial performance of the EU and its institutions. The fourth dimension focuses on utilitarian attitudes such as general support and benefit evaluations as well as more post-materialist utilitarian considerations with regard to the EU. The fifth and final dimension refers to a strengthening of the EU in the future and reflects support based on agreement with extended decision-making competencies and policy transfer as well as with further integration (de Vreese et. al., 2011, p. 258).

One of the most adequate distinctions was made by Ales Chmelar, in 2010. In the general acception of EU officials, Eurosceptics are those individuals or groups that are against the EU and its current developments. Nevertheless, reality imposes many shades of grey in between. By having this observation as a starting point, A. Chmelar distinguishes between EU-scepticism (opposition to the EU per se), current-EU-scepticism (scepticism to its current political direction), and Eurosceptical nationalists or chauvinists, who are against the shift of democratic powers from nation-states towards the EU. Many Eurosceptics, EU-sceptics and current-EU-sceptics may also overlap, but they simply cannot be put under one umbrella-term.
One common conclusion of the many definitions of Euroscepticism is the fact that it varies in intensity. For example, Taggard & Szerbiak (2008, p. 7) distinguish between the “Hard” and the “Soft” expression of Euroscepticism. “Hard Euroscepticism is a principled opposition to the EU and the European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership, or whose policies toward the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integrations as currently conceived”, whereas soft Euroscepticism is based on discontent with certain policies or aspects of the integration process.

Petr Kopecky & Cas Mudde (2002) responded to the Hard and Soft distinction with a critique that emphasized the difference between underlying attitudes to the European integration as a principle and attitudes towards the EU, and came up with a fourfold distinction between Euroenthusiasts, Eurorejects, Eurosceptics, and Europragmatists (Kopecky & Mudde, 2002, p. 303). Euroenthusiasts are parties or groups that support the general ideas of European integration and believe that the EU is or will soon become the institutionalization of these ideas. Eurosceptics support the general ideas of European integration, but are pessimistic about the EU’s current and/or future reflection of these ideas. Eurorejects subscribe neither to the ideas underlying the process of European integration nor to the EU. Finally, Europragmatists do not support the general ideas of European integration underlying the EU, nor do they necessarily oppose them, yet they do support the EU. In general, this group will contain parties that do not hold a firm ideological opinion on European integration, and on the basis of pragmatic (often utilitarian) considerations decide to assess the EU positively because they deem it profitable for their own country or constituency.

In this paper, we take into consideration A. Chmelar’s distinction between EU-scepticism and current-EU-scepticism, which can be associated with the Hard-Soft terminology of Taggard and Szerbiak. Besides, it is important to emphasize that Eurobarometer questions on Euroscepticism implicitly take into consideration the above-mentioned forms of Euroscepticism. The concepts are also replicated in the debates taking place in the academia and in the public discourse.

2. Euroscepticism: Sources, Causes and Explanations

If Euroscepticism is unanimously acknowledged as a fact, its sources, causes and mechanisms are largely unclear. Four main directions can be identified: perceived benefits of European integration (utilitarian theories), identity-related theories, party-based Euroscepticism, media studies on the role played by mass communication media in the amplification of Eurosceptic feelings. We will briefly review these directions in order to create a theoretical background for our research and the interpretation of its results.

The utilitarian model, first proposed by Gabel & Palmer (1995, in Gabel, 1998, p. 336) argued that EU citizens in different socioeconomic situations experience different costs and benefits from integrative policy; that these differences in economic welfare shape their attitudes toward integration; and consequently, that citizens’ support for integration is positively related to their welfare gains from integrative policy. The support for European integration translates into the evaluation of citizens of the extent to which supranational institutions allow national political elites to provide political, social, psychological and economic security and well-being.
Although utilitarian theories remain the most popular, some scholars have turned to alternative explanations. Lauren McLaren (2005; 2006) argues that the utilitarian theory fails to address the more fundamental reasons variation in support for integration. The researcher finds a key-factor related to identity. As long as national identity is able to provide people with a basis for self-esteem and self-value, it is likely that these people will be opposed to threats to that national identity. Some find the EU to be more threatening to their national identity and culture than others, thus explaining variations (McLaren, 2006, p. 18). The identity approach assumes that economic factors do not have the most important influence on a person’s well-being. What matters the most is the psychological state of comfort and of feeling part of a social group, especially a national group. Accordingly, group loyalties and attachments are significant predictors of attitudes towards the EU (Garry & Tilley, 2009, p. 362). Taking a more nuanced stance, Garry and Tilley (2009) argue that factors relating to identity and to economics are important predictors of attitudes towards the European Union (EU) and argue that that the impact of identity is conditional on economic context:

First, living in a member state that receives relatively high levels of EU funding acts as a ‘buffer’, diluting the impact of an exclusive national identity on Euroscepticism. Second, living in a relatively wealthy member state, with its associated attractiveness for economic migrants, increases the salience of economic xenophobia as a driver of sceptical attitudes. (Garry & Tilley, 2009, p. 361)

In the authors’ opinion, the salience of identity factors in a member state is a result of that member state’s wealth and the extent to which that member state is a beneficiary of EU funding. More wealth leads to a greater likelihood of economic migrants, which, in turn, raises the potency of economic xenophobia as a driver of Euroscepticism. More EU financial benefits appear to act as a buffer, cushioning the impact of exclusive national identity on views on integration.

Another distinct category of research papers focus on party-based Euroscepticism, which “expresses the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration” (Taggart, 1998, in Abts & Krouel, 2007, p. 254). The ideological location of parties influences their position on European integration. There is a systematic, relatively strong relationship with the positions they take on the two dimensions that structure domestic competition: the Left/Right dimension, concerned with economic redistribution, welfare, and government regulation of the economy; and the cultural Gal/Tan dimension, concerned with lifestyle issues, community values and authority-related issues (Hooghe & Vachudova, 2005, p. 5). De Vries and Edwards (2009) argue that the growing uncertainties about the future of European integration among national publics are increasingly politicized by Eurosceptical elites on both the extreme right and left of the political spectrum. Their work proves that Eurosceptic cues are found on both extremes, but for different reasons. Whereas right-wing extremist parties oppose European integration with the defence of “national sovereignty” and successfully mobilize national identity considerations against the EU, left-wing extremist parties resist further integration in Europe on the basis of the neoliberal character of the project and cue voters against the EU on the basis of economic insecurity arguments.

The fourth line of research focuses on the formation of opinions in the public sphere and the role played by the media. By analyzing online media on the occasion of the European Parliament elections, Wilde et al. (2010) approach Euroscepticism as part of “existential debates” contesting the EU or European integration in terms of polity. The authors found that
online campaigning reinforces the electoral disconnect between EU citizens and the EU policy-making process by focusing either on domestic campaigns or on existential issues concerning the legitimacy of the EU. Euroscepticism is a form of opposition that relies on media infrastructures for salience or amplification. (de Wilde, Michailidu & Trenz, 2010, p. 17).

Claes de Vreese (2005) analyzed how the media influence the variation of public support for the European integration. Cynicism at the level of the political debate and political elites may help to understand why citizens do not support or even reject specific policy proposals, such as those put forward in referenda. More precisely, exposure to strategic news (news that focuses on winning and losing and is driven by ‘war and games’ language) leads to Euro-cynicism. However, this effect is conditional upon two factors: the pervasiveness of strategically framed news reporting and individual level characteristics, such as the degree of political sophistication (de Vreese, 2005, pp. 12-13).

Trentz and de Wilde (2012) posit that Euroscepticism appears to be less marginal than is often assumed. It can take a prominent place in political debates, without necessarily being mobilized by political parties. The authors propose that Euroscepticism should be approached in terms of the scope and contents of public discourse that primarily unfolds through the mass media. “Euroscepticism is unfolding as the counterpart of EU legitimation discourse” (Trentz & de Wilde, 2012, p. 3).

3. Overview of Previous Empirical Research on Euroscepticism

Empirical research on Euroscepticism is done almost exclusively with quantitative methods; such a choice is consistent with the investigation of the phenomenon at mass level. Most studies are either cross-country, or depicting the evolution of Eurosceptic attitudes and patterns over the years and can be divided into three categories. The first category is a combination between secondary data analysis on Eurobarometers and the analysis of a different corpus (national surveys, written texts/manifestos, voting behavior etc.). The second category of studies is carried out on original data, other than Eurobarometers. The third category includes extended and thorough analysis of Eurobarometer data, comprising multi-annual and cross-country studies.

Qualitative research in this field is relatively scarce. Some studies make a compromise between quantitative and qualitative approaches by using a type of qualitative content analysis. It is the case of Büyükbay & Merdzanovic (2012), who investigated the main trends in public attitudes towards the EU in the candidate states Turkey and Bosnia Herzegovina by examining party programmes and transcripts from parliamentary and scientific debates, and other articles. Natasza Styczyńska (2012) used the same method when studying the link between the Polish identity and anti-European attitudes in the case of political parties, organizations and the media.

We would like to mention the interesting research project of J. Hughes, G. Sasse and C. Gordon (2002), which consisted of large-scale elite interviews conducted in 1999–2000 in key regional cities of Hungary, Slovenia, and Estonia. The study included people from regional and local government, business, the mass media, and, to a lesser extent, the cultural intelligentsia, up to a maximum of 75 in each city. The interview (as a method for studying Euroscepticism) proved to be valid and useful. The results showed that sub national elites tend to view EU membership as a national issue and irrelevant for their level, and are poorly informed
about EU activities that benefit them. The authors suggested that this disengagement of subnational elites constitutes a space for the mobilization of Euroscepticism from below (Hughes, Sasse & Gordon, 2002).

Quantitative data are highly relevant in emphasizing the underlying trends and making cross-country comparisons; however, it is our opinion that qualitative methods are useful in gasping the nuances and intimate connections between different factors, shedding light upon the reasons and arguments that back up Eurosceptic attitudes. Due to the reasons mentioned above, we have chosen to combine quantitative and qualitative methods for a more comprehensive perspective.

4. Romania’s Level of Euroscepticism – Eurobarometer Results

In this section of the paper, we compare results in the standard Eurobarometers during 2007-2012, in order to depict the evolution of Euroscepticism and to identify some current trends. We take into consideration the following indicators of Euroenthusiasm (or its opposite – Euroscepticism): trust in the EU, trust in the European institutions versus trust in national institutions, the estimation of the right/wrong direction, and the attitude regarding the future of the EU.

The results of the most recent Standard Eurobarometer survey available (autumn 2012) are fairly stable for most indicators: the situation of economy at the national and European levels is still perceived negatively by large majorities of Europeans; wide differences still exist between EU countries despite some narrowing trends. Expectations for the twelve months to come are also somewhat more pessimistic, especially when it comes to the national economy. The economic and financial crisis continues to influence Europeans’ answers throughout the survey; this is especially the case regarding their main concerns at personal, national and EU level. A third of Europeans that they trust the European Union, and this proportion has slightly increased since spring 2012. The European Union continues to be seen as the actor best able to take effective action to tackle the effects of the crisis. Despite a slight fall, a large majority of Europeans continue to consider that the EU has sufficient power and tools to defend the economic interests of Europe in the global economy (EB78, European Commission, 2012).

Historically speaking, Eurobarometers indicate a constant decrease in trust in the European Union, both at the European level and in Romania. In the fall of 2007, less than a year after Romania’s accession to the EU, 68% of Romanians stated that they trust the EU, meaning 20 percentage points above the European average. In comparison, the survey conducted in the neighbour state, Bulgaria, indicated that only 58% of citizens admitted to have trust in the EU. Nevertheless, Romanians’ degree of trust has decreased constantly since 2007, with the only exception of the year 2009, as shown in the chart below. The lowest degrees of trust have been recorded for the end of the year 2012, when only 45% of respondents answered they have trust in the EU. But even then, the degree of trust in Romania remained 12 percents above the European average of 33%.
The EU27 average indicates that trust in the European Union has increased since spring 2012 (33%, +2 percentage points), the largest rise since the Standard Eurobarometer survey of spring 2008 (EB69). Standing at 57%, distrust has fallen by three percentage points since spring 2012. Although the downward trend has stopped, the European Union is nevertheless still far from regaining all the ground it has lost since the autumn 2009 survey (EB72). The trust-distrust ratio, measured at -24 in this autumn 2012 survey, is the second worst ratio ever measured in the history of the Eurobarometer (EB78, European Commission, 2012).

In total, the EU currently enjoys majority of trust in seven Member States: Bulgaria (60% versus 24%), Lithuania (49% versus 37%), Poland (48% versus 42%), Denmark (48% versus 46%), Estonia (46% versus 38%), Malta (46% versus 34%) and Romania (45% versus 40%). Distrust is therefore the majority position in 20 EU countries, led by Greece (81%), Spain (72%), the UK (69%), Cyprus (64%), Sweden (62%), the Czech Republic (60%) and Germany (59%).

Only a minority of Europeans trust their national institutions. Levels of trust have stabilised after increasing slightly in spring 2012: 27% of Europeans tend to trust their national government, versus 68% of respondents who distrust it. In what the national parliament is concerned, 28% trust it, whereas 66% do not.

In the case of Romania, we can notice that trust in the European institutions remains relatively high, above the EU average, whereas trust in the national institutions remains significantly lower. An all time low in trust was recorded in the fall of 2011, when only 9% of Romanians trusted the national Parliament and only 10% trusted the national government. In spring 2012, trust in the national institutions increased to 16%, respectively 27%, but remained 30 percentage points lower than trust in European institutions.
At the European level, trust in the central institutions is decreasing, with a slight improvement in 2012. The highest levels of trust for all four institutions taken into consideration (the European Central Bank, the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament, the European Commission) were recorded in 2008. Although a renewal of trust seems to have been set in motion in 2012, these institutions are still far from regaining the trust that they enjoyed before the crisis. The European Parliament still enjoys the highest levels of trust from all European institutions (44% in autumn 2012, +4).

Results can be correlated with the answer to another question in the standard Eurobarometer, regarding the direction in which things are going in the EU. Despite a positive attitude towards the future of the Union, opinions stating that the EU is on a wrong track have increased constantly since 2008. The economic crisis, the problems faced by the euro zone and other events that took place in 2011 strongly affected the perception that the EU is heading in the right direction. If in the spring of 2011 (EB 75), almost half (46%) of the European citizens were optimistic when it came to the direction things were going in the EU, in the autumn of 2011 the drop in percentage was of ~ 8 points. In autumn 2012, 52% of Europeans believed that the direction is wrong, and only 22 percent believed the opposite. Only three Member
States majorities continue to believe that things are going in the right direction in the European Union (compared with five in spring 2012): Bulgaria (49% versus 11%), Lithuania (40% versus 20%) and Latvia (35% versus 23%).

Romanians make no exception to the general trend, as their optimism about the direction the EU is headed dropped to 46% in autumn 2011. In 2012, opinions in Romania have hardened and are now predominantly negative (30%, -10, versus 34%), for the first time since EU accession. The abrupt decrease in trust in Romania has a double explanation: the exposure to international events related to the euro crisis and the harsh measures adopted by the Government and which were perceived as being imposed by the EU central authorities.

Figure 4. EU: right direction/ wrong direction.

After the sharp decline in optimism in autumn 2011, the beginning 2012 brought a slight upturn in the public opinion’s expectations on the future of the EU. In the autumn, half of Europeans (+1 since spring 2012) are optimistic about the future of the EU, while 45% are pessimistic. Pessimism is now dominant in eight countries: France (52% pessimists), Greece (71%), Portugal (64%), Cyprus (59%), Hungary (57%), UK (56%), Czech Republic (56%), Italy (47%). Optimism is therefore dominant in the remaining 19 Member States, with the highest levels in Denmark (72%), Poland (66%), Lithuania (65%) and Bulgaria (64%). Romania remains fairly optimistic (+11 percentage points above average) when assessing the future of the EU, but the values are constantly dropping. The evolution of positive opinions on the future of the EU is shown in the chart below.
We must emphasize a paradox: although the majority of Europeans believe that EU is heading in the wrong direction, and only 33% of them trust the European Union, they still consider there are reasons for optimism regarding the future. It is difficult to speculate on the causes of these differences. Maybe the next surveys will shed a light on this matter. Until then, we believe the paradox to be the expression of sheer optimism. Although the present is unsatisfying, hope for a better future is diminished, but not completely eroded.

5. Methodology

Our research project aims to investigate the existence of Eurosceptic feelings at the level of the public opinion in Romania, in the particular context of the economic crisis and the 2012 political crisis – the events surrounding the impeachment of the Romanian president Traian Băsescu and the reactions of EU officials.

As background information, the political events took place in June and July 2012 and started with a series of measures taken by the Parliament preliminary to the referendum. On the 3rd of July 2012, the ombudsman was revoked by the Senate. The following day, the Government diminished the attributions of the Constitutional Court. On the 6th of July, the Parliament suspended the president Traian Băsescu, with a majority of 256 votes supporting the decision. These political events triggered a reaction from several EU officials. J. M. Barosso, on behalf of the European Commission, expressed his “concern with the situation in Romania”. Joseph Daul, the president of the European’s People Party, made a statement saying that the events had the characteristics of a coup d’état. Germany labeled the attempted impeachment of the President as “unacceptable”, due to violation of the fundamental principles of any constitutional state. The Chancellor A. Merkel said she would support the EU in taking the right measures against Romania. The European Commission made a list of 11 official requests, addressed to the Prime Minister V. Ponta, in order to readjust the situation and comply with EU standards.

Taking into account this heated political context and the involvement of EU actors in the internal confrontations, we initiated a research project having as main objectives:

1. To identify the specificity of Euroscepticism in Romania, with three main possibilities: radical opposition to the EU and European integration; disappointment with the current design
of the EU, and a strong desire for change and improvement inside the Union; or mild, passive, Euroenthusiasm (the logic of “the EU is good, so we have no objections what-so-ever”).

II. To identify the causes for the sharp decline in support for the EU, with the following possibilities: the turn to the worse taken by the economic situation in the EU, the measures of austerity imposed by the Government in line with EU directives, EU officials’ interventions during the political events surrounding T. Băsescu’s impeachment, or the combined action of all the above.

We focused on four research questions:

RQ1. What is the level of Euroscepticism among young people in Romania, in the context of the economic crisis?

RQ2. What is the influence of the economic and financial crisis on the attitudes and perceptions of the young people in what the EU is concerned?

RQ3. What is the influence of the political and economic situation in Romania on the attitudes and perceptions of the young people towards the EU?

RQ4. How do young people imagine the future of the EU on the short term and on the long term?

In the following sections of this paper, we will focus on answering the last two research questions. We carried out 4 focus groups between the 12th and the 20th of December 2012, reuniting a total of 28 students from different masters’ programmes, aged between 22 to 26 years. All students live, work and study in Bucharest, and they are enrolled in some of the most prestigious state universities in the Capital and in the whole country. We included questions related to the levels of trust in the EU and its institutions versus trust in Romanian institutions, the economic crisis and its influence on the attitudes toward the EU, the economic crisis in Romania, the attempted impeachment of the state president Traian Băsescu and the reactions of EU officials and the future of the European Union.

6. Data analysis

In the introductive section of the focus groups, we asked the participants to associate a color of the traffic light with the European Union, in order to assess the overall perception on the EU and its current development. Most of the answers received suggested that the EU is in an uncertain situation, cautiously waiting and considering its future steps. This situation was associated with the colors yellow and orange. The key-words here were “no risks taken” (Andrei), “lack of change” (Ana), “at a stop” (Andrei”), “uncertainty” (Lavinia, Ana). The most pessimistic view anticipated that the worst is yet to come: “until now, the solutions have been more of a postponement of the crisis than a way of solving it” (Vlad). It is important to emphasize that no one associated the color red with the long-term future of the EU. Those who chose green argued that in the more or less distant future the economic development of the EU will definitely improve (Andreea, Beatrix, Andrei N.). One argument was that “there are a lot of opportunities for us, young people to travel and study abroad” (Oana).

Taking into consideration this attitude of mild pessimism, we investigated whether the political situation in Romania had any influence whatsoever on the evaluations of the European Union.
The participants were asked to assess whether the statements of EU officials on the impeachment of president Traian Basescu had been legitimate/abusive, welcomed/unwelcomed and why. This evaluation was biased by the individual’s own opinion on the impeachment:

I agree with the statements. I find it normal for any state, anywhere in this world. People didn’t plan this. I believe that the impeachment was a political scenario. (Roxana)

They tempered the Romania mass media. [...] I want to see that certain values and principles are respected and the statements came as a confirmation of my way of thinking. I said to myself: if these intelligent, powerful people from many countries say these things, it means the Constitution has really been broken.” (Oana).

They [the EU officials] ignored somehow diplomacy in order to make sure that the law is respected and I feel relieved that Romania managed to overcome the risk of turning back into the year 1989. (Mircea).

Many answers reflected the view that the EU plays the role of a watch dog of Romanian democracy and underlined the righteous authority expressed by the European institutions. The EU was depicted as a problem solver (“The moment the EU officials stepped in, the conflict was settled and a solution was found [...] We couldn’t have done it from the inside.”- Diana), a rescuer (“Practically, it drew attention that something is not OK [...] they told us to respect democracy”- Sorina) and a driving force (“I found the pressure to be rather normative”– Andreea) at the same time.

Only a few answers expressed the opposite view, that the intervention was abusive and unappreciated:

I am appalled. (Florin)

Their position on the matter was clearly an overreaction to what really happened in Romania. (Mihai)

The EU awakened a little late to see what is happening in our back yard. All these statements seem designed to support the president. Until now, we have had many problems and the EU seemed to be asleep; we have many problems now and EU is still sleeping. (Andrei).

As we have mentioned, the head of the EU commission José Manuel Barosso sent a harsh letter to Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta, urging him to stop political infighting and ensure that constitutional judges can do their work without threats. He also expressed deep concern about developments relating to the Constitutional Court’s validation of the referendum. We asked the participants in the focus groups to express their opinion on the 11-point to-do-list addressed to the Prime Minister. The answers reflected the same logic as above. Barosso’s list was “the sensible thing to do” (Carmen), “logical and natural” (Gabi), “a legitimate pro-stability intervention” (Andreea). Some respondents chose the middle ground and argued that the legitimacy of Barosso’s list depends on its character: recommendations versus directives (Florin, Mihai, Andrei N). The frame of the punishing Europe is easily distinguishable:

Like you would scold a baby. (Ioana)

I believe that until 2010, when the trend was in favor of a naïf Euroenthusiasm, we saw the EU like the God from the New Testament: good, loving, rewarding, whereas after the referendum on impeachment we started referring to the EU as the God from the Old Testament: filled with vengeance. (Mihai)
Despite all these considerations, there was general consent that this episode did not influence personal opinion and attitude towards the EU. It was said that official reactions from EU representatives simply match reality. “It is good to be told when you are wrong” (Carmen). Furthermore, the aforementioned statement induced even feelings of comfort:

All of this proved they are with us; we are not left alone to do whatever we please. (Gabi)

At that very moment, I felt we are not alone. (Oana)

The respondents seemed relieved and content that there was an objective, watching eye over Romania. No one admitted feeling differently (meaning negatively) because of the recent political developments. Overall, the attitude towards the EU remained open and positive.

Another issue that was vividly debated was connected to the medium-term future of the EU. When asked to imagine the impact of the economic crisis on the future of the EU in the next 10 years, respondents thought of many different aspects of this future: more rigidity, uncertainty, a threat against unity, a multi-speed Union, huge gaps between national economies, demographic problems.

The worst case scenarios depicted by the most pessimistic respondents described a European Union inflexible in its admission criteria, keeping a vigilant eye on all the member states. According to this vision, trust will be forever gone from the European public sphere and the member states that are not able to face the great pressure of complying would be rejected. Uncertainty will cast its shadow over collaborative relations: “I believe there are problems everywhere and it depends whether all states are willing to work together to fix them or act individually.” (Ana). One particular evolution includes economic unity, and political action confined to the borders of the national state.

The positive scenarios, slightly more dominant, included the continuity of the enlargement process (Mihai, Elena, Sorina, Vlad). Also, already accomplished integration is viewed as being irreversible (Mirecu). Other answers mention overcoming the economic crisis successfully and slow evolution (Corina).

Nevertheless, when asked specifically whether the euro crisis could lead to a stop or even dissolution of the European project, even the most optimistic respondents give a second thought to this problem. Integration could find itself in a point of immobility (if not taking a step back), due to economic, political and religious aspects. EU could face an existential dilemma:

Nevertheless, I think this was a lesson for the EU and the other member states that reached this point, and I thing that relations will grow cold in the future. (Gabi)

It is the beginning. The beginnig of us standing at a crossroad. (Andrei)

From an alternative point of view, this is the most appropriate moment for a reengineering or innovation of the EU, which further unites the member states (Vlad, Mirecu, Irina, Nico). The role of the member states in this process should be to lead the change, provided they are powerful enough: „It is a problem of geopolitics.” (Alina), „The influential will lead” (Stefania).

At the individual level, it is questionable whether the crisis has made people more aware of the impact that European decisions have on their lives or not. The most frequent answer is “yes, but...”. Yes, but it depends on the extent to which mass media will cover European subjects (Ana, Gabi). Yes, only if people overcome the problem of the insufficient level of
education and/or information, especially in the rural areas. Yes, but it depends on individual aspects and on the frequency of getting in contact with European affairs. "As people get more and more into contact with anything EU-related, they understand better what is happening and its importance" (Oana). Two factors can drive this process: opinion leaders (mostly in the small communities, where word-of-mouth plays a great role) and the mass media, through their educational nature.

7. Discussion

The current opinion on the European Union is mildly optimistic. As we have previously shown in this paper, the participants in the focus groups associated the EU with the colors yellow and orange, symbols of a state of uncertainty. Nevertheless, the most pessimistic view, according to which things will take a turn to the worst in the near future, is almost absent. There are times of caution, alert, increased attention to details, but the economic crisis is not seen by our target group as a serious threat to the EU legitimacy. In other words, Euroenthusiasm still exists, although it is tempered by the acknowledgement of certain temporary difficulties.

When we compare the results of our study with the average results in Romania, as shown in the standard Eurobarometers, we see that young people’s opinions are somehow distinct. Their Euroenthusiasm is the result of the lifestyle of today’s students. They have the opportunity to travel and study wherever they choose to in Europe. As a consequence, they associate increased mobility and cosmopolitanism with EU membership. The respondents’ Euroenthusiasm is doubled by strong disapproval of the local ways of doing politics. The participants in the focus groups felt the need to criticize the Romanian political class and the Romanian institutions as much as they reinforced their trust in the European ones. This attitude is similar with the one at the national level: since the 2007 accession, the Romanians have shown a considerable amount of trust in the central EU institutions and a corresponding distrust in the national ones.

The students’ general positive opinion on the EU was not altered by the statements made by EU officials in a delicate moment for the political situation in Romania. The EU is seen as a watchdog of democracy, as a problem solver, a legitimate actor in our internal political affairs. This reflects a rather passive attitude of accepting that Romania cannot, and more importantly should not solve its internal problems alone. It is the manifestation of a lasting discourse frame, that of “Europe that punishes us”. In the words of one participant, the EU needs to scold us like a child.

Concerning the future of the EU, two scenarios take form. The worst case scenario, as depicted by the participants in the focus groups, anticipates a more rigid EU, displaying a considerable degree of uncertainty. The member states would allegedly be divided according to their own interests. Under the influence of the economic crisis, those states that do not comply with European standards will be firmly rejected, in order to avoid another “Greek situation”.

The best case scenario is dominated by one tendency (the continuity of the enlargement process) and one fact: the irreversibility of European integration. The latter is, undoubtedly, the most significant “symptom” of Euroenthusiasm at the level of the public opinion. The crisis may have spread some doubt on the short term well-being of EU citizens, but abandoning the European project seems yet unthinkable. We did not receive any single answer on the pos-
sible dissolution of the European Union. The crossroads where the EU is currently standing is seen as an opportunity for innovation and growth rather than the beginning of the end.

8. Conclusions

The young generation in Romania differs to some extent from the majority of Romanians, at least in terms of their highly positive attitude towards the European Union. Comparative to their European fellows, Romanians are one of the most Euroenthusiast members; nevertheless, the most recent surveys show that the trend is decreasing sharply. The majority of Romanians are more skeptical and critical; they trust the EU and its institutions less and start reassessing the benefits of their country’s membership to the EU.

The students that took part in our study are educated individuals, who are used to traveling a lot, to meeting and making friends in other European countries, and who appreciate the opportunity to study abroad, through Erasmus and other similar programs. In this context, they show great trust in the EU as a refined institutional mechanism. This attitude is very different from the cynical and indifferent approach that they have with regard to Romania’s evolution. From their perspective, the only possible solution for our country is to comply better and faster with the European standards. “Compliance” is the key-word here; the students, as a specific category of Romanian citizens, embrace what seems to be a complex of inferiority. The “big league” is somewhere outside the borders of Romania, and they sum it up by vaguely calling it “the European Union” or “Europe”. This is the dark, demotivating side of Euroenthusiasm – the argument that the European Union is trustworthy not for its intrinsic value, but for being better than Romania, and for having the capacity to guide and scold us like a parent or a teacher. What the young generation appears to display is more of a naive Eurooptimism, even Euroapathy in disguise.

References


Online sources