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Saved by the Union: Romanians' Attitudes toward the European Union

Abstract

In this study we show that, in the aftermath of the economic crisis, Romanians remain among the most enthusiastic citizens of the European Union, in what concerns trust in the European institutions, projections for the future, the image of the EU and general attitudes toward the union. Relying on data provided by eu-robarometers since the Romanian integration, we argue that the reasons for this peculiar position of Romanians within the EU is largely due to how people evaluate the economic and political performance of their own country: from evaluations of the economy to trust in national institutions, Romanians are very pessimistic about how their country handles the present situation and about perspectives for the future. In this context, they turn to the European Union as to a Savior, who represents their hope and promise for a better future, for economic prosperity and security. This is the reason why, more than five years after the beginning of the financial crisis, Romanians are still among the most optimistic citizens of Europe.

Key words: European attitudes, European identity, trust, European institutions

1. Introduction

After the European integration, Romanians' attitudes toward Europe, the European future, and the European institutions changed, in the direction of a more moderate and rational approach to the European project in general, especially in the context of the economic crisis; nonetheless, Romanians still remain among the most optimistic and enthusiastic European citizens, significantly more in favor of the European project than the majority of Europeans.

This article aims at finding plausible explanations about the general level of support of the European Union in Romania, in the context of the aftermath of the economic crisis, and by comparison with the general support at the Union level. The general context of the crisis also generates a crisis of credibility in the EU, often associated with of the perception of a lack of internal regulation (Dobrescu, 2013, p. 130).

In a historical context dominated by the raise of euroscepticism, not necessarily as a fact reflected in the general level of support of the EU by the European citizens, but especially in terms of perceptions regarding the future of the European Union, the newly integrated countries, such as Romania, manifest some of the symptoms of euroscepticism in general, but have a more positive approach and attitude toward the EU. Some of the academic literature

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trying to explain this phenomenon offer rather historical explanations, related to the very high level of euroenthusiasm from before the European integration, which diminished slowly in time, after the inclusion of the country in the EU. Nonetheless, we consider that authors sometimes ignore the economic factor (perceptions about the state of the economy at the national and union levels), the internal (national) political situation, which translate into the general level of trust/distrust in the most important national and European institutions.

Another important factor addressed in this study is the feeling of belonging to the European Union, or the feeling of being European. We argue that the European identity is a rather fuzzy concept, unstable in time as general perception, at least for the newly integrated citizens, such as Romanians. We will discuss issues of cultural versus instrumental European identity, and their role in the configuration of general attitudes toward the European Union.

In this context, by using secondary data analysis of Eurobarometers data since 2007, we try to offer a more comprehensive explanation of the attitudes of Romanian citizens toward the European Union.

In the context of the economic crisis, Romanian academic literature (Bârgăoanu, 2011; Negrea, 2011; Radu, 2012; Dobrescu & Durach, 2014) suggests that the crisis favored the crystallization and consolidation of eurosceptic feelings, and even an identity crisis for the citizens. We argue that Romanians' attitudes toward EU became rather moderate, as a result of the diminishing enthusiasm, normal after the integration, and regained momentum, to some extent, in the last years, as a result of increasing distrust in the national main institutions (Government and Parliament).

2. Attitudes towards the European Union

Citizens' attitudes toward the European Union have been a constant concern of European officials, as well as of scholars, since they are directly related to the legitimacy of the European project. In the context of the financial crisis, the legitimacy deficit of the EU has been given an even greater amount of attention, because of the threat of the raising eurosceptic feelings among the citizens.

When analyzing attitudes toward the EU, both public and academic discourses changed from *citizen support* (Duch & Taylor, 1997) to *euroscepticism* (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2001; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2005) over the last decades. Both concepts are rather vague and need further clarifications.

Defined as a phenomenon that express an opposition toward the process of European integration (Kopecky & Mudde, 2002) or, more narrowly, "as opposition toward a specific policy or integration effort", euroscepticism "may be just one facet of public opinion toward the EU" (Boomgaarden et al, 2011, p. 2). Nonetheless, euroscepticism has become the buzzword largely used when discussing attitudes toward the EU.

Starting from the original definition of Taggart (1998, p. 366), as expressing "the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration", euroscepticism has been later classified as *hard* or *soft* (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2001), which made the distinction between a clear rejection of the entire European project, and a "qualified opposition" to the EU on specific policies or decisions.

Both support and eurosceptic attitudes are facets of the same coin and were considered as *diffuse* or *specific* (Gabel, 1998; Hewstone, 1986), or having an *utilitarian* or *affective* nature

(Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970). The utilitarian dimension refers to the evaluation by the citizens of the costs and benefits of the integration (we will further see a similar distinction with regard to the European identity), whereas the affective one refers to the emotional responses to the EU. Regardless of the form they take, feelings and attitudes toward the EU have been shown to fluctuate (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2010), specially in the context of dramatic economic changes.

We argue that support or eurosceptic attitudes toward the EU are related to various factors, among which some of the most pervasive influence power could be attributed to the evaluation of national economy (from an utilitarian perspective), as well as the general feeling of European identity (from an affective perspective). In practice, it is almost impossible to differentiate between the costs-benefits and the emotional dimensions of people's feelings and thoughts about the EU; this is the reason why a research should take into consideration both perspectives, when discussing the multifaceted nature of EU attitudes.

There have been various attempts to operationalize support or eurosceptic attitudes toward the EU, the most commonly cited being related to five dimensions: feelings of fear and threat by the EU, a sense of European identity, performance and democratic functioning of the EU, supports and benefits evaluations, and support for further integration (Boomgaarden et. al., 2011; Spanje & deVreese, 2011). We argue that, related to those, trust in national institutions (as a result of evaluating national government performance), correlated with other dimensions, could play an important role in how people relate to the European Union. At the same time, we take into account Habermas' idea that citizens have somehow developed two *personae*, one that represents himself/herself as a European citizen contributing to the very process of creation of the European Union, and the other – being a citizen of his/her country, as a well established nation state. (Habermas, 2012, pp. 95-96) This means that people's representations of both European and national images, institutions, economic evaluations, etc. play an important role in developing attitudes toward the European Union in general.

3. Toward a European Identity

The concept of European identity has seen a lot of transformations since its birth, mainly due to its vague and volatile nature. In order to circumscribe the term, one should rely on the notion of "multiple identities" or "different self-construals [that] may coexist within the same individual, available to be activated at different times or in different situations" (Brewer & Gardner, 1996, p. 83). Thus, the European identity is but one of the various layers of identity Europeans hold simultaneously (Bruter, 2005; Risse, 2010). In other words, when taking European identity into account for explaining different phenomena, one should acknowledge that people may have loyalties toward their nations, as well and simultaneously as/for Europe and the European community.

Most of the theories regarding the European identity rely on the commonly accepted distinction between its civic vs. cultural components (Bruter, 2005; Wintle, 2005; Inthorn, 2006), to which an instrumental layer has been added by some authors (Cinerella, 1997; Ruiz Himenez et al, 2004; Schoen, 2008). The civic European identity refers to citizens' sense of belonging to the EU from an institutional point of view (mostly economic and political dimensions) (Bruter, 2005, 2009), or people's commitment to the shared values of the Union (Weiler, 1999). Cultural identity relies on the general feeling perception of citizens that they feel rather

European than non-European (Bruter, 2005), “based on ethno-cultural factors generated through a long-term historical process” (Udrea, 2014, p. 56). The instrumental approach largely relates to citizens’ evaluation of the benefits (potential gains and losses) provided by the very fact of belonging to the European Union.

It has been argued that the more people perceive weaknesses of their country in the international arena (the lack of a strong national voice in international context), the more they identify with the European Union (Gabel & Palmer, 1995; Gabel, 1998). We argue that the same stands for general economic and political “performance” of national institutions: the more people distrust the most important institutions of their country (such as the Government and Parliament), the more they tend to trust the European institutions, basically looking for some sort of “salvation” outside the country. At the same time, it has been stated that nowadays euroscepticism focused on alleged bureaucratic intrusions and the waste of resources of the European institutions, as well as on a sense of identity loss that would result from the European unification (Verhofstadt, 2012/2009, p. 223).

The feeling of being European is closely related to the national loyalties. There are different approaches to the nature of the relationship between national and European identities: some scholars have argued that collective identities are conflicting and exclusive, competing against each other, while others believe that people are perfectly happy with multiple identities (Arts & Halman, 2006; Dufek, 2009). Most of the time, researchers agree that the European identity is rather developed as a secondary layer of identity, added to the national (or even local, regional) identity. This is mainly due to the fact that “national identity can never be induced to a population by artificial means” (Udrea, 2014, p. 58), whereas “European identity has been in construction and reconstruction process throughout history” (Udrea, 2014, p. 59). This is the reason why, when defining themselves as Europeans, citizens rather see themselves as being “national and European” than simply European or even “European and national”.

We argue that Romanians and, to some extent, Europeans as well have changing (or mixed) feelings with regard to their national vs. supranational identities, which makes the equation explaining the attitudes crystallization toward the EU even more complicate.

This study tries to find empirical basis for a general explanation of the changing attitudes toward the European Union in Romania, compared with the average of other member states, taking into account people’s feelings, attitudes, trust about the EU, as well as their projections related to the image or future of the European Union.

4. Methodology

In order to understand the evolution of the attitudes toward the European Union and its institutions, both at the level of the union and in Romania, we used secondary data analysis of eurobarometers since 2007. We used a comparative approach between data regarding Romania and the average of the European member states, aiming at providing a comprehensive analysis of the general evolution of European citizens’ opinion about the EU in general, its future, its institutions, etc. We used 16 standard European Barometers (the last one being EB82, autumn 2014, preliminary data), and three special eurobarometers (EB 346, “New Europeans”, spring 2010, EB 379, “Future of Europe”, autumn 2011, and EB 394, “Future of Europe”, autumn 2012).

The research questions guiding the analysis focused on attitudes toward the European Union, trust in the future of the European project and trust in the national and European institutions. All the research questions aim at providing insights into the mechanisms of the attitudes evolution in Romania, compared to the average attitudes of the European citizens in general.

RQ1. How did Romanians and Europeans' attitudes toward the European Union evolved since the adhesion of Romania to the European Union?

The aim of this research question is to provide explanations for the evolution of Romanians' attitudes toward the EU, in the context of the economic crisis, correlated to the mean of European citizens' attitudes. The role of this research question is to offer a first level of understanding of attitudes fluctuations and (possible) eurosceptic movements after 2007, with of focus on the aftermath of the economic crisis.

RQ2. How did Romanians and Europeans perceive the future of the European Union?

The image of the European Union in the eyes of its citizens is an indicator of how people generally perceive the European project. Correlated with people's opinions about the future of the EU, one could have a more complex understanding of the direction of future evolution of the union.

RQ3. How did Romanians and Europeans level of trust in the national and European main institutions (Government and Parliament) evolve since the integration of Romania in the European Union?

We believe that the level of trust in European institutions is negatively correlated with the level of trust in the national institutions; in other words, we will investigate to what extent a positive evolution of trust in national institutions might lead to a decrease in trust in the European institutions and vice versa. For Romania, we expect to find a correlation that could provide an explanation to the findings related to the first research question, which, combined with how people forecast the future of the EU, and feelings of being European (the second research question) would offer a general image of how people form and change their opinions regarding the European Union in general.

When analyzing the existing data in Eurobarometers, we used the standardized questions related to the three research questions; when the wording changed over the years, we used most semantically closely related questions following the logic of the original ones. There are some rare cases in which some questions were eliminated from the eurobarometers and later reintroduced with a different wording. We considered data as missing for the respective eurobarometers. We used the same logic for the last eurobarometer (autumn 2014), for which only preliminary data was available.

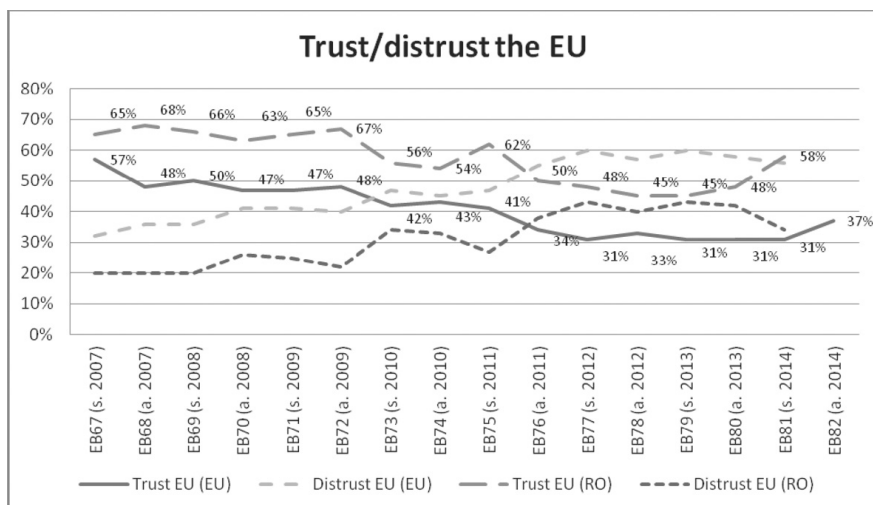
5. Findings

Data from eurobarometers provide evidence about various facets of attitudes toward the European Union. In order to get a general image and understanding of Romanian and European citizens' attitudes, we will analyze people's trust in the union in general, the way they perceive the image of the European Union and its future, as well as trust in national and European main institutions, namely Government and Parliament. We will further try to correlate these data with additional figures related to the feeling of being European and with the

way people evaluate both national and European state of the economy in general, in order to understand the mechanisms through which people's attitude toward the EU have evolved over time, since the adhesion of Romania to the European Union.

The general level of trust in the European Union, the main macro-indicator of people's general attitudes evolved to some extent predictably over time: the general mean at the level of the union have been constant above the level of distrust until the moment the effects of the crisis began to be dramatically perceived at the citizens' level. Thus, starting 2009, the distrust overcame trust in the EU. However, Romanians' level of trust, even though dropped dramatically in the same period of time, has never outrun the level of distrust (Figure 1).

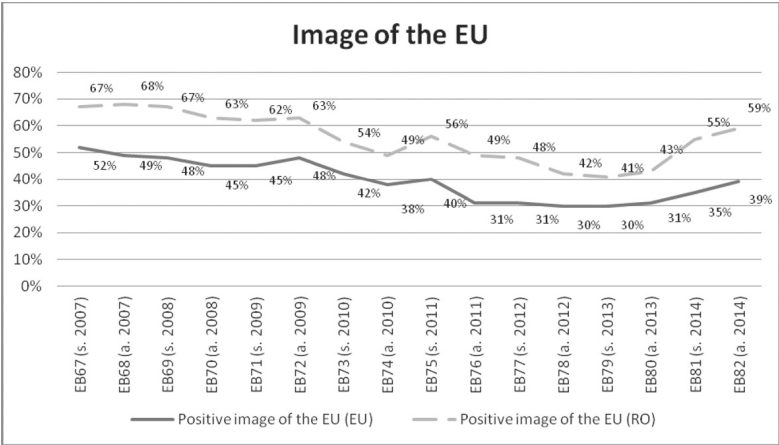
Figure 1. The level of trust/distrust in the European Union in Eurobarometers (EU versus Romania).



In 2014, trust in the European Union raised dramatically again in Romania (with 10%, compared with 0% in the EU). Even though there is no data available yet for each nation state, the last eurobarometer shows that the general level of trust at the European level increased with 6%, compared with the beginning of 2014. These very visible changes, after a period of two years of stagnation might be due, in part, to the general feeling of populations that the end of the crisis already happened or is very near. In Romania, we believe that the high increase in the level of trust in the EU is also due to the presidential elections and general political turmoil in the last year, which made people believe that 'salvation' may come from the EU.

At the same time, there is a similar gap between the moderate increase (8%) of the positive image that European holds of the union in 2014 compared to 2013, while Romanians rate with 16% more positively the image of the EU in the same period of time. (Figure 2).

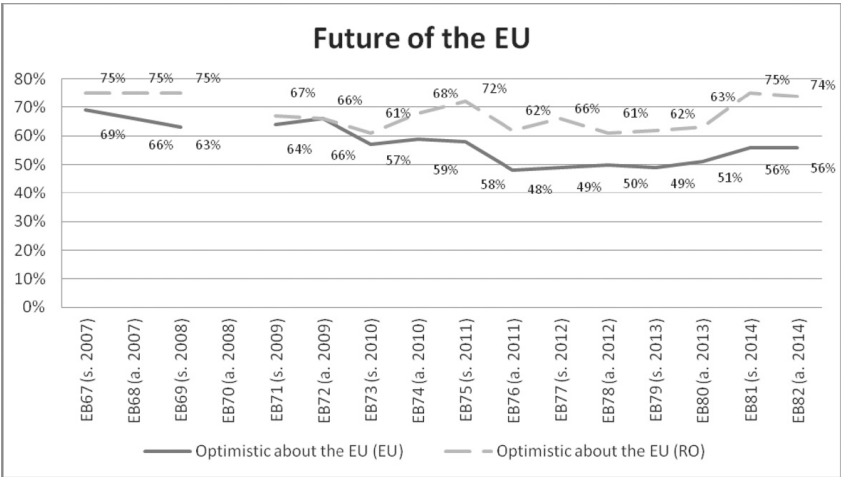
Figure 2. Positive image of the European Union in Eurobarometers (EU versus Romania).



The general way in which Europeans and Romanians perceive the image of the European Union regain to some extent the level of before the crisis (before 2009). After a dramatic drop of 10% and 14% respectively in just one year, the EU has somehow managed to readjust its image in the last one year and a half. In Romania there are only 4% of difference between the period of before the crisis and the end of 2014, and at the level of the union there is a difference of about 9%. Correlated with the level of trust, we can affirm that Romanians regain faith in the EU more than the majority of the other Europeans.

As far as the future of the union is concerned, Romanians have always been more optimistic than the rest of Europeans (with the exception of the beginning of 2010), and at present they are with almost 20% more optimistic than the average European. (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Perceptions about the future of the EU in Eurobarometers (EU versus Romania).

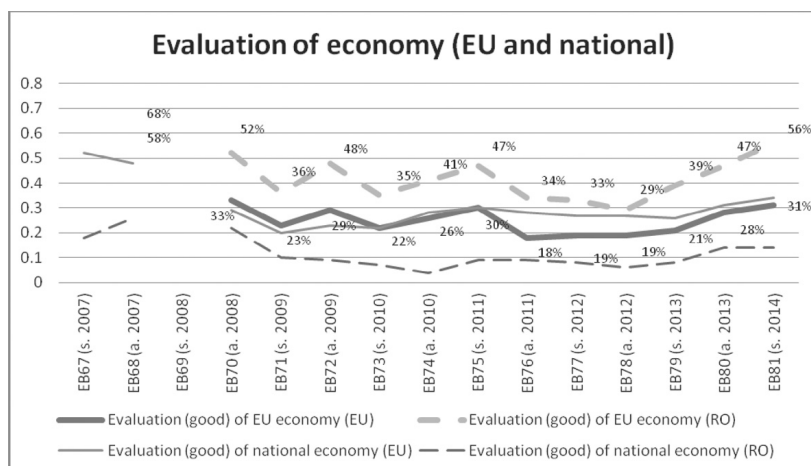


The level of optimism of Europeans regarding the future of the European Union increased steadily but moderately in the last two years, with about 7%, while in Romania optimism raised with 12%.

Trying to understand the different paces of change in the various facets of the attitudes of citizens toward the EU, we will take a close look at possible explanations of the somehow particular evolution of attitudes toward EU in Romania. Thus, we will further investigate people's evaluation of national and European economies, and the level of trust in national and European institutions respectively. We believe that a rather negative evaluation of the general "performance" of their country (translated into evaluations of the state of the economy and trust in national institutions), might make people turn for hope to the EU, viewed as a "savior" and a trustworthy guaranty of future prosperity.

The evaluation of national economies has not been too positive for the European countries in general, with a mean of 30% of a good evaluation at the European level; however, the level of positive evaluations of the national economy for Romanian has a mean of only 12%, with a constant level under 10% after 2009, and a slight increase in 2014 (14%). (Figure 4)

Figure 4. Evaluation of the national and European economy in Eurobarometers (EU versus Romania).



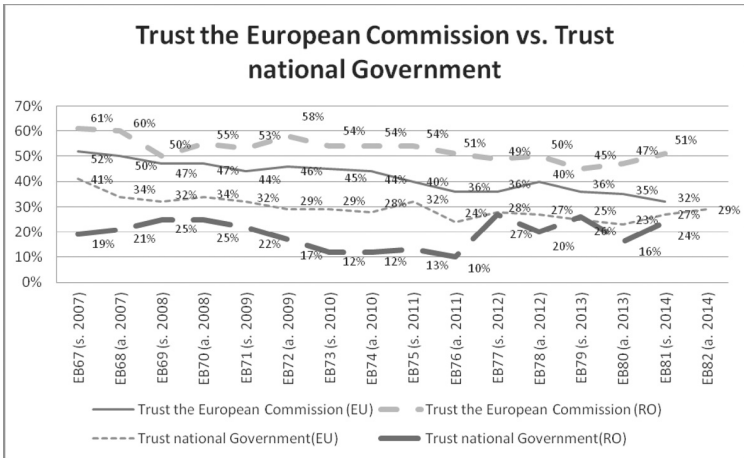
At the same time, Europeans' evaluations of the EU economy match their evaluations of national economies (just slightly lower than the national – 27% compared to 30%), while Romanians' evaluations of the EU economy are far from mirroring their representations of the national economy (an average of 43% compared to 12%). (Figure 4)

This prominent discrepancy between Romania and the rest of the European Union is one of the causes of the much higher level of trust in the European Union and its future; being discouraged to a very high degree by the performance of the national economy, and thus having probably a rather gloom overview of their country's future, Romanians turn to EU for help, hope, and the promise of a better future.

This becomes clear as well from how people appreciate their level of trust in the national and European main institutions, the Government and the Parliament. Europeans trust more the European Commission than they trust the governments of their countries (with a difference of 12%), while Romanians trust more the European Commission than the Romanian Government with 44% of difference. This shows the huge gap that Romania has to overcome, if compared with the average of the European Union. Even though the general trust in the Commission is higher for European as well, a difference of more than 40% basically show that

Romanians have lost almost entirely their faith in the Romanian Government and seek “salvation” to the European institutions. (Figure 5)

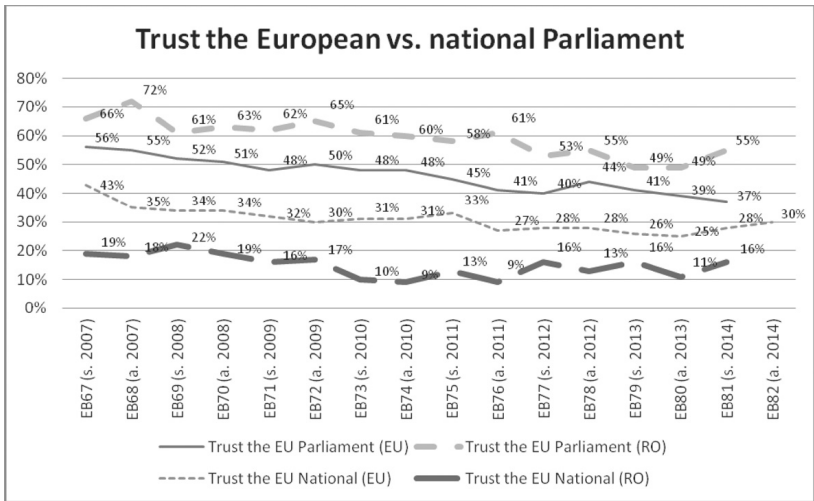
Figure 5. The level of trust in the national vs. European government in Eurobarometers (EU versus Romania).



At the same time, eurobarometers show that Romanians regain to some extent their trust in the government after 2012 (which coincide with national elections), while their trust in the European Commission remained more or less unchanged. Trust in the European and national governments at the level of the EU registered a slightly decreasing trend since 2007.

Similar trends could be observed with regard to national and European Parliaments. Europeans trust more the European Parliament ($M=46\%$) than their own parliaments ($M=31\%$), but the difference of the two levels of trust is rather moderate, if we compare data with the level of Romanians' trust in the parliament of their own country and the European Parliament (15% compared to 59%). (Figure 6)

Figure 6. The level of trust in the national vs. European Parliament in Eurobarometers (EU versus Romania).



The general trend at the European level is a descending one, for both national and European parliaments, with a slight increase in the last year in favor of the national parliaments, while for Romanians both trends are sinuous, with a slight decrease in 2009, and a soft recovery in the last one year and a half.

The very large difference in the levels of trust of European and Romanian institutions provide insights into the way people of Romania perceive the European Union in general, as a counterweight to the weak performance of their own country.

Finally, we will look into the feelings of being European. They have started to be evaluated in eurobarometers since 2010. Generally speaking, Romanians feel less European than the rest of Europe, with a general mean (aggregate data for “Romanian and European”, “European and Romanian” and “just European”) of 50%, as compared to 57% for the other Europeans. At the same time, the feelings of being “just Romanian” or any kind of European layer of identity are not very stable over time, with sometimes differences of up to 10%. Judging from the aggregate means of available data, Romanians feel slightly less European than the rest of Europe (see Table 1). The explanation is related to the very concept of “European identity”: when discussing about identity, strong feelings of belonging cannot be developed in a short period of time, such as the time elapsed since the Romanian integration, which makes people reluctant to feeling European. They probably experience some degree of Europeaness related to the costs-benefits paradigm (the instrumental approach to identity).

Table 1. Feelings of being European (EU versus Romania)

	Just National	Just Romanian	National and European	Romanian and European	European and National	European and Romanian	Just European (EU)	Just European (RO)
EB346 SE (s. 2010)	46%	50%	41%	18%	7%	13%	3%	6%
EB 379 (a. 2011)	39%	44%	46%	41%	8%	13%	4%	9%
EB77 (s. 2012)	38%	41%	49%	33%	6%	10%	3%	7%
EB394 (a. 2012)	38%	40%	49%	46%	7%	6%	3%	2%
EB79 (s. 2013)	38%	41%	49%	32%	7%	7%	3%	7%
EB80 (a.2013)	42%	45%	47%	31%	5%	7%	2%	8%
EB81 (s. 2014)	39%	47%	51%	46%	6%	4%	2%	3%

Summing up, data from eurobarometers over the years suggests that Romanians' attitudes toward the European Union are somewhat more positive than the average of the Europeans, in terms of trust, optimism about the future, picture of the image of the EU, etc. The main explanation for that is the general very low trust of Romanians in their own national institutions, and the general negative evaluation of the Romanian economy. Thus, the citizens of Romania believe that the European Union is the answer to their hopes of personal prosperity and growth, consolidating a myth of the savior, which projects an aura of trust and stability onto the European Union.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper we argue that feelings and attitudes that Romanians and Europeans hold toward the European Union changed in ways that could be explained and understood under the light of the economic crisis on the one hand and of national economic and political performance on the other hand. When trying to provide explanations about the somehow unpredictable ways people's attitudes changed over the last years, we took into consideration to what extent people's feelings are driven by their evaluations of their own countries. We argue that, by judging the economic and political performance of their country as (rather) negative, people turn to the EU for 'salvation' and promise of future prosperity. This is the reason why, in the context of increasing eurosceptic feelings, Romanians still remain among the most euroenthusiastic European citizens.

Attitudes toward the European Union changed in the last 7 years, especially in the context of the financial distress brought about by the economic crisis. Starting 2009, the general level of distrust at the union level outran the level of trust. However, as far as Romanians are concerned, their trust in the EU never leveled up with the distrust. Even though their enthusiasm diminished, they still perceive the union as a reliable source of stability and hope for the future.

The same holds true for the general image people have of the European Union, dramatically affected since 2009: Europeans in general slightly reconsidered the image of the union in the last two years; however, the somewhat more positive image is still far from what it used to be before 2009. Romanians recovered more visibly, but still never reached the highly positive image they used to hold of the union before 2009. In this context, Europeans are moderately optimistic about the future of the EU, while Romanians are highly optimistic and hopeful.

As far as the trust in institutions is concerned, Romanians' position is highly different of the majority of Europeans. They distrust profoundly the national institutions (Government and Parliament), while, as a form of compensation, they tend to trust more deeply than the rest of the Europeans the European Commission and the European Parliament. For most Europeans, the general level of trust in the Commission and the European Parliament steadily decreased, whereas for Romanians, the level of trust regained (after the turning point of 2009) a positive trend in the last two years. At the same time, it is important to take into consideration the way people evaluate national economies. Even though the average European evaluates poorly his/her own country's economy, Romanians are among the citizens that evaluate their own country economic performance worst; this is probably the reason why they tend to evaluate much better the European economy than the other European citizens in general.

The most unstable indicators of attitudes toward the EU remain the feelings of belonging to the EU, of being Europeans in general. Romanians generally feel less European than the majority of Europeans, which is generally the case for newly integrated countries. In the context of the crisis, these feelings evolved somehow chaotically, with notable differences from one barometer to the next, not only for Romanians, but for Europeans in general as well. The supranational identity is, thus, a very fluid entity, probably dominated by instrumental reasons (benefits of the integration).

Summing up, Romanians' attitudes toward the European Union evolved toward the direction of euroscepticism after 2009, following a general trend at the union's level; nonetheless, they remained and still remain among the most enthusiastic about the future of the European project. Their level of trust in the European institutions and EU in general is negatively correlated with their trust of national economic and political performance. We argue that Romanians still hold a very positive image of the EU, continuously building and consolidating a myth of the Savior: the European Union will "come and save" them, thus offering a hope of economic prosperity and individual well-being.

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