

Paul DOBRESCU*
Alina BÂRGĂOANU**

The Discourse of Romanian Elites on an EU Topic: Islands of Europeanization in the Romanian Public Sphere

Abstract: This article presents some results of a large research project premised on the model of the Europeanized public spheres. The research was initiated at the beginning of 2011 in the context of the proposal made by the French and German Ministers of Internal Affairs on the 21st of December 2010 to postpone Romania's accession to the Schengen area of free movement. This proposal sparked a lively debate in the Romanian media during the following two months. The research project had several objectives: to content analyse the coverage of the Schengen topic in the media of different EU member states; to content analyse the coverage of the Schengen topic in the Romanian national media (TV and online news); to analyse the public perception created around the Schengen issue; to explore the perception of public elites on the same topic. For the purpose of this article, we shall only present and interpret the data obtained from the 10 interviews, with a special emphasis on the degree to which the statements of the interviewees – high profile political figures or experts in EU affairs – were placed in a European rather than a purely national frame of reference.

Keywords: EU public sphere; Europeanized public spheres; Schengen area of free movement.

1. EU Public Sphere – Habermas' View

The concept of the public sphere has proved extremely appealing to those concerned with the legitimacy of the European Union and with its various deficits – be they democratic or communication in nature. The original concept of the public sphere was extended to the European Union level in the context of a large debate which started in the mid 70s on the relationship between the EU and its citizens. Following this debate, the European leaders issued “The Declaration on European Union” (1972), which defined the European identity using three pillars: (1) the countries' common history and interests and their special obligations within the Community; (2) the “dynamic” nature of the European unification; and (3) the cooperation of the (then) nine member states in relation to the rest of the world (Burgess, 2009, p. 479). It was the starting point of an extremely large number of publications on the concept

* National School of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania,
paul.dobrescu@comunicare.ro.

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** National School of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania,
alina.bargaoanu@comunicare.ro.

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of European public sphere, which later came to be included in the official documents of the European Commission. According to the German researcher Hans-Jörg Trenz, the very fact that Habermas' view on the public sphere has received European recognition and has been included on the research agenda of the European researchers is a "success story" on the process Europeanization itself (Trenz, 2005, p. 407).

Habermas developed his own view on the European public sphere as "a communicative network extending across national boundaries and specializing in the relevant questions" (Habermas, 2009, p. 87). According to the German philosopher, the notion of a European public sphere as "the last layer of a cake" is misleading or utterly wrong. The solutions to the identified problems of EU's deficits in the field of communication, legitimacy, ability to connect to its citizens are not to be found in the attempt to build a supra-national public sphere, the 28th public sphere of the European Union, with its own media system and a common language (most likely English). "The solution does not consist in constructing a supranational public sphere, but in *transnationalizing* the existing national public spheres. For the latter could *become more responsive to one another* without any need for drastic changes in the existing infrastructure" (Habermas, 2009, p. 183), without any need to remove the "obstacle of multilingualism" (Habermas, 2009, p. 87). In this view, national media play a key role: their duty is not only to present European topics and concerns, and treat them accordingly, but also to provide information on the decisions made and on the political disputes on other member states, which eventually gives rise to the same concerns in other member states. Habermas also underlines the idea that it is the responsibility of elites to contribute to the Europeanization of the national spheres: "Our lily-livered political elites, who prefer to keep their eyes glued to the tabloid headlines, shouldn't try to talk their way out of it by claiming it's the people who are blocking deeper European integration. To date not a single country has held a European election or referendum that wasn't really about national issues and tickets." (Habermas, 2010). The apparent lack of interest of the EU citizens, even the so-called "lethargy" invoked by many critics and exposed as a "structural deficiency" of the public sphere is explained by the fact that the public debate, as it has been driven by the political elites so far is not genuinely European, but largely national. Often, Europe is a mere rhetoric mechanism, and the clashes over the "questions of Europe" reflect either the fear to lose power or the inability from the national elites to adapt to a totally changed environment.

2. Models of the EU Public Sphere

Inquiry into the issue of the European public sphere is challenging both theoretically and empirically. As far as theory is concerned, no consensus has been reached so far around a generally accepted definition or model. There are voices saying that there is no European public sphere, just as there is no such thing as a European collective identity; European matters are not addressed from a "European perspective", whatever that perspective may mean, and EU topics are hardly visible in the national media; there is no pan-European media system, no European people, no common language etc.

We have shown elsewhere (Bârgăoanu, 2011, pp. 60-74) that three models of the EU public sphere are prevalent in the literature: a) the homogeneous European public sphere (the *heavy* public sphere – as it is called by Claes de Vreese), b) the Europeanized national public spheres (be it vertical or horizontal Europeanization), and c) the *ad hoc* public sphere,

which is fluid and crystallized around some common issues and common concerns. One can speak of a relative consensus around the notion that the most viable model, both from a conceptual and an empirical point of view, is that of the Europeanized national public spheres. Building on this relative consensus, different criteria for assessing the degree of Europeanization of national public spheres have been put forth, the general idea being that, when debating EU issues, it is important to promote a European rather than a national perspective. The media, the representatives of the European institutions and those from public institutions in the member states act as intermediary frameworks between the messages from the European Union level and the citizens and thus play a tremendous role in the emerging of the Europeanized public spheres.

The Europeanization of national public spheres requires an opening of the national communicative spaces to themes and actors from other Member States and also at a European level, or a connection through communicative interaction (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004). Koopmans and Erbe (2004, p. 6) distinguished between three different forms of Europeanization of public spheres: the emergence of a *supranational European public sphere*, characterized by interactions between European institutions and actors on European themes, with the support of trans-European mass-media; *vertical Europeanization*, either “bottom-up” – where national actors address European actors – or “top-down” – “in which European actors intervene in national policies and public debates in the name of regulations and common interests” (*ibidem*). *Horizontal Europeanization* refers to a mutual observation between different member states and has a weak and a strong dimension. “In the weak variant, the media in one country cover debates and contestation in another member state, but there is no linkage between the countries in the structure of the claim-making itself. In the stronger variant, actors from one country explicitly address, or refer to actors or policies in another member state” (*ibidem*, pp. 6-7).

An extension of this typology is provided by Brüggemann and Königslöw (2007, p. 4) by combining the vertical and horizontal dimensions of Europeanization. Thus, they came up with four patterns of Europeanization: *comprehensive Europeanization* – high levels of vertical and horizontal Europeanization; *segmented Europeanization* – vertical, but no horizontal Europeanization; *Europeanization aloof from the EU* – horizontal without vertical Europeanization and a *parochial public sphere* – neither vertical, nor horizontal.

Thomas Risse proposes several indicators based on which to assess the degree of Europeanization of the national public spheres. T. Risse talks not so much about “the European public sphere”, but rather about the “communication beyond the borders of the national state”, arguing that “trans-border communication emerges if and when the same issues are being discussed at the same time using similar frames of references across the various national public spheres” (Risse, 2010, p.108). In order to be able to talk about “communication beyond the borders of the nation state”, commonality of an issue, simultaneity of the debate and the employment of the same relevance criteria and frames of references for the interpretation of events are needed. Risse identifies two extremes concerning the possibilities of this trans-European/ trans-national communication: the first one claims that it is necessary to have a “common/ European perspective” or “the same criteria of relevance”; the other extreme only emphasises the notion that national public spheres should be responsive to one another. In order to reach a middle ground, Risse considers it absolutely necessary that the national public spheres are mutually responsive and that the same common relevance criteria for the interpretation of events are used: “we can disagree about whether the attack in Iraq was consistent with international law or not. We can even disagree whether international law or the respect

for basic human rights is more important and how we give weight to each value when discussing a particular issue. But the same criteria of relevance require that we agree that compliance with international law, on the one hand, and respect for basic human rights, on the other, are significant in debating questions of war and peace” (Risse, 2010, p. 119). These common criteria of relevance allow for different responses, even opposite ones; but the general framework, the questions and the concerns should be common and, moreover, should be “European”. For example, when debating on the issue of Turkey’s accession to the European Union, the “European” questions/ perspectives could be: “which are the borders of the European Union?”; “can a Muslim country be a EU member?”. So, the common relevance criteria or interpretation frameworks leave room for disputes, challenges, even confrontation. Risse makes this point explicitly: “If this argument implies that we have to discuss European themes with an eye to whether they promote or hinder European integration, or worse, that we actually agree on a common European standpoint, such a conceptualization misses the mark” (*Ibidem*, p. 112). Agreement on European policies and measures is not an indicator of the existence of a European(ized) public sphere, just as disagreement over these policies is not an indicator of its inexistence. “Europeanized” or rather trans-border communication in the EU is neither pro-European Union, nor pro-European integration.

3. General Context of the Research

The article presents some results of a research project premised on the ideas of the Europeanized public spheres. The research was initiated at the beginning of 2011 in the context of the proposal made by the French and German Ministers of Internal Affairs on the 21st of December 2010 to postpone Romania’s accession to the Schengen area of free movement. This proposal sparked a lively debate in the Romanian media during the following two months. Given the apparent prominence of the debate and its connection to an EU topic, we considered it a good context in which we could analyse some patterns of Europeanization of the Romanian public sphere – the visibility of EU topics in the media, the actors involved, the frames used when discussing about the European Union, the interpretative frameworks, the degree of connectivity to issues of interest to the EU as a whole rather than to Romania only. Consequently, the ample research project had the following objectives:

- to content analyse the coverage of the Schengen topic in the media of different EU member states;
- to content analyse the coverage of the Schengen topic in the Romanian national media (TV news and talk shows and online news);
- to analyse the public perception created around the Schengen issue;
- to explore the perception of high-profile public actors on the same topic.

In order to carry out the research, we used a multi-method research design including a content analysis of the media coverage (quantitative and qualitative), a national survey, and a series of in-depth interviews with 10 high-profile Romanian political figures. Some results of this ample research project were published in Bârgăoanu (2010). For the purpose of this article, we shall only present and interpret the data obtained from the 10 interviews.

4. Research Methodology

In order to assess the perception of public elites on the Schengen topic, we carried out a series of 10 semi-structured interviews during the period 25th of January 2010 to 4th of February 2011. We selected the ten public figures in such a manner that they represented the main political landscape of the moment in a balanced manner. Thus, we carried out two interviews with representatives of the main governing party, the Democratic Liberal Party (PD-L): Teodor Baconschi, ministry of External Affairs and Vasile Blaga, former ministry of Administration and Internal Affairs; one with György Frunda, a representative of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), also a part of the governing coalition; three interviews with the representatives of one of the opposition parties, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) – Ioan Mircea Pașcu, EP, Vasile Pușcaș, former chief negotiator with the European Union (2000-2004), and Adrian Severin, EP; and three interviews with the representatives of the other major opposition party, the Liberal Party (PNL) – Teodor Meleșcanu, former Romanian minister of the External Affairs (1992-1996) and currently a Member of the Romanian Parliament, Norica Nicolai, EP and professor Daniel Dăianu, former EP and a high-profile commentator on EU affairs. The tenth interview was carried out with Leonard Orban, presidential counsellor on European affairs, former European Commissioner in charge with multi-linguism, with no political affiliation. As one can notice, the 10 interviewees were chosen both based on their political/ institutional affiliation and on their proven expertise in the field of EU affairs or closely connected to the Schengen topic. The duration of the interviews varied between 25 and 50 minutes.

The research questions that structured the interview were:

RQ1. How do political elites perceive the overall significance of the Schengen affair?

This question refers mainly to the symbolic importance of the Schengen accession and is meant to place the Schengen topic in the relation to the overall perception regarding the EU and Romania's standing as a member state.

RQ2. How do political elites perceive the reasons for postponing Romania's accession to the Schengen Area?

The public perception regarding the reasons for postponing Romania's accession to Schengen is based on the media information. Political elites have access to other information as well – information conveyed through diplomatic outlets, face-to-face talks with other important European players, etc. This research question was also meant to uncover whether the political elites consider it important that the proposal to postpone access to Schengen came from France and Germany, which now make up the “engine” of the whole EU.

RQ3. How do political elites perceive the Romanian official response to the French and German proposal?

The reaction of the Romanian officials was largely commented upon in the media, being often labelled as “hysterical”, “hasty”, “emotional”, etc. We wanted to learn whether this type of labelling could be found only in the media discourse, as a result of their general search for sensationalism or it reflected a more general assessment of the official reaction.

RQ4. How do the political elites perceive the consequences (including symbolic ones) of the proposal to postpone Romania's accession to Schengen?

This research question was meant to uncover both the concrete (financial losses, for example) and the symbolic consequences (loss of prestige) of the proposal in order to get a complete picture of the Schengen accession process overall.

RQ5. How do the political elites assess the media coverage (national and international) of the Schengen topic?

We wanted to learn how the media coverage was perceived by the political elites, whether those who were present in the discussions were deemed as informed or competent or not and, in general, what lessons could be learned from the media coverage of the Schengen affair.

RQ6. Do the political elites see any link between the proposal to postpone Romania's accession to Schengen and a rise in Euro-scepticism among Romanians?

This last research question was meant to place the Schengen affair in the broader framework of the attitudes towards EU. Just like in other member states, Euro-enthusiasm has been constantly decreasing in Romania since 2007, when the country joined the EU and we wanted to learn whether the political elites perceive any impact that the Schengen topic might have had on these attitudes.

5. Findings

5.1. The Significance of the Proposal to Postpone Romania's Accession to Schengen

The meanings attached to the postponement of Romania's accession to Schengen are varied. The political elites interviewed generally associate this particular event to the more general issue of the "in-depth integration into the European Union". The Schengen affair is deemed as an interesting case regarding the fundamental difference between becoming a member state (EU accession) and being integrated into the EU affairs (EU integration). The practical consequences of the postponement are touched upon briefly by all the interviewees, while the "symbolic" consequences enjoy a greater deal of attention. These symbolic consequences are framed as losses and failures by the representatives of the two opposition parties: the postponement places Romania in the second tier of EU member states, leaving it isolated at the outskirts of the EU:

We suddenly realise that we have a problem; we become suddenly aware that they are entitled to isolate us at the outskirts of the EU, exactly because we haven't done anything until now in order to eliminate our drawbacks. (Ioan Mircea Pașcu)

The postponement of access to Schengen could be an implicit acknowledgement of the status of Romania as a second-hand member state. (Daniel Dăianu)

In my opinion, the stakes of the Schengen affair are related to Romania's image and performance in the EU rather than with some concrete, practical stakes. The accession would have been a proof that Romania was a stable country, capable to comply with the EU standards, and it would have added to our standing in the EU. (Norica Nicolai)

All the interviewees refer to the topic of "true integration", with different wording: "in-depth integration", "incomplete integration", "two (multi)-step integration". Adrian Severin structures the three layers at which the significance of the Schengen affair can be grasped:

practical significance (e.g. free movement of persons and goods, a more appealing business environment); symbolic significance – Schengen as a reconciliation between Europe's history and geography, the making up of a spiritual, borderless community (with a direct reference to the Hungarian border) –, and third level, having to do with the EU overall:

The third level refers to the European integration, to the deepening of the European integration. We cannot talk about an integrated Europe with states which are integrated at different levels and with various degrees of depth. A truly integrated European member state is one which, besides performing in the EU institutions, is a member of the Schengen Area and a member of the Euro zone. [...] This is equally important for Romania and for EU. (Adrian Severin)

5.2. The Reasons for Postponing Romania's Accession to the Schengen Area

The interviewees indicate various reasons underlying the postponement: internal problems, such as corruption, the border with the Republic of Moldova, the underperformance of the legal system and external reasons, having to do with the situation in the EU, such as the economic crisis, the problem of the immigrants' integration, or contextual causes, such as the coming elections in Germany and especially France.

Corruption is the internal reason most cited by almost all interviewees, irrespective of their political affiliation: Ioan Mircea Pașcu, Leonard Orban, György Frunda, Teodor Meleșcanu. The border with the Republic of Moldova is framed under the general issue of "EU internal security". This is the position of Vasile Pușcaș who, although reluctant to indicate that problem as a direct reason for the postponement, emphasizes that this is a "sensitive matter of internal [EU] security". Granting double citizenship to Moldavian citizens is explicitly indicated as a reason for the postponement by György Frunda:

I believe that Romania's decision to grant double citizenship – both Romanian and Moldavian – to Moldavians was an error for which we are paying the price now. (György Frunda)

Depending on their political affiliation, the interviewees emphasise the ratio between technical and political considerations underlying the postponement differently. The representatives of the governing political party and the official representative of the Romanian presidency choose to dwell on the fact that Romania complied with all technical requirements and that reference to political reasons are not acceptable, while the representatives of the opposition parties underline that access to Schengen is not a mere matter of complying with some technical requirements, that political considerations are weighted in and, consequently, the Romanian government should have minded these political considerations proactively and not defensively.

[the Schengen affair] is not only a matter of freedom of movement, but also a matter of market and security. (Vasile Pușcaș)

Other points of view emphasize the general challenging situation in the EU, as well as the various difficulties facing other member states – such as the flows of immigrants (Ioan Mircea Pașcu, Leonard Orban). When asked about the reasons for the postponement, most interviewees point to the some "unofficial" rationale, having to do with the presidential elections in France. Germany's position – though less marked – is symbolically significant, being explained either by the rise of populism in Germany, which creates pressure from the public opin-

ion (Adrian Severin), by the future regional elections in this country (Daniel Dăianu), or by the concerns for the EU economic governance, in which Germany needs France as its main partner (Adrian Severin).

It is mainly France's problem. France has initiated these actions against Romania and has been successful in attracting new allies, such as Germany and Finland. (Ioan Mircea Pașcu)

It is a European crisis and the founding countries or the current EU engine now feel the need to stay as united as possible. (Adrian Severin)

Both countries will have elections next year and I guess neither of the leaders will give up in favour of Romania if this reduces their chances to win the elections. (Norica Nicolai)

We can only guess that election-related interests are not to be excluded. (Leonard Orban)

France and Germany are the very core of the UE. It is the decision of those governments and obviously it cannot be changed now. It is crystal clear for anyone who knows politics. (György Frunda)

Generally, the reasons provided by the interviewees point both to Romanian and European problems. The unfavourable economic context in the EU adds to the difficulties brought about by the enlargement of the Schengen area itself.

5.3. Romania's Official Response

The reactions of the Romanian officials to the proposal to postpone Romania's accession to Schengen vary depending on the political or institutional affiliation. The representatives of the governing party (Vasile Blaga, Teodor Baconschi) claim that the reaction was fair, while the representatives of PSD, PNL, and UDMR consider it "emotional", "hasty", or "irritated".

I think the official reaction has clearly expressed the fact that Romania was ready to join the Schengen Area, as well as the fact that we can only agree to be assessed according to the Schengen acquis and we cannot accept conditions which exceed this acquis. (Teodor Baconschi)

The reaction of a child who is angry because someone has slapped him. (Norica Nicolai)

This is one of the worst examples, worth including in diplomacy textbooks. (Teodor Meleșcanu)

Those who perceive the reaction as "fair" bring forth the argument of the "technical criteria" that Romania presumably complied with. The emotional side of the reactions is labelled as "irritated" (Ioan Mircea Pașcu), "primitive, warlike" (Teodor Meleșcanu), "hasty" (Daniel Dăianu), "irrational, emotional" (György Frunda). A particular feature of this part of the interviews regarding the perception around the official reaction is the prevalence of the race frame, the confrontation with the EU being portrayed in sports-related terms.

If a player goes to swear at the referee during the break because he put him at a disadvantage during the first round of the match, that player cannot expect the referee to get scared and arbitrate to his advantage during the second round. (Ioan Mircea Pașcu)

We couldn't simply have foreseen that a close partner of Romania will want to change the rules of the game during the last 15 minutes of the game, if I am allowed to make a comparison to sports. (Teodor Baconschi)

This means observing the rules of the game. If I play *oină* [traditional Romanian sport, a sort of rugby], I am an *oină* champion, but I want to play rugby and be a champion, then I must observe the rugby rules, not the *oină* rules anymore. It's that simple. (György Frunda).

Some interviewees made a series of comments on the reaction of the Bulgarian officials, by contrast with that of the Romanian ones: "normal, not exaggerated" (Vasile Pușcaș), ex-

plicitly meant to “differentiate itself from the Romanian position” (Daniel Dăianu). According to the presidential counsellor Leonard Orban, each of the two countries performs in a specific context and their reaction was deeply influenced by their respective readiness to join the Schengen Area.

5.4. Consequences of Postponing Romania's Accession to Schengen

As we have already underlined, most interviewees tackled this issue right from the beginning of the interview, as a spontaneous response to the first ice-breaking question regarding the significance of the Schengen affair. When asked specifically about these consequences, they mention concrete ones, such as financial losses, restrictions on the labor market for the Romanian workers (Vasile Pușcaș), losses in competitiveness of Romanian companies (Teodor Meleșcanu). The missed benefits refer to an increased capacity to fight cross-border organised crime (Norica Nicolai), the benefits for transporters (reduced waiting time at the customs at the Hungarian border), simplified access for investors (Teodor Baconschi), easier flow of goods and persons (Vasile Blaga). Two representatives of the governing party underline two additional consequences: postponing the transfer of border responsibility (Teodor Baconschi) and creating a dangerous precedent created for the decision-making processes in the EU (Leonard Orban).

The symbolic consequences explicitly underlined have to do with a loss in public image. PSD representatives perceive a negative impact on the way the Romanian citizens are perceived in the EU, as second-hand citizens not enjoying full rights (Vasile Pușcaș) and underline that this postponement is a clear instance of Romania's incomplete integration in the EU (Ioan Mircea Pașcu). The PNL members have a rather different stance: Norica Nicolai argues that the Schengen affair does not affect Romania's image, provided it is a temporary decision, while Daniel Dăianu believes that the symbolic consequences are felt more deeply by the political and cultural elites, who consider themselves downgraded by their EU counterparts. Out of the representatives of the current power holders, Vasile Blaga perceives some “symbolic damage”, while the other two interviewees do not refer to any such symbolic effects. György Frunda had a particular view on this issue, claiming that the image problem was rather the cause of the postponement than its effect.

5.5. The Responsibility for the Schengen “failure”

Some questions dominated the public agenda immediately after the proposal to postpone Romania's access to Schengen was publicized: who is responsible, how fair the decision is, what could have been done differently in order to avoid such a refusal. The public figures interviewed had different perspectives on these matters.

When it came to responsibility, the government and the other state institutions are mentioned one way or another: “I believe the Government is first responsible for this failure, because it is in charge with this project” (Norica Nicolai); “It is the authorities' fault” (Vasile Pușcaș); “Both the president and other players have acknowledged they were partly responsible for this” (György Frunda). The representatives of the governing party avoid the topic of internal accountability, stress the importance of external factors, recall the ratio between the technical and political criteria, and stress the unfair treatment which Romania received in this matter:

We are against any additional conditions to be imposed on Romania. Such an approach would be discriminatory and risks to create a dangerous precedent at the European level [...] The fact that Romania complied with all the requirements of the Treaty and is not allowed to join the Schengen Area is obviously an unfair treatment for our country. (Teodor Baconschi)

From my point of view, it is an unfair measure against Romania. Since we have enforced so many reforms, including major investments of more than EUR 1 billion into border consolidation, it is clearly unfair not to be allowed to join the Schengen Area. (Leonard Orban)

Vasile Blaga – a representative of the power holders – underlines that we cannot blame the other Schengen states exclusively for this decision and that Romania also bears some responsibility for the failure in the accession process.

Daniel Dăianu and Norica Nicolai explained the current “intolerance” of the other states towards any form of EU enlargement by the generally unfavourable context brought about by the economic crisis. This creates a totally different framework than that of 2007, when Romania joined the EU. We deal with a completely changed economic context, as a result of which the EU is much more inflexible and reluctant to any forms of enlargement – enlargement of the EU to new member states, enlargement of the Schengen area or enlargement of the eurozone.

The tolerance dating back to the period when Romania started the negotiation with the EU and to the year 2007, when it joined the Union, does not exist anymore. Europe was in a different situation then, the so-called “great moderation”, when its sole concern was the performance of institutions and the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon. Europe is in a different situation now, in a different epoch I could say, due to the economic crisis, the euro zone crisis, the loss of competitiveness, the demographic situation etc. (Daniel Dăianu)

Except for Teodor Baconschi and Leonard Orban, all the other interviewees discuss the underperformance of Romanian external affairs over the last years. The representatives of the opposition parties blamed the “structural weaknesses of our external affairs” (Adrian Severin), “the most serious errors I have ever seen in the diplomatic field” (Teodor Meleșcanu), “our external affairs is far from being proactive” (Norica Nicolai). The UDMR representative completed the picture by calling the Schengen case “a failure of the Romanian external affairs” (György Frunda), while the PD-L member Vasile Blaga appreciated that Romania should have taken the first steps in relation to France and Germany before 2010, and come up with proactive solutions:

It is a failure of the Romanian external affairs. Our country should have had multilateral talks with the German and French presidents. You remember the relationship Sarkozy and Băsescu. The presidents of those two important European countries should have been invited in Romania. (György Frunda)

Teodor Baconschi and Leonard Orban show different positions in this matter, considering that Romania has made all the necessary efforts. The minister of External Affairs mentioned the efforts made long time before the French-German letter was issued, “at all the levels, to clarify France’s concerns and find mutually acceptable solutions”. While the presidential counsellor Leonard Orban argues that, although certain actions might have been done differently, “there was no change whatsoever to obtain anything else than we did, considering how inflexible a member state is in this matter”.

The opposition parties and the UDMR representative generally appreciate that the responsibility for postponing Romania’s accession to the Schengen Area belonged to the Romanian

diplomacy and to the government in the first place, whereas the PD-L members consider there are rather external causes, related to a certain inflexibility and rigidity of the European Union as a whole, of France and Germany in particular. Much criticism was expressed for the underperformance of the Romanian external affairs over the latest years, summed up in the idea that steps to reach such an important objective should have been prepared in advance, through negotiation, high level visits in the partner states and of their representatives in Romania, open discussions and, in general, through a more active involvement of the representatives of the Romanian state on the European stage.

5.6. The Media Coverage of the Schengen Affair

The Schengen topic received different degrees of attention in the Romanian media and the media from other EU member states. While it became a prominent topic in the Romanian national media immediately after the French-German letter was publicized, it was treated as a marginal topic in the European press (see also Bârgăoanu, 2010). All the interviewees, except for Ioan Mircea Pașcu and Teodor Meleșcanu, criticise the way in which the Romanian media covered the Schengen topic. Ioan Mircea Pașcu appreciated that there was enough debate, while Teodor Meleșcanu believed that the media coverage was “fair and balanced”, reflecting the various points of view involved. The other interviewees expressed four fundamental reasons for criticism: the lack of accurate information on the topic overall; the treatment of the topic in a purely sensational manner; the misleading interpretations of various facts and statements; the inability to mobilize the public opinion in favour of a national interest topic.

Nobody knowledgeable of the topic expressed their opinion or asked the right questions. (Adrian Severin)

My criticism has to do with the fact that the media do not select the right experts to talk on the issue. A technical rather than a political discourse would have been more appropriate. (Norica Nicolai)

Debates are confusing, the participants do not know what they are talking about. (György Frunda)

The media barely mentioned what the Schengen area is all about. (Vasile Pușcaș)

We should leave aside the election-type discourse and deal with the important topics of the European affairs in an intelligent manner. (Leonard Orban)

Vasile Blaga points to the sensational character of the media coverage, emphasizing that, as long as the Schengen topic created “positive news” (the positive reports issued over time by the EU authorities), it was of no interest to the media, the sudden interest in the topic being raised by its negative turn.

The low visibility of the topic in other European media is explained by all the interviewees in agenda-setting terms. On the one hand, the topic of Romania’s accession to the Schengen Area is less than a priority for other EU citizens; on the other hand, the European agenda was fully immersed in topics such as the euro crisis, the popular uprisings in the Middle East and the influx of immigrants from that part of the world to EU countries.

The economic crisis has hit all EU member states, not only Romania. Each country has its own agenda with its own problems. The Schengen topic is mainly of interest to us. (Vasile Blaga)

The European media are interested in the Schengen topic and generally in the topic of the security of EU external borders, but I believe that Romania and Bulgaria’s accession to this Area does not radically change the situation, that is why the media in other countries was not very interested in this topic. (Teodor Baconschi)

Leonard Orban is the only one to consider that the European media (meaning the media from Brussels and from different member states) covered the Schengen topic more extensively than expected, while Daniel Dăianu thinks that the topic was of moderate interest for the Romanian media and, especially for the Romanian citizens, too.

5.7. Euro-scepticism and Its Explanations

The level of the Euro-scepticism has increased in Romania over the past years for various reasons, most of them related to the unfavourable social and economic context. Compared to the years prior to the 2007 accession, when the level of Euro-enthusiasm in Romania was the highest among the member states, the level of trust has been in a constant decline. In this context, we wondered whether the political elites perceived any impact of the Schengen affair on the level of Euro-scepticism. Some interviewees answered that the Schengen episode might determine a rise of Euro-scepticism (Teodor Baconschi, Leonard Orban, Ioan Mircea Pașcu, Adrian Severin, Norica Nicolai, Teodor Meleșcanu), while others expressed rather neutral opinions (Euro-scepticism is not directly related to the Schengen case, it is rather the result of the general disappointment after 2007, created by the high expectations associated with becoming a member state (György Frunda, Daniel Dăianu, Vasile Pușcaș)).

Episodes such as Schengen are the reason for the decreasing respect the Romanians show to EU institutions, for their decreasing enthusiasm with the EU. (Adrian Severin)

I do not know to what extent the Schengen episode is alive in people's collective ethos; they are concerned with totally different problems and it is true that their life would not change in the short run, if Romania joined the Schengen Area. [...] In my opinion, the ordinary citizen is not so much concerned whether he is in the Schengen Area or not. (Daniel Dăianu)

The public opinion obviously perceives such an experience in a negative way, therefore the level of Euro-scepticism is increasing. The population had very great expectations when Romania joined the club. They have been only partially confirmed, which might have caused some frustration, which is understandable. (Teodor Baconschi)

When asked about other causes for an increase in Euro-scepticism over the past years, the interviewees underline the different treatment that the Romanians receive as EU citizens (Vasile Blaga), the fragile EU leadership (Norica Nicolai), the economic crisis (Teodor Meleșcanu), and the social and economic problems throughout Europe (Leonard Orban). As far as the future is concerned, Ioan Mircea Pașcu and Adrian Severin state that there is no alternative to that of pursuing the European project. The latter interviewee stress that Romanians "have an instinct for European federalism", fearing isolation within the EU just as much as they fear domination by an empire or by an all too powerful state.

6. Conclusions

The interviews with the ten high-profile Romanian political figures give us a comprehensive view on the way in which the proposal to postpone Romania's accession to the Schengen area was perceived by the elites. The prevailing interpretation – with due nuances – is that the postponement has mainly symbolic consequences which are not to be underestimated. Among these symbolic consequences, the most prominent one is the acknowledgement

of Romania's marginal status in the EU. Accession to Schengen is interpreted as a sign of the "genuine" integration in the EU, and the failure to obtain that access is, among other things, the result of the fact that after 2007, Romania has got stuck in a "acceding state" mentality and has no longer been able to engage in an equally ambitious and large-scale endeavour as that of becoming a EU member as such.

Perception around the reaction of the Romanian officials varies widely depending on the political/ institutional affiliation: "fair" and "justified" by the power holders or by those close to them, "emotional" or utterly "erroneous" by the other interviewees. In spite of this divergence, all the interviewees agree that the Schengen affair would have required a general agreement throughout the Romanian society, a trans-partisan approach driven by solidarity around an issue of national interest. Besides, it is generally perceived that the Schengen topic did not receive the right media treatment – being framed as it was in emotional, sensational and confrontational terms; consequently, the media did not mobilize the public opinion in favour of that "national cause", and the Schengen topic was the battleground where a general fight against the current power holders in Romania was carried out. Regarding the issue of Euro-scepticism, it is the general opinion that the Schengen affair may have added to the already rising Euro-scepticism, which is the expression of a larger disillusionment with EU – with its institutions, its policies and the benefits brought about by the European integration.

The answers provided by the 10 high-profile public figures show a great deal of interconnectedness to issues of general concern for the European Union. Their statements could be considered as "islands" around which more Europeanized debates could be crystallized in the public sphere. The wider relevance of postponing Romania's accession to Schengen not so much for Romania as for the European Union – precedent in EU decision-making, security and fluidity of EU external borders, EU various enlargements, enlargement of the Schengen area, enlargement of the EU to other countries, enlargement of the eurozone – was underlined one way or another by the interviewees. Unfortunately, this type of reasoning in a EU perspective, using a EU framework did not permeate the general public discourse, more precisely the discourse covered by the media. And, judging by the fact that the 2010 proposal to postpone Romania's access to Schengen has turned into a *sine die* postponement, one could say that that it was not taken up as a vigorous argumentation point to be used by high level Romanian leaders when debating this issue with their EU counterparts.

Rezumat: Acest articol prezintă câteva dintre rezultatele unei cercetări mai ample asupra sferei publice din România. Cercetarea s-a derulat la începutul anului 2011, fiind prilejuită de propunerea miniștrilor de interne ai Franței și, respectiv Germaniei de a amâna aderarea României la Spațiul Schengen, propunere anunțată pe 21 decembrie 2010. Acest eveniment a declanșat, în primele două luni ale anului 2011, o dezbatere aprinsă în mass-media românească. Cercetarea la care ne referim aici a avut următoarele obiective: să analizeze mediatizarea subiectului Schengen în mass-media din diferite state membre ale UE, să analizeze mediatizarea subiectului în mass-media românească (știri TV și online), să examineze percepția publică asupra problemei Schengen, să investigheze percepția elitelor din România asupra acestui subiect. În articolul de față, vom prezenta și interpreta datele obținute în urma interviurilor realizate cu 10 personalități marcante ale vieții publice actuale, personalități care, în virtutea funcției și a experienței în afacerile europene, au fost în măsură să exprime un punct de vedere avizat pe marginea subiectului Schengen. Analiza relevă faptul că discursul elitelor publice din România este sincronizat cu o problemă europeană, depășind un cadru de referință strict național.

Cuvinte-cheie: sfera publică europeană; sfere publice europenizate; Spațiul Schengen.

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