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**“Once Bitten, Twice Shy”.
EU’s Fiscal Compact in Romanian Readers’ Comments on
Adevărul and Evenimentul Zilei**

Abstract

The paper proposes a new empirical approach in the study of Europeanized public spheres, by applying political claims analysis and frames analysis to readers’ comments about the Fiscal Compact and comparing them to claims in the media articles. The research draws a broad picture of how Romanian citizens interpreted the actions and decisions of political actors, what positions they chose to adopt in regard to the issue and why. Results show that readers’ attitudes regarding the fiscal treaty are influenced by their political party affinities or oppositions and that the extent of Europeanization of a newspaper determines the degree of Europeanized claim-making in readers’ comments. The paper questions citizens’ participation in the public sphere, characterized by mediated interactions and high degrees of contestation. The EU Fiscal Compact has generated an issue-specific agonistic public sphere which, to a certain extent, involves online news media consumers, who do not resume at replicating the political debate between European leaders, but also add their own interpretations to it. Besides monitoring and discussing political decisions, readers of Adevărul and Evenimentul Zilei also address claims to the political class, asking for information and for citizens’ participation in the decision-making regarding the treaty. However, the overall level of Europeanization of readers’ debate is quite low.

Keywords: EU Fiscal Compact, Europeanization of national public spheres, public sphere, fiscal union, political claims analysis.

1. EU Fiscal Compact: better safe than sorry?

The ratification of the European Fiscal Compact has been a top-of-the-list issue on EU’s 2012 agenda. Initially seen as a solution to “save” the Eurozone, the treaty has nonetheless brought forth new questions about the future of the EU. The debate stirred up by the signing of the pact once again brought to light the cleavages between member states and the difficulty to find a one-size-fits-all solution for stabilizing the Euro area and preventing a replication of the Greek scenario.

In response to the Greek crisis, on May 9, 2010 the finance ministers agreed during an Extraordinary ECOFIN meeting on a package of measures to provide financial assistance for EU member states in difficulty: the European Stabilization Mechanism, amounting 750 billion euro. The intergovernmental agreement included the European Financial Stabilization

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Mechanism (EFSM) and the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF), both aimed at safeguarding financial stability. The European sovereign debt crisis intensified during 2010 and thereafter, with the bailouts of several Eurozone countries. The “Troika” (EU, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) granted in May 2010 a bailout of 110 billion euro to Greece through the Greek Loan Facility, and six months later Ireland also received an 85 billion euro bailout. A third Eurozone country, Portugal, obtained a funding package of 78 billion euro in May 2011, while in February 2012 Greece received a second bailout of 130 billion.

Concerned with the possibility of a fiscal contagion to other countries inside or outside the Eurozone, the Council of the European Union agreed to reform under the open method of coordination the EU’s Stability and Growth Pact signed in 1997. The finance ministers proposed the “Sixpack”, a set of changes that include the introduction of the excessive deficit procedure, which implies that the national member states risk automatic sanctions if their debt level exceeds 60% of GDP, even when the deficit is below 3% of GDP (*Council reaches agreement on measures to strengthen economic governance*, March 15, 2011). The euro area Heads of State or government, together with Bulgaria, Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania adopted the Euro Plus Pact, paving the way for EU economic governance. One of the pact goals is to reinforce financial stability by strengthening economic and tax policy coordination. The Pact brings more strict provisions than the Stability and Growth Pact, including the commitment of signatory member states to translate the EU fiscal rules into their national legislation, either in the constitution or in some other legal vehicle with a strong and durable binding nature (*Euro Plus Pact*, April 20, 2011).

However, the Euro Plus Pact did not bring much novelty in terms of provisions in comparison to the 1997 Stability and Growth Pact. These provisions were repeatedly violated by several countries, including Germany, whose finance minister, Theo Waigel, had advocated for the pact in 1997. According to BBC’s “main offenders” list (BBC, *Eurozone crisis explained*, June 19, 2012), Italy regularly broke the 3% annual borrowing limit and Germany was the first big country to break the 3% rule, followed by France. The same media source reports that Greece never complied with the 3% target, but allegedly manipulated its debt statistics in order to enter the euro area and kept misreporting years after. The problems with Greece’s financial indicators were revealed when the European Commission issued a report on Greek government deficit and debt statistics which questioned the reliability of the figures sent by Greece to Eurostat regarding the countries’ data for 2005-2008 (*Report on Greek Government Deficit and Debt Statistics*, 2010).

On the other hand, Spain has been the only big economy which respected these debt and deficit rules, but only until the 2008 financial crisis (*Report on Greek Government Deficit and Debt Statistics*, 2010). In order to avoid history repeating and following a second agenda as well, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel started pleading for further, treaty-based, fiscal integration: “this (a European fiscal union with powers of enforcement) is exactly what’s on the agenda. We’re almost there. Of course, there are difficulties to be overcome. But the necessity of such action is widely recognized. We’re not just talking about a fiscal union but starting to create one. I believe you can’t overestimate the importance of this step” (The Guardian, *Angela Merkel vows to create ‘fiscal union’ across Eurozone*, December 2, 2011).

As a result, one week later the Heads of State or Government of the Eurozone member states agreed on a new intergovernmental treaty (*Statement by the Euro Area Heads of State or Government*, December 9, 2011) based on the provisions of the Stability and Growth Pact:

the *Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union*. The Fiscal Compact, which makes the subject of the current paper, is only a section of this treaty, in specific Part III. Among the new provisions of the Compact are the following: the signatory states commit to pass an amendment of the national constitution or a national law that includes the “golden rules” agreed on in the treaty and an automatic correction mechanism. The treaty also strengthens the excessive deficit procedure and the power of the European Court of Justice in monitoring national budgetary policies.

On March 2, 2012 all Member States signed the treaty except for the United Kingdom and Czech Republic. The Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the EMU should enter into force on January 1, 2013, if by then 12 members of the Eurozone will have ratified it. The Irish government was the only one to hold a referendum regarding the ratification, which turned out in favour of the treaty. Among the first countries to have ratified the treaty are Slovenia, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Ireland, Latvia and Denmark. Except for Germany, none of the countries that form the hard core of the Eurozone have yet ratified the treaty. Germany has ratified it in the Parliament on June 29, 2012. However, due to several appeals against the ESM and the Fiscal Compact, Germany's Constitutional Court has decided to delay its approval. In order for the ratification of the treaty to be completed in Germany, it had to be signed by the President Joachim Gauck, who was expecting for the highest court to pronounce itself regarding its constitutionality. After the Court allowed the ratification of the treaty, the German President signed it on September 13 (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Gauck unterzeichnet ESM-Gesetz und Fiskalpakt*, September 13, 2012).

In an interview for *Der Spiegel*, German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble had advanced the idea that Germans might vote in a referendum for more EU integration: “there's no problem with transferring more rights to Brussels, but the German people will have to make that decision” (*Der Spiegel*, *Interview with Finance Minister Schäuble: 'We Certainly Don't Want to Divide Europe'*, June 25, 2012). His statement stirred up the debate in Germany, dividing the opinions among media, politicians and civil society. While there was an increasing support for the idea of more participation regarding fiscal integration with the argument “That's democratic”, others thought back at the 1933 Nazi's referendum to leave the League of Nations (*Reuters*, *Risk, history shape German view on Europe referendum*, July 24, 2012) or doubted the capacity of citizens to understand and decide on complicated European matters such as the ESM or fiscal treaty (*Der Spiegel*, *Germany Debates a Euro Bailout Referendum*, June 26, 2012). However, taking into consideration the constantly declining trust in the EU, stressed by the crisis, listening to citizens' voice might help bridge the gap between them and Brussels and gain legitimacy for EU decisions, through a bottom-up approach. Horst Seehofer, the leader of Merkel's ally, the CSU, argued that “Politicians cannot simply impose more Europe on us from the top down [...] That's why I'm pleading for our constitution to allow us to have referendums on all important European matters” (*Euractiv.com*, *German parliament approves EU bailout fund*, July 2, 2012).

Similar issues were raised in France, where a study carried out by *Vêtements made in France* showed that 52% of the respondents wanted a referendum for the ratification of the Fiscal Compact, while 38% agreed to it passing through parliament and 10% were unsure (*Euractiv.com*, *Majority of French want referendum over new EU budget treaty*, July 27, 2012). These results might have also been fueled by François Hollande's demands during his presidential campaign for a renegotiation of the treaty, so that it would include a dimension of economic growth. In the debate about the fiscal compact, there have been two main lines of

criticism. The first regarded the austerity measures needed to reach the debt brakes, which were thought to impede economic growth and generate negative economic and social consequences. Martin Feldstein, Professor of Economics at Harvard University, legitimately asked how a country like Spain, with increased unemployment rates, could be required to raise taxes and cut social transfers as penalty for failing to comply with the golden rules (*Europe's Empty Fiscal Compact*, February 27, 2012). ECB president Mario Draghi came up with a response to Hollande's demands and the concerns regarding austerity, by proposing a "Growth Compact" complementary to the Fiscal Compact. The suggestion was soon agreed on during the EU Summit in Brussels on June 28-29, when EU leaders decided on a "Compact for Growth and Jobs" amounting 120 billion Euros aimed to stimulate growth, investment and employment as well as to make Europe more competitive. Sebastian Dullien, Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council of Foreign Relations, considered the Growth Compact a step forward in solving both the issue of economic growth and the negotiations for the ratification of the Fiscal Compact. He argued that "countries such as Germany may be willing to sign up for it as the price for ratifying the Fiscal Compact. For their part, countries skeptical of the current austerity stance might be willing to accept the Fiscal Compact if they see that the overall package is better than the status quo" (Dullien, *Reinventing Europe: Explaining the Fiscal Compact*, May 1, 2012).

The second concern with the Fiscal Compact regarded sovereignty and the transfer of national power and competences to Brussels. As Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French far-right Front National put it, "the treaty transfers budgetary sovereignty to Brussels technocrats" and would create "a German Europe [...] a diktat of the privileged caste and the banks" (Euractiv.com, *Majority of French want referendum over new EU budget treaty*, July 27, 2012). On the other hand, Yves Bertoncini, Secretary General of Notre Europe, argued that the sovereignty issue only stands for "countries under programmes" like Greece, which is obliged to allow EU and IMF interference in return for the bailouts. However, according to Bertoncini, countries like Spain, Greece, Ireland and Portugal are the only ones responsible for "*de facto* losing their sovereignty by putting themselves in a position of excessive dependence on their private creditors that grant them loans with unbearable interest rates" (Bertoncini, "*Fiscal Compact*", *Sovereignty and Austerity*, July 26, 2012). In other words, these countries pay for their mistakes through austerity and the restriction of sovereignty.

For Bertoncini ("*Fiscal Compact*", *Sovereignty and Austerity*, July 26, 2012), the Fiscal Compact illustrates the principle that "prevention is better than cure". From this point of view, it reflects the effort of EU leaders to reduce the negative spillover effects of the indiscipline of Eurozone members. And, as a second agenda, the fiscal union is meant to set the ground for EU leaders' ambitions for a political union. However, it is hard to imagine that further, political integration in a durable, more federalized EU is possible without the consent of its citizens. A referendum in France or Germany might have been an opportunity to raise the question of a prospective political union, but it might also have endangered the "saving" of the Eurozone in case citizens would have rejected the ESM and the Fiscal Compact, which seem to be the priorities on EU's current agenda.

2. The Fiscal treaty: trigger for a Europeanized debate?

The current paper places the EU Fiscal Compact in the broader debate about the emergence of a European public sphere. The intergovernmental treaty represents a milestone in shaping EU's political configuration which can deepen the Europeanization process. The compact has triggered debates at the national, transnational and supranational level, between political actors, media and civil society from different member states. The paper aims to capture the Romanian debate regarding the treaty among readers of two newspapers and to search for signs of an emerging Europeanized Romanian public sphere.

The European public sphere is increasingly described as a transnational network, a "communicative space" (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007) or a "community of communication" (Steege & Risse, 2010). 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). Europeanized public spheres are vehicles for information and awareness among citizens regarding the decision-making processes at the European level. Koopmans and Erbe (2004) showed that one can speak of a European-wide debate that interconnects Member States only when the European actors and issues in question have sufficient visibility and are known by the national actors and citizens. The argument follows John Dewey's claims for an enlightened public as a precondition for public participation in political debate. Trenz (2005, p. 411) attempted a recovery of the political dimension of the European public sphere concept, considering that "the minimum definition of the European public sphere [...] denotes thus an open communicative space that is linked to the approval and criticism of evolving forms of European governance. The European public sphere produces visible communication about the performance of European political actors and institutions. It is thus a political public sphere that refers to the normative expectations, attitudes and opinions expressed in the sphere of politics".

Koopmans and Erbe (2004, p. 6) identified three different forms of Europeanization of public communication: the emergence of a *supranational European public sphere*, described as a network of interactions between European institutions and actors on European topics, with the support of European-wide media; *vertical Europeanization*, which has a "bottom-up" and a "top-down" dimension. "Bottom-up" Europeanization refers to cases when national actors address European ones, whereas "top-down" Europeanization consists in interventions of EU actors in national policies and public debates in the name of regulations and common interests. *Horizontal Europeanization*, on the other hand, 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" (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004, pp. 6-7). This distinction between different patterns of Europeanization has mainly been applied in analyses of media articles. The present study proposes a different angle, which shifts the attention from journalists and political actors to citizens' mediated interactions. The aim of such a demarche is to capture how Romanians assimilate and filter the claims in the media about the Fiscal Compact, how they reframe it and to what extent this mediated debate shows signs of Europeanization. In order to identify traces of Europeanization in the dispute generated among Romanian readers of the newspapers analyzed, the analysis focuses on bottom-up and weak horizontal approaches.

The European public sphere is a potential vehicle for reducing the alleged democratic deficit of the EU by facilitating some of the basic criteria in democratic theory: popular control of the political agenda (Dahl, 1971), public participation (Beetham, Bracking, Kearton & Weir, 2002; Held, 2006), representation, transparency and accountability (Beetham, 1994). Furthermore, “we cannot – and should not – imagine a democratic politics without conflict, confrontation, and potentially dangerous disputes among actors. The task, rather, is to construct a «civil» society in which conflict is recognized but channeled through public politics into a means of developing practices of transparency and accountability that monitor both the state and private actors” (Guidry & Sawyer, 2003, p. 285). In other words, the European public sphere is seen more in Arendt’s agonistic terms, rather than in the habermasian rational consensus ones. Based on this distinction, I intend to identify how Romanian readers of the two newspapers analyzed construct their support and contestation regarding the Fiscal Compact and the decisions or actions taken by national or European political actors.

3. Methodology

In order to mix quantitative and qualitative perspectives, the research uses political claims analysis (see Koopmans & Statham, 1999, 2010) and frames analysis. Content analysis is used to measure the recurrence of different actors and attitudes towards the Fiscal treaty in readers’ comments. The inductive and deductive frames analysis allow zooming in and creating a broader, more detailed view of how the readers frame this topic and, to a certain extent, why.

Both the political claims analysis and the frames analysis were conducted based on the Codebook developed in the Europub project by Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham (2002), which was adapted to fit the topic of this paper. In addition to the frames pre-established by Koopmans and Statham in their Codebook, a small number of other frames were also included. The decision to include these additional frames was determined by the results of previous researches on Romanian media, frames which were considered likely to be used in the discourse about the fiscal treaty. An example is the “penalizing Europe” frame (Bârgăoanu, Dobrescu & Marincea, 2010; Bârgăoanu, 2011; Marincea, 2011), which is a depiction of the EU as a superior entity that sanctions Romania for its problems. The paper also draws comparisons to a previous analysis of the political claims about the treaty on the two newspaper websites, conducted during the same interval (Marincea, 2012). The issue-specific frames identified in the cited research were based on an inductive approach and are tested in the current analysis of users’ comments. These frames can be consulted in Annex 1.

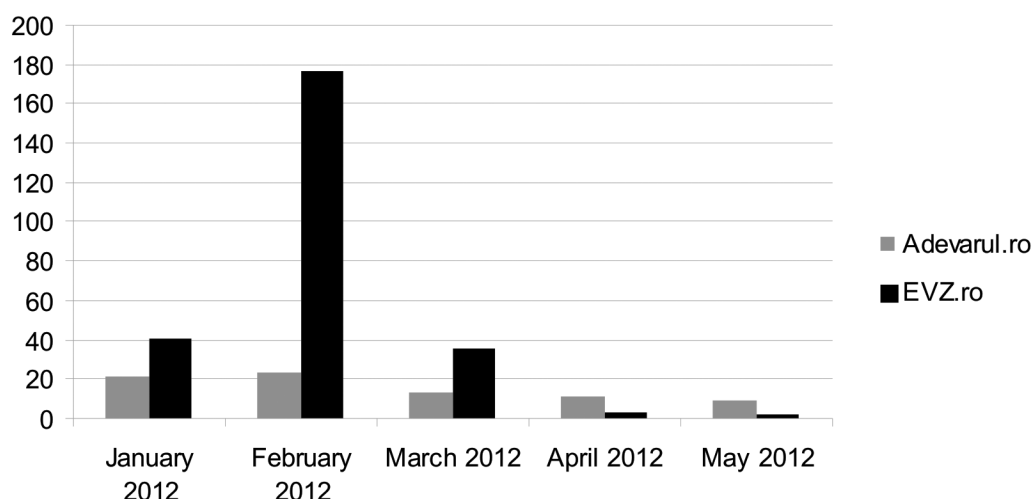
The analysis draws on articles published on the websites of two Romanian printed newspapers – Adevărul.ro [The Truth] and EVZ.ro [The Event of the Day]. These sources are considered to be targeted at the general public and part of the quality press. The selection of the two newspapers was based on their highest online traffic during the period analyzed, according to official statistics¹. The initial sample that resulted from the keywords and tags search consisted in 102 articles and 1501 comments. In order to determine the final sample, articles with no comments or articles that contained only comments that had no reference to the issue analyzed – the fiscal treaty – have been excluded. Therefore, the final research corpus consisted in 54 articles published during five months, 24 articles published on Adevărul and 30 on EVZ. The time frame analyzed is January – May 2012. The interval was chosen taking in-

to consideration that the treaty was signed in March 2012, which is why the five months period comprises two months before and two months after the signing of the Fiscal treaty.

The unit of analysis is the comment. I have only coded one claim per comment and have excluded from the analysis comments which make no clear reference (either implicit or explicit) to the Fiscal treaty. After these selection criteria have been applied on the 102 articles, the final sample for the analysis comprised 287 comments. It is worth mentioning that the distribution of these comments is highly uneven. Only 15% (43 comments) of the comments analyzed come from Adevărul, while the rest 85% come from EVZ. However, the 43 comments on Adevărul represent 32% of the total number of comments published on the initial Adevărul sample, while the 244 comments on EVZ only amount to 18% of the total number of comments on EVZ. The number of comments is much higher on EVZ, amounting to an average of 40 comments per article, in comparison to Adevărul, with an average of only 9 comments per article. In other words, even though readers tend to comment much less on Adevărul than on EVZ, most of the comments on the latter are rather off-topic.

The comments analyzed are unevenly distributed within the five months interval (Figure 1). Most of the articles and comments on both newspapers are in January and February, before the signing of the treaty which took place in March. This shows that readers were pre-occupied about this issue, tried to get involved in the debate and voiced their concerns about the ratification. After the decision was made, the interest regarding the issue dropped for both newspapers, tendency more pronounced on EVZ. In April and May readers of Adevărul became more active than the ones on EVZ in monitoring the news about the treaty.

Figure 1. Monthly distribution of comments on Adevărul.ro and EVZ.ro.



Some articles gained more interest and stirred up more debate among readers than others. The most commented article on Adevărul regards the criticism brought by Romanian liberal democrat Cristian Preda, member of the European Parliament, to the social democrats, for allegedly opposing the treaty (Adevărul.ro, *Preda: USL has no right to get us out of the EU for a radical political game*, February 19, 2012). However, from the 16 comments generated by this article, only two of them explicitly relate to the treaty, the others consisting in criticism or support against or for the Social Democrat Party (PSD)/ the Social Liberal Union (USL)

and the Democrat Liberal Party (PDL). The second most commented article refers to regulatory measures taken in addition to the fiscal treaty, which increase EU's competences by allowing it to monitor national budgets (Adevărul.ro, *European Union will receive the right to verify national budgets*, February 20, 2012). In contrast to the previous article, half of the comments for this article regard the treaty. A third news article by the number of comments is an analysis which takes up skeptical points of view from different political actors or media from other member states regarding the opportuneness of the fiscal treaty (Adevărul, *Why the new pact will not save Europe*, February 1, 2012).

The most commented articles on EVZ have a stronger national focus. The Romanian President's discourse after his participation at the European Council meeting in Brussels (January 2012) generated 3601 views and no less than 453 comments (EVZ.ro, *Traian Băsescu: Romania has a debt of 4,570 euros / capita, the lowest in EU*, January 31, 2012). A second highly debated article regards Traian Băsescu's criticism against the Opposition and a call for support addressed to Romanian politicians in regard to the fiscal treaty (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012). On the third place there is a mainly informative article which announces that Romania has signed the treaty and resumes the main provisions agreed upon (EVZ.ro, *Historic day: Romania signed the Treaty on Governance in the EMU*, March 2, 2012).

4. How did Romanian readers react?

Because the analysis was applied on users' comments, the claimants have been considered to be Romanian readers of the two websites; therefore, the research focus has been placed on the other actor-related variables: the addressees of the claims and the actors who are supported or criticized. The websites of the two newspapers allow users to post comments at the end of the article, which opens up the opportunity for debate. However, the communication is mediated, not direct, which explains why only one third of the claims on each of the newspapers have an addressee. In most of the cases, users resorted to markers of direct communication when they wanted to criticize certain actors or when they replied to other users' comments, but also, less frequently, when they wanted to explicitly express their support for the decision of signing the treaty, in which case they congratulated President Traian Băsescu and the government.

As expected, almost all readers targeted their claims at Romanian actors. There is only one exception, consisting in a comment on Adevărul which addressed the German Chancellor Angela Merkel using the singular form of the second-person pronoun: "Immer Vorwärts Genossin Merkel. They named you, they rule you. Wir singen frohlich die Internationale" (Adevărul.ro, *What remains after the last EU summit*, January 31, 2012). The usage of singular second-person pronouns was very common in readers' comments when they addressed or criticized politicians and was often used to show their dissatisfaction or even lack of respect for the contested actors. Other markers of disrespect were the colloquial manner of addressing them, writing the names of political actors or countries without capital letters and using appellatives instead of or associated with names, as in the example above.

All other claims addressed Romanian actors, either political representatives or members of the civil society. On both of the websites, around half of the claims which had an addressee were targeted at other users, as responses to previous comments: "Whose efforts, my dear Co-

rina? [...] but what would you say if we confiscated all the assets that exceed one million euro, don't you think we would get rid of the debt? wouldn't it be a proof of solidarity? wouldn't it still be reform?" (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012). This shows that the Fiscal Compact has generated debate among Romanian readers, even in a mediated form. When addressing other users, readers usually gave arguments for a different point of view, sometimes even resorting to invectives, or, in fewer cases, expressed their support and tried to back up the other users' statements with his/her own opinions.

Another half of the claims on Adevărul and only 12% on EVZ were targeted at the general public. Users used different discursive strategies when they addressed a larger audience. Some of them adopted the *expert* tone, assuming the role of informing or educating the others: "Let me tell you about the austerity measures and fiscal adjustments" (Adevărul, *The Fiscal Treaty, a necessary evil*, February 28, 2012); "do you know what this treaty means? Well, what boc (sic! Reference to the prime-minister Emil Boc) cut is nothing. Starting from now the Romanian State obliges itself not to exceed the budgetary deficit imposed by the EU, which leads to serious consequences for Romania's population" (EVZ.ro, *Historic day: Romania signed the Treaty on Governance in the EMU*, March 2, 2012). This category of "omniscient" readers who teach and explain also resorted to rhetorical questions in order to prove their point: "But how do you think that USL will agree to limit the budget deficit [...] PSD (Social Democrat Party) stayed years in Opposition and now when they hope to grab the bone again, be controlled by Europe?" (EVZ.ro, *Protocol for budgetary austerity, signed in the absence of USL*, February 16, 2012). Other readers took a more normative stand when they addressed Romanian readers, employing an imperative tone or calls for action: "We must be nationalists!!!!!!" (Adevărul.ro, *Merkel, after S&P decision: "We urgently need fiscal pact"*, January 15, 2012), "We must be united and support the government in order to have stability so that we can overcome the crisis!" (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012), "Wake up, Romanians, wake up!" (EVZ.ro, *What does the Treaty of budgetary discipline signed by 25 European countries, including Romania, provide*, February 1, 2012).

Except for these two categories of addressees – the general public and other users, on Adevărul there were only two other claims with different targets. One criticized the government for signing the treaty, while the other criticized the journalists at Adevărul for the way they framed the news. Similarly, EVZ readers only addressed three claims to the journalists from this newspaper, either as a response/explanation of the issue discussed by the article, or to express dissatisfaction with the framing of the Fiscal treaty in the news headline: "Protocol for budgetary austerity, signed in the absence of USL, you consider this a headline?? let's be serious, pick on Romania's important issues! This protocol is Băsescu's trademark and I do not think we need it! Give your resignation and cut the critiques (targeted at USL)! USL – THE GREATEST POWER –" (EVZ.ro, *Protocol for budgetary austerity, signed in the absence of USL*, February 16, 2012).

On the other hand, on EVZ there was an increased diversity of addressees. 14 out of 79 claims were directed at President Traian Băsescu and the government, mostly criticizing the decision to sign the treaty. The president was the most often target of these critiques, being addressed with different appellatives and even invectives. The tone is severe and informal, marked by the singular form of the second-person pronoun. Users resorted to this type of communication in order to diminish the statutory distance between them and the addressee, whom they admonished or held accountable: "You (President Băsescu) talk about «fiscal dis-

cipline», but who do you address? Those with whom you took part in the spoliation of the country” (EVZ.ro, *The fiscal discipline assumed by Băsescu, explained*, February 2, 2012). Other 6 claims negatively addressed the former president Ion Iliescu and the Social Liberal Opposition. There was also one comment that held the Romanian Parliament responsible for the decision to join the Fiscal Compact.

5. Support and contestation

The analysis of readers’ comments shows, on the one hand, that there was a high degree of contestation around the decision to sign the fiscal treaty. Over half of all the comments posted on both newspapers stated an explicit opposition to actions or decisions of different actors or to the actors themselves. Adevărul readers manifested their support for different political actors in a third of the comments, more often than the ones on EVZ, who were more focused on criticizing, with only a quarter of the claims greeting other actors. This difference may have been caused by the stronger focus of EVZ readers on the national debate regarding the treaty, and their constant criticism targeted either to the representatives of the Power or of the Opposition.

As expected, most of the contestation revolved around Romanian politicians, but it was not limited to them. A closer look at the results of the analysis points out different patterns of claim-making in the comments on each of the two news websites. Users on Adevărul seem to be more nationalists in their contestation regarding the treaty than the ones on EVZ. On the former, most of the claims (9 out of 22) expressed points of view in opposition to political actors from other European member states. The German chancellor Angela Merkel and the former French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, are political figures who were often targets of Romanian readers’ criticism, while in other cases the users pointed to the governments of the following countries: Germany, France, Netherlands and the United Kingdom. However, France and, to a lesser extent, Germany, gained almost the same amount of support from other readers of Adevărul, result which shows that Romanians who commented on this website were divided in their opinions regarding the treaty and this division led them to either agree or disagree with the key political players (or the other way round). On the other hand, Netherlands gained only criticism: “TYPICALLY DUTCH. We give lessons to the Greeks and the Romanians but we ourselves are in debt and deficit” (Adevărul.ro, *The new EU rules, already challenged by the Netherlands and Spain. Both risk penalties*, March 2, 2012).

Most of EVZ readers’ criticism to other member states revolved around Germany, but it was rather low in relation to the total number of comments (5 out of 164). On the other hand, only one reader appreciated the German contribution to the ratifying of the fiscal treaty. More support was directed to the Czech Republic (4 comments), UK (2 comments) and Ireland (2 comments). In the case of the first two, readers acclaimed their decision of not joining the treaty, while in Ireland’s case – the decision of holding a referendum was seen as a democratic act of letting people decide.

The second target of criticism in the comments on both websites was the EU or EU representatives such as Romanian members of the EP, in 7 out of the 22 claims with an opposing actor on Adevărul and 10 out of the 165 claims with an opposing actor on EVZ: “they verify our economy ... budget ... consumption ... wages ... birth ... and LIFE ... Welcome to the NEW WORLD ORDER ... which is installed squarely in the shadow ... who else wants freedom???” (Adevărul.ro, *European Union will receive the right to verify national*

budgets, February 20, 2012); “Adrian Vasilescu, in his recent book, gave 4 complete solutions to exit the crisis [...] Which solution did the EU choose? SACRIFICING THE POPULATION THROUGH AUSTERITY. So again the people will pay for the greed of globalist capitalists and politicians!” (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012). In contrast, only 4 Adevărul readers and 3 EVZ readers declared their support for the EU initiative and involvement in ratifying the Fiscal treaty: “IT CAN ONLY PLEASE, THIS COMMENDABLE INITIATIVE OF THE EU” (Adevărul.ro, *European Union will receive the right to verify national budgets*, February 20, 2012).

A previous research on claims regarding the Fiscal Compact in the articles published on Adevărul and EVZ in the same five month period showed that Adevărul, in contrast to EVZ, had a much stronger tendency towards Europeanization, especially a horizontal one (Marincea, 2012). The current analysis seems to add to this conclusion that not only the claims selected in the articles on Adevărul, but also the ones in readers' comments displayed a strong tendency towards horizontal Europeanization. Only 6 out of 22 claims opposed national and local Romanian actors, while 2 out of 13 manifested support for this type of actors. By contrast and in line with the results of the cited research, EVZ's parochial style “contaminated” their readers' comments as well. In 90% of all the comments with an explicit or implicit opponent, this opponent was Romanian, while in 77% of the supportive comments, this support was directed towards national actors. In most of the cases, the subjects of this support were the president (who was also the most contested political actor) or the democrat liberal government, in 30 out of 41 comments on EVZ and in only one comment on Adevărul. Other politicians from the social democrat Opposition gained much less support (11 EVZ comments), on Adevărul being entirely missing. Civil society actors were not so much present in readers' positive evaluations, the most frequent being economists and financial experts (3 comments), whose statements the readers used in order to back up their own claims.

Table 1. Party opposition and support in readers' comments, by newspaper.

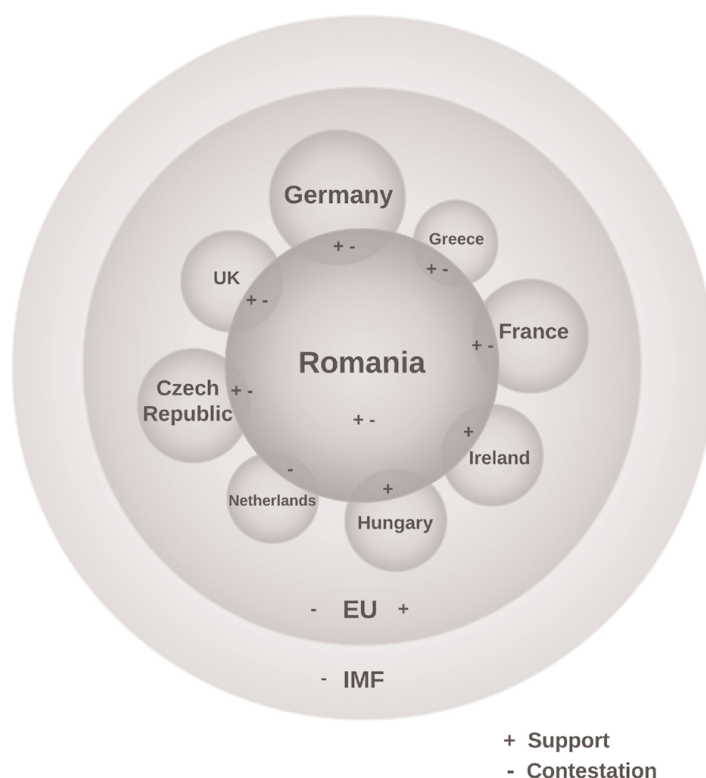
		Opponent party		Supported party	
		Adevărul.ro	EVZ.ro	Adevărul.ro	EVZ.ro
Party of opponent or supported actor	PDL	1	54	1	30
	PSD	0	14	0	1
	USL	1	61	0	10
Total		2	129	1	41

Table 1 shows that the general tendency in readers' comments was a critical one, negative comments regarding Romanian state and party actors being three times more frequent on EVZ than the positive ones. Almost 60% of the critiques were aimed at USL and the social democrats, in particular. While the Democrat Liberal Party and the president² were targets of the other 40% of the negative claims, PNL was almost absent from readers' evaluations in relation to the fiscal treaty, and mostly subsumed as part of USL. The results in Table 1 show that, while Adevărul readers were less preoccupied with monitoring Romanian politicians, EVZ readers seemed quite the opposite. In addition, in the EVZ readers' debate about the Fiscal

Compact there was a clear tendency in favour of president Traian Băsescu and the democrat liberals, in comparison to the social democrats, who got more critiques and less support, even though both sides were highly contested.

Figure 2 is a visual representation of the different levels of claims resulted from the comments analyzed on the two newspapers. It shows that Romanian actors (mostly politicians) remained in the center of readers' debate, which is rather polarized in their attitudes towards different actors at different levels. Online users adopted attitudes towards eight out of the 27 member states, mostly regarding Germany, France and the Czech Republic. Netherlands was the only country who has been solely criticized for its actions and claims, while Ireland and Hungary were the only countries which lacked criticism. To some extent, readers tended to acclaim the member states that adopted firm positions against the treaty (Czech Republic and UK), against the limitation of deficit (Hungary), or which asked their people to decide upon the ratification (Ireland). On the other hand, Germany and Netherlands, strong supporters of the treaty, have been mainly criticized, while France and Greece were placed between contestation and support. Greece was either set as a bad example, which Romania should avoid becoming, or portrayed as a victim. The frames analysis in the second part of the paper gives a broader insight on the reasons why readers evaluated these countries differently.

Figure 2. Targets of readers' support and contestation regarding the Fiscal Compact.



The attitude towards the EU was also divided, according to readers' opinions about the fiscal treaty. The ones who were in favour of the Fiscal Compact supported the EU as well and hoped that it would help Romania reach stability and diminish corruption, while the ones who

opposed the EU considered that the treaty would have negative consequences on Romania and other member states. There was also one claim which opposed the International Monetary Fund, considering the fiscal treaty “an assault of the finance together with IMF on the EU” (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012).

6. Readers' evaluations of the treaty, influenced by political affinities

As shown in the previous part, readers of both newspapers tended to have a critical attitude in regard to the different actors they perceived as key players in the ratification of the fiscal treaty. However, when they referred to the treaty, there were noticeable differences between the two newspapers analyzed. Table 1 shows that almost half of the Adevărul readers tended to criticize the treaty, while the other half was fairly divided between support and uncertainty. EVZ readers manifested the opposite tendency. 43% of all the comments on EVZ were in favour of the treaty, a third of the articles criticized it and only a quarter were either neutral or ambivalent in this regard. The same dichotomy between anti-treaty and pro-treaty attitudes was found at the level of claims in the news articles on the two websites, as the previous research shows (Marincea, 2012). This different bias of Adevărul and EVZ journalists and readers may suggest either that readers' opinion about the Fiscal Compact was influenced by the way the newspaper framed the issue and by their different selection of political claims, or that the readers turned to the news sources that confirmed their own beliefs.

Table 2. Readers' evaluation of the Fiscal treaty by newspaper

		Count % within newspaper	newspaper		Total
			Adevarul.ro	EVZ.ro	
Evaluation of Fiscal treaty	Negative	Count	20	74	94
	Neutral/Ambivalent	Count	12	66	78
	Positive	Count	11	104	115
Total		Count	43	244	287

In order to explain these attitudes, several correlations were run on the database for the two newspapers. The results showed a number of significant relations between readers' attitudes towards the treaty and their attitudes towards different party actors. At the 0.01 level the following conclusions could be drawn in regard to EVZ readers: users who criticized PDL (including the president) were against the treaty, while the ones who opposed USL had a positive attitude towards the fiscal treaty and tended to support PDL as well. There was also a clear division between supporters of the two parties, who tended to blame the other while acclaiming their favourite party. Taking into consideration that president Traian Băsescu and the democrat liberal government have been the ones to sign the Fiscal Compact, while the Opposition was more reserved in this regard, the correlations suggest that EVZ readers' opinions about this issue were determined by their political affinities.

In addition, EVZ readers manifested a clear support for PDL and the president, as opposed to USL. Correlations ($\text{sig} = 0.000$) point out that comments which criticized USL and the ones which acclaimed the treaty gained the most positive feedback from other readers (number of positive votes). The same holds for comments in support of PDL, which gained more positive votes than the ones in favour of the social liberals ($\text{sig} = 0.028$). These results corroborate the previous ones, in Table 1, which also showed a general more positive attitude towards PDL in the case of EVZ and towards the treaty as well. Because Adevărul readers made few evaluations regarding Romanian politicians, there is not enough data to draw similar conclusions regarding the political affinities of these users.

7. Readers' framing of the Fiscal Compact

In order to have a broad view on the debate about the Fiscal Compact among the readers of the two newspapers, an inductive and a deductive frames analysis were conducted (all the identified frames can be viewed in Annex 1). The results show that there is a wide variety of interpretations and arguments brought by Romanian readers to support their stand on this issue. 91 news frames occurrences were identified on Adevărul and 491 on EVZ, which were grouped in four clusters: general, issue-specific, political and economic frames. Most of the frames previously identified from the claims of different actors in the news (Marincea, 2012) were also adopted by readers, but with different salience. Furthermore, there were also new frames that readers used when referring to the fiscal treaty, in comparison to the ones in the articles analyzed. In comparison to the claims made by journalists or political actors, which were mainly issue-specific and economic ones, readers prefer political and general frames, which seem to ease their understanding of the treaty. Among the most frequently used frames in readers' claims are corruption, communism and wastefulness, frames with a much lower salience in the news articles. The austerity interpretation is rather salient in readers' comments as well, but it does not dominate their debate as much as it seems to preoccupy other categories of stakeholders (mainly politicians). Readers tend to interpret the issue by resorting to historical frames more than journalists or politicians, and focus less on conflict framing. The most frequently used frames, including austerity, have polarized interpretations, showing that the divergent opinions follow readers' political preferences. To give an example, for supporters of the democrat-liberal government, austerity has a positive connotations, been seen either as necessary discipline and possible solution to the crisis, or as means for reducing national corruption. At the opposite end, supporters of the social-democrats see austerity in a negative way, associating it with poverty.

Overall and not surprisingly, the readers use a much more critical tone in their claims and framing of the fiscal treaty in comparison to other claim-makers. However, there seems to be a correspondence between the general attitude and reporting style of readers and of the different news sources they read. Adevărul shows a negative bias in relation to the treaty, but a more Europeanized reporting, while EVZ has a rather positive attitude, but mainly parochial, both in the news articles and in readers' comments. This suggests that readers are influenced by the news source they choose. However, the current analysis does not allow any causality statements regarding this matter, nor does it aim for that.

The frames which were most frequently used by readers of both newspapers were political ones. Among them, *corruption* was the most salient, with an occurrence of 8 comments

on Adevărul and 55 on EVZ. However, the use of this frame varied. In most cases, it was used as an argument in favour of the fiscal treaty, the readers considering that it would help to reduce corruption among Romanian politicians: “FINALLY, IT WILL END THE ROBBERY AND I HOPE THAT ALL WHO HAVE UNJUSTIFIED WEALTH STOLEN FROM PUBLIC FUNDS WILL HAVE THEIR ASSETS CONFISCATED” (Adevărul.ro, *European Union will receive the right to verify national budgets*, February 20, 2012). In line with this perception, *corruption* was also used to criticize the position adopted by USL regarding the treaty, in contrast to its democrat liberal promoters: “By signing this treaty by USL, Iliescu [the former president] is afraid that PSD will not be able anymore to steal as much as they have stolen from the 90s onwards. Without money stolen from the budget, there will be no PSD. This is how they have understood governing so far”. (EVZ.ro, *Ion Iliescu: “If you cut, at least you should know why and how”*, February 15, 2012).

Other more skeptical readers believed that the ratification of the treaty would not have any impact on national corruption, or even that it might facilitate it: “but as for stealing, stealing from the budget will continue, will it not?” (EVZ.ro, *Traian Băsescu welcomes the signing of the Protocol for the Treaty on fiscal stability*, February 15, 2012); “Well, I’ll tell you about these austerity measures and tax adjustments. These guys thought that after they’ve been stealing for 22 [years] [...] they want to steal from us through these measures [...] either through cuts, or through increased taxes” (Adevărul, *The Fiscal Treaty, a necessary evil*, February 28, 2012). For this reason, these readers tended to consider that the *treaty is useless*, frame with a low salience, but which was also identified in the claims of political actors from other member states (Marincea, 2012).

Readers of both news websites perceived that there is a cleavage between Romania and more developed countries, but the opinions diverged when it came to the effects that the treaty might have in bridging this development gap. The optimists hoped that it will help Romania “catch up”: “At least theoretically, Romania is on the right track, I think. [...] Let’s hope that we will start to run a little faster to catch up with others” (Adevărul, *The new pact for financial stability, which Romania will also accede to, will be signed in March*, January 9, 2012). On the other hand, pessimists thought that this treaty would increase the gap between rich and poor EU countries, and even that it would help the former overcome the *economic crisis* at the expense of the latter: “it is clear that there will be states which will not be able to achieve the targets and will be punished ... these countries will still be the weak ones which cannot sustain their economy so Rromania (sic!) will be punished and the fine will go to the states who reach the targets ... simple ... if by mistake there will be strong states who do not reach the targets then they will be punished with a derogation or eyes will be closed the same as it happened with France and germany (sic!) when they violated the maastricht (sic!) criteria” (Adevărul, *The new pact for financial stability, which Romania will also accede to, will be signed in March*, January 9, 2012).

Readers also used comparisons between Romania and other member states in order to argument their perception that the fiscal treaty would increase the inequality between member states. Some of them considered that the European pact was conceived as a saving plan for Greece and other members of the Eurozone; they argued that it as an injustice that Romania should pay for these countries’ failure, particularly because they have higher wages and a much higher standard of living in comparison to Romania, argument which gave way to readers’ frustration: “But does the treaty signed not mean that my money should help save Greece where ordinary people don’t seem so ... conscientious as the dumb Romanian in tightening

the belt?” (EVZ.ro, *Traian Băsescu: Romania has a debt of 4,570 euros / capita, the lowest in EU*, January 31, 2012). In other comments, Greece was set as a bad example which Romania should try to avoid becoming, this being an argument in favour of the treaty and often framed in relation to *corruption*: “without the pact we will steel from each other until we become like Greece” (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012).

In contrast to claims in the news articles, users’ comments often used historical frames to explain their opposition towards the treaty. They went back to different periods in the history of the European continent, mostly periods of conflict and oppressive ideologies. The most common references (4 comments on Adevărul and 23 on EVZ) regarded *communism*, either the Romanian regime or, more generally, the communist/Stalinist rule in Eastern Europe. The frame was used in different contexts. In most cases, readers made use of it to criticize Romanian politicians for their stand regarding the treaty (especially from USL and PSD, in particular), calling them communists or neo-communists: “Of course USL has an anti-European attitude, but why? Well let’s see who is part of USL—all former communist demagogues who were at the same table and raised in the shadow of “the most beloved son of the Romanian people, President Nicolae Ceaușescu” [...] who helped building “Romania’s Golden Age”, people who now have a new neo-communist front, people who cannot break with the past” (EVZ.ro, *Cristian Preda: Adrian Năstase, the ideologist of exiting the EU*, February 18, 2012).

In addition, the readers accused these political parties of being anti-European or even pro-Russian: “The problem is that the Opposition, represented by USL, already chose Russia, not Europe! All actions undertaken show clearly this is the direction they follow! Actually, come to think ... it is the direction they have always followed, since August 23, 1944, when the Red Army invaded Romania!” (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012). This second frame underlines readers’ perception of the cleavage between a “civilized”, “future-oriented” West and a “barbarian”, communist East (or other third world references). This distinction serves as an argument in favour of the treaty: “Normally if we are a country that wants to grow then we have to approve the EU pact. If we want to transform our country into a banana republic we will refuse any cooperation with the EU” (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012).

On the other hand, more nationalist readers evoked *communism* to criticize the treaty. Some called to mind the Romanian communist regime resembling it to the future austerity brought by the Fiscal Compact: “If Nicolae Ceaușescu had lived, he would certainly have found a reason for satisfaction in the way European leaders insist to solve the problem of huge debt accumulated by EU countries. Just as the communist dictator paid the debt in the ‘80s, so do the European authorities plan to resolve the problems – through ‘skin and bones’ austerity” (EVZ.ro, *The fiscal discipline assumed by Băsescu, explained*, February 2, 2012). In addition, the EU was accused by readers of *imperialist* intentions: “what do you see as „right-winged” in the fact ... that great empires make rules in small countries? ... this is communism ... and this is only the beginning” (EVZ.ro, *Protocol for budgetary austerity, signed in the absence of USL*, February 16, 2012). A similar frame, which was also identified in the claims made in the media (Marincea, 2012), but in a lighter tone, depicted Germany as trying to impose its own plans and views over the other countries: “The European fiscal pact is only Germany’s (sic!) maneuver in which they enslave the entire EU. Therefore, [...] Romania should denounce its signing and join the Czech Republic and the UK!” (EVZ.ro, *Daniel Dăianu: It*

wouldn't be wise that the Fiscal Treaty be applied in Romania starting with January 1, 2013, April 2, 2012).

A few readers also made references to the Maastricht Treaty, reminding the fact that Germany, France and other Eurozone countries have violated the provisions regarding deficit or debt brakes, without being sanctioned. Other, more emotionally charged *historical frames* used by readers are *imperialism/colonialism*, *fascism/Nazism*, the *World Wars* and even the *Middle Ages*: "USL is still in the Middle Ages (not in the EU), they only know how to look responsibly at their own pockets" (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012). The *responsibility* and the *accountability* frames were also salient in 24 and 12 comments. In most cases, readers accused Romanian politicians of lack of responsibility, or of lack of *competence*. In other cases, they expressed their hopes that the Fiscal Compact would impose strict rules of handling and monitoring the budget, which would increase the *efficiency* of public spending and the accountability of politicians.

This line of argumentation was related to another frame, which was the most prominent economic frame that readers used: *wastefulness*. Romanian readers often accused their politicians of throwing away budget money for electoral campaigns or for different social policies, which some readers called "charity" (the ones who opposed the social democrats). They hoped that the Fiscal treaty would reduce the wastefulness of public spending: "The good news is that the Treaty of the European financial governance will lead to drastic cuts on charity by limiting the waste of money on state pensions and salaries in the public sector" (EVZ.ro, *Protocol for budgetary austerity, signed in the absence of USL*, February 16, 2012). For these readers, *wastefulness* was associated with *social democracy* and *demagogy*: "It's over with the socialism trick in Europe (sic!), whenever these shameless [socialists] came to power in a country they indebted it in order to give election charity and then, from the Opposition, shamelessly criticized the austerity measures meant to repair their waste. Social-Democracy, a big hypocrisy and lies" (EVZ.ro, *Protocol for budgetary austerity, signed in the absence of USL*, February 16, 2012).

Other users criticized the treaty and the EU making references to *capitalism*. In their views, both *austerity* and what the treaty promotes as *solidarity* are rather the price poor countries have to pay for the recklessness of the developed countries and the financial elite: "How blackened and mean can your soul be as to think it's normal that the poor be solidary with the rich with the greedy capitalist who took advantage of the system???" (Adevărul, *Why the new pact will not save Europe*, February 1, 2012). Four readers went as far as to consider EU leaders or national ones, in particular the Romanian president, as being *manipulated by the financial elite*: "this seems to be an assault of the finance together with IMF on EU. IMF is the tool of the international mafia that bankrupts countries and turns them into simple executants after it deprives them of all they have [...] to come forth and give the IMF as argument in the European construction is to acknowledge your membership in that mob either as its executor (which is highly likely) or as part of it ... băsescu (sic!) is the man of international mafia who acts squarely against Romanian citizens" (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012).

A similar line of argument used frames like *globalization* or *free trade* – considered to disadvantage member states with a decreased competitive market, such as Romania. On the other hand, some readers acknowledged that the fiscal pact would strengthen the EU's role in the global competition and pleaded for *unity*: "A historic agreement was signed and Romanians should be proud. When world economy globalizes, Europe must be united, otherwise it has no

chance of survival. Do we want to be at the mercy of the Russians, the Chinese, the Indians or the Americans? [...] Europe, with good things and not so good, is our home and we have to defend it at all costs". (EVZ.ro, *Coalition leaders have signed the Protocol for the Ratification of the Treaty on EU governance*, February 15, 2012). As this comment shows, some readers pleaded for the ratification of the treaty using a *European identity* framing. They defined their European belonging in opposition to "the other", usually identified as Russia. In other cases, however, "the other" became the EU or western, developed countries. The perceived gap between Romania and these countries was framed by some readers in terms of *national identity*. They scolded Romanians and held them accountable for not being as competitive as more developed countries, and used this critique in support of the fiscal treaty: "You got used to others doing the work for you and to enslaving future generations. What luxurious living on debt means, we've already seen from the Americans. We cannot even afford their recklessness, we are much poorer, more ineffective, more rascal, much lazier" (EVZ.ro, *Traian Băsescu: Romania has a debt of 4,570 euros / capita, the lowest in EU*, January 31, 2012).

The issue-related frames which dominated readers' discourse about the fiscal treaty are the same as the ones political actors or journalist used in their claims (see Marincea, 2012). 22 comments on both websites made references to *austerity*, which was seen either as a necessary measure to surpass the *economic crisis*, or as a harmful consequence of the treaty, which would impoverish the population (but not the political class as well) or inhibit *economic growth*: "Austerity is not good because lack of investment increases unemployment" (Adevărul, *Europe is starting to refuse the austerity medication*, April 24, 2012). Readers also related the fiscal pact to *discipline*, which gave it a general positive connotation. Interpreted from a *sticks and carrots* perspective, the treaty was thought to lead to a better management of public funds, due to the debt and deficit targets and the risk of being penalized through *sanctions*. For this reason, the optimist readers invested the Fiscal Compact with a cathartic function of bringing order to national politics and reducing corruption by disciplining Romanian politicians: "If the theft continues, Romania will never develop. As Romanians only listen to the stick, this treaty will make Romania develop because political locusts will NOT be able to steal anymore" (EVZ.ro, *Ilie Șerbănescu: "If the deficit will be lower, there will be less to steal"*, February 15, 2012).

Users of EVZ commonly associated the treaty with *national interest*, by arguing either in favour or against it: "The political class must understand that it is a very important decision for Romania's future whether the treaty will be ratified or not and how soon" (EVZ.ro, *Traian Băsescu: Romania has a debt of 4,570 euros / capita, the lowest in EU*, January 31, 2012). This frame was also used to legitimize the decision to join the pact made by the governing coalition and the president, who were congratulated by some readers for acting in the interest of the country. On the other hand, the Opposition was blamed for acting "in the detriment of Romania and Romanians" (EVZ.ro, *Coalition leaders have signed the Protocol for the Ratification of the Treaty on EU governance*, February 15, 2012) because of their reserved attitude and refusal to participate in the consultations on this issue. These readers accused the Opposition of putting personal interests above national ones and some threatened that people would sanction their position at the following elections. However, other readers criticized the Power on the same grounds. In their view, agreeing to sign the treaty was against national interests, or even an act of "betrayal".

It is noteworthy that readers were slightly more concerned about issues related to *sovereignty* or *self-determination* in their claims regarding the treaty than politicians and journal-

ists. For these readers, the ratification of the Fiscal Compact meant “giving away the remainings of people’s wealth and income of sovereignty and autochthonous self-management” (EVZ.ro, *Traian Băsescu: Romania has a debt of 4,570 euros / capita, the lowest in EU*, January 31, 2012). Others went as far as to define the treaty as “MODERN SLAVERY” (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012). This line of argument gave way to a *nationalist framing* and anti-EU calls for action: “WE MUST BE NATIONALISTS, WE MUST BE PATRIOTS [...] THE ONLY SOLUTION: THE ABOLITION OF THE BABYLONIAN EU!!!!” (Adevărul.ro, *European Union will receive the right to verify national budgets*, February 20, 2012).

The research on the news articles (Marincea, 2012) shows that the claims made by the Romanian president and by representatives of the governing coalition placed them in the role of “good guys” who intended to set a model of compliance by being among the first countries to ratify the treaty. The analysis on readers’ comments points out the reaction that some of the users had to this point of view. Some readers criticized harshly or ironically what they perceived as a compliant attitude of “signing with eyes closed” just to please the EU officials: “Now see how auntie Europe will pat us on the back and praise us in front of the class for being the first at signing documents that are shoved in our face” (EVZ.ro, *Coalition leaders have signed the Protocol for the Ratification of the Treaty on EU governance*, February 15, 2012). Others explained this hurry to sign the treaty using a frame which was also identified in the claims made by different politicians, both Romanian and from other member states – the *fear of being left out*, or the wish to be in the same boat with the key EU players: “another superficiality in thinking. quick quick so that no one understands, [...] so that us, too, get in the boat [...] what they’re doing in Brussels and Bucharest is signing with their eyes shut, no one pays attention to us anyway” (EVZ.ro, *Protocol for budgetary austerity, signed in the absence of USL*, February 16, 2012). While some condemned this attitude – “we’re in just to be there, for the rest, God have mercy” (Adevărul, *The new pact for financial stability, which Romania will also accede to, will be signed in March*, January 9, 2012), others suggested that Romania had a stake in joining the treaty: “The significance of the protocol must be explained to the population, and the potential consequences if we remained outside the game [...] the protocol must be assumed” (EVZ.ro, *Ungureanu will contact USL leaders and ask them to sign the Protocol in support of the EU Treaty*, February 15, 2012).

As the above comment shows, readers pointed out the need for *information and awareness* among Romanian citizens regarding the fiscal treaty. In addition, others advocated for the *participation* of citizens in such decisions, taking the referendum organized by Ireland as an example of involving citizens in national decision-making. Ireland’s referendum was brought up not only as an appraisal of a functional *democracy*, but also in contrast to Romania’s case; readers accused president Băsescu of having a dictatorial behaviour and making the decision on his own – “With Europe after you consult with the people [...] WITH EUROPE IF THE COUNTRY WANTS, NOT AS YOU PLEASE” (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012). The parallel between Ireland, as a good example, and Romania, as a bad example was framed in terms of *democracy and participation*: “While Ireland holds a referendum” (EVZ.ro, *Historic day: Romania signed the Treaty on Governance in the EMU*, March 2, 2012), Traian Băsescu calls for consultations with the Opposition, but “has already de facto signed the treaty, again miming democracy” (EVZ.ro, *Consultations at Cotroceni. The Coalition invites the Opposition to dialogue*, February 13, 2012).

The need for public consultations was also brought up in relation to another topic raised by readers – the *modification of the national Constitution* as a consequence of signing the treaty: “When you sign an amendment to the Constitution, you need public consultation, possibly referendum” (EVZ.ro, *Băsescu addresses the Opposition: With Europe or against it?* February 1, 2012). This was also framed in terms of *legitimacy* or *credibility*. Readers disputed the president’s legitimacy to sign the treaty in Romania’s name or to modify the Constitution without previous public consultations. Their arguments were that, at that time, people were asking the president to resign, trust in him being very low and, therefore, “he doesn’t represent anyone anymore, so that signature (on the treaty) is virtually useless” (EVZ.ro, *Great Britain and Czech Republic don’t want the new budgetary pact. Romania signed the agreement. Constitution should be amended by the end of 2013, January 31*, 2012). The argument of *legitimacy/credibility* was also brought in another context, used to criticize representatives of PSD. Readers accused the former president, Ion Iliescu, and the former prime-minister, Adrian Năstase, for lacking the credibility necessary to make public statements about the fiscal treaty.

8. Conclusions

The EU Fiscal Compact was a highly controversial topic among political actors and citizens as well. It has sparked debate at the national level and between the Member States, debate which can create the prospect for a Europeanized public sphere. The research points out that not only politicians, but also Romanian citizens, readers of *Adevărul* and *Evenimentul Zilei*, showed concern in regard to this issue. Divergences between the President, supported by PDL, and USL have infiltrated not only the media, but also Romanians’ mediated debate. The results of the analysis suggest that the Fiscal Compact has led to a division of Romanian readers of the two websites along party affinities. In other words, supporters of president Traian Băsescu and of the democrat liberals manifested a positive attitude in regard to the treaty, while criticizing the actions of USL. In the case of EVZ, the overall tendency of comments was more favourable to PDL than to USL, therefore the Fiscal Compact gained less contestation than support. However, the debate between EVZ users was rather parochial, without many references to decisions or actions outside Romania. On the other hand, comments on *Adevărul* displayed consistent traces of weak horizontal Europeanization and a general negative attitude towards the treaty. *Adevărul* users paid more attention to national leaders from other member states than to Romanian ones when they evaluated politicians’ actions before and after the signing of the Fiscal Compact. These readers were not reluctant in vehemently criticizing the positions of Germany, Netherlands or other Eurozone countries, or in making nationalist claims or calls for patriotism. Taking these results into consideration, the following hypothesis can be advanced for further studies to test: that horizontal forms of Europeanization might trigger a more critical attitude towards European issues.

The frames analysis conducted showed that readers’ debate about the Fiscal Compact was very rich in interpretations. Their arguments in favour or against the treaty frequently adopted frames from the political discourse identified in the media, such as austerity, sovereignty, discipline or economic growth, but readers often put a different spin on them or prioritized them in different ways. In addition, though the main arguments in the claims of political actors and of Romanian citizens were common, the latter had a much stronger emotional ground.

Readers' debate was highly politicized, tendency also revealed by the primary use of political frames over the other types of frames. The red line of readers' comments revolved around their critical attitude towards the Romanian political class, framed in terms of corruption, inefficiency or incompetence, wastefulness, lack of responsibility and demagoguery. For a significant part of the readers, these problems represented arguments in support of the treaty, seen as the EU's disciplinary stick. On the other hand, the levels of contestation were considerably high, the Fiscal Compact generating among Romanian citizens the frustration of being forced to be solidary with richer countries or even to pay for their misdeeds.

The concern of different political leaders regarding the restriction of national sovereignty through the treaty was also common in Romanian readers' comments. The most Euro-skeptical ones drew on historical frames such as communism or imperialism when they evaluated EU and national actors' decisions. And while voices in France and Germany have advanced the idea of a potential referendum for the ratification of the treaty, Romanian citizens also showed some interest in being involved in this decision. The need for more information about the treaty and for a higher awareness among Romanians was highlighted more than once, as well as the need for citizens to participate in the ratification. While Ireland was commonly used as a model of democratic civic engagement, some readers criticized the lack of consultation and the "blind-folded signing" of the Fiscal Compact by president Traian Băsescu.

Without doubt, the fiscal treaty has divided both political actors and citizens and has raised the stake of the debate about the future of the EU to the prospect of a political union. It is understandable why, in the context of a constantly degrading trust in EU and of the economic crisis which highlights the cleavages between Member States, such a project creates high levels of contestation, with different targets. However, it might be exactly this contestation that could pave the way for a real opening of the dialogue between EU leaders and citizens, with a stronger bottom-up focus. The question posed is not just about the Fiscal Compact, the ESM or a fiscal union, but rather about which way EU should take. And the current analysis shows that, if the EU still benefits of the trust of new member states like Romania, mainly because of its citizens' distrust in national politics, setting up a political union without asking people first might cause some loss of legitimacy and even a blame-shifting behaviour.

The research suggests that there are traces of an agonistic, issue-related public sphere at the level of Romanian citizens who read *Adevărul* and *EVZ*. And to some extent, the debate within this mediated public sphere gives proof of an emerging Europeanized communication. The analysis also suggests that the degree of Europeanization of the newspaper influences the degree of Europeanization of the debate between readers. In other words, newspapers that talk about EU issues and monitor what happens in other member states represent an incentive for their readers to do the same. However, the readers' participation in the public sphere remains isolated from the national or European political communication; it is hard to imagine that a Europeanized Romanian public sphere that could contribute to reducing the democratic or communication deficit of the EU could emerge without bridging the gap between the two.

The Fiscal Compact is the result of the "once bitten, twice shy" behaviour generated by the crisis. The analysis suggests that this type of behaviour was common both for Romanian citizens and for European or national leaders, though sometimes in slightly different ways. For Germany and other promoters of the treaty, it represented a solution to avoid further slippages and contagions in the Eurozone, or a lesson learned starting with the Greek crisis. On the other hand, for actors who opposed the treaty or emphasized on the need for economic growth, the lesson learned from the crisis was that austerity by itself may not be a solution or may even

deepen the crisis, which is why a Growth Compact was proposed. For Romanian readers who have been “bitten” by the economic crisis, by the austerity measures and the corruption of the political class, the perspective of more austerity is either a scarecrow or, on the other hand, an acceptable compromise to reduce further wastefulness. All these actors’ claims seem to point to one conclusion: more than ever, the EU is going through the age of precaution.

Rezumat: Lucrarea propune o abordare empirică nouă în studiul europenizării sferelor publice, constând în o analiză a revendicărilor politice și o analiză a cadrajelor identificate în comentariile privind Tratatul Fiscal, prin comparație cu revendicările identificate în articolele din presă. Cercetarea oferă o imagine de ansamblu privind modul în care cetățenii români au interpretat acțiunile și deciziile actorilor politici, precum și pozițiile adoptate de aceștia privind subiectul analizat. Rezultatele cercetării arată că atitudinea cititorilor în privința tratatului fiscal este influențată de afinitățile sau animozitățile lor politice, precum și că gradul de europenizare al fiecărui ziar determină gradul de europenizare al revendicărilor realizate de cititori în comentarii. Lucrarea pune sub semnul întrebării participarea cetățenilor la sfera publică, participare care constă în interacțiuni mediate cu un nivel ridicat de contestare. Tratatul Fiscal European a generat o sferă publică agonistică, ad-hoc, care, într-o oarecare măsură, implică și consumatorii de media online; aceștia nu se rezumă la a replica dezbaterile politice dintre liderii europeni, ci îi adaugă propriile lor interpretări. Pe lângă monitorizarea și discutarea deciziilor politice, cititorii ziarelor Adevărul și Evenimentul Zilei interpelează clasa politică, solicitând ca cetățenii să fie informați și să participe în procesul decizional de ratificare a tratatului. Cu toate acestea, nivelul general de europenizare al dezbaterii dintre cititori este unul destul de scăzut.

Cuvinte-cheie: tratatul fiscal european, europeanizarea sferelor publice naționale, sferă publică, uniune fiscală, analiza revendicărilor politice

Notes

¹ Between January and May 2012, an average of 2.422.011 unique users have visited the website of Adevărul and 1.524.097 unique users have visited the website of EVZ. According to Internet audience and traffic study, <http://www.sati.ro>

² Due to his affiliation to the Democrat Liberal Party, president Traian Băsescu has been associated with this party in the analysis, even though, during his mandate, he doesn't have an official affiliation.

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Annex 1. Frames used by readers on Adevărul.ro and EVZ.ro in their comments about the Fiscal Compact.

Frames	Newspaper		Frames	Newspaper	
	Adevărul	EVZ		Adevărul	EVZ
Specific			Economic		
Austerity	4	18	Wastefulness	0	19
Economic crisis/debts crisis	2	17	Economic growth	1	13
Discipline	3	12	Loss/Threat	3	10
Modification of Constitution	0	11	Accountability	4	8
Germany imposes treaty	1	9	Win/Opportunity	0	8
Penalizing Europe – sanctions	2	3	Capitalism	3	2
Treaty is useless	0	4	Stability	0	3
Sticks vs. carrots	2	1	Strength in global competition	1	2
Spill over	1	0	Free trade	0	2
Total	15	75	Total	12	67
General			Political		
Historical frames	2	20	Corruption	8	55
Efficiency, competence	2	20	Equality among member states	8	24
National interest	0	19	Communism	4	23
Information/awareness	1	15	Responsibility frame	2	22
Comparisons between MS	0	14	Demagogy	0	16
Conflict frame	2	9	East (Russia) vs. West (EU)	0	15
Unity	3	5	Dictatorship/totalitarianism	2	12
Credibility/legitimacy	0	6	Democracy	4	8
Slavery	0	6	Sovereignty	6	3
Solidarity	1	4	Nationalism	2	6
National identity	1	4	Colonialism/imperialism	1	7
Economic consequences	5	0	Participation	1	6
Civilization	0	4	Socialism/social democracy	0	5
Western culture	3	1	Fear of being left out	1	3
Globalization	0	3	EU/national leaders are manipulated by financial elites	1	3
Modernization/future-oriented	0	3	Self-determination	1	1
EU identity	0	2	Fascism/Nazism	1	2
Freedom, liberty	2	0	Federalism	0	1
Peace	0	1	Bureaucracy	0	1
Total	22	136	Total	42	213
Total Adevărul	91				
Total EVZ	491				