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## The Rise of Euroscepticism in Times of Crisis. Evidence from the 2008–2013 Eurobarometers

### Abstract

The financial and economic turmoil within the European Union has significantly impacted upon the way in which the European citizens assess the advantages of EU membership and the future of the integration process. Intensely preoccupied with the economic problems, the EU leadership has lost sight of the constant decrease of public support and the increasing lack of citizens' confidence in the Union. This paper seeks to show the dynamics of public opinion between 2008 and 2013 with a special focus on the rise of Euroscepticism, using secondary data analysis of standard Eurobarometers. Our longitudinal analysis reveals the dynamics of EU-related attitudes and perceptions before, during, and after most of events that are usually labeled under the rather generic term "crisis".

**Keywords:** Euroscepticism; Eurozone crisis; EU legitimacy crisis; Eurobarometers.

### 1. EU Public Opinion during the Crisis

The financial and economic crisis that the European Union is currently undergoing has determined transformations both at the structural and symbolic levels of the European project. Ever since Greece's public acknowledgement of its debt-related problems in 2010 and the subsequent economic and financial problems that the country admitted it could not overcome by itself, the flawed architecture of the monetary union has been exposed and dark clouds have gathered over the EU. In spite of numerous summits, official meetings and heated debates over the austerity measures needed to overcome the negative effects of the crisis and over the solutions to save the Eurozone, consensus has not yet been reached. However, there seems to be a unanimously accepted idea among European leaders and European affairs scholars that the collapse of the European Union should be avoided (Barroso, 2011; Habermas, 2011, 2012) and that the European project should be consolidated and re-designed according to the political, economic and social realities of the global world. This urge to save the European Union is also motivated by a paradox, namely that the Union runs a major risk of disintegration precisely because it *cannot* disintegrate (Krastev, 2012). Given the commitment of all involved parties, in the long run, the EU will probably attain the level of political, economic and finan-

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cial integration that it seeks, be it for the Eurozone countries only or even for Union as a whole. No matter how comprehensive this level of integration will be, there is one important aspect that the European decision-makers can hardly afford to leave unattended: the dynamics of the public opinion across the EU, its impact upon identity, citizenship, and EU-wide solidarity.

The financial and economic turmoil within the Eurozone has significantly impacted upon the way in which the European citizens assess the advantages of EU membership and the future of the integration process. Intensely preoccupied with the economic problems, the EU has lost sight of the continuous loss of public support and of the Europeans' increasing lack of confidence in the Union, as shown by Eurobarometers. The results of the spring and autumn waves of the 2010 Eurobarometer revealed an inversion of the trust-distrust ratio. In spring 2010, for the first time in the history of the European public opinion research, the distrust in the EU outweighed trust (42% of the respondents trusted the EU, whereas 47% said they distrusted the Union). The situation persisted until the autumn 2010 wave of the Eurobarometer, although the percentages showed a slight increase of trust in the EU (43% of the subjects trusted the EU, whereas 45% did not). In 2013, the vivid discussions between the European Council and the European Parliament on the approval of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the 2014 and 2020 period further affected citizens' trust in the European Union, causing a new drop in confidence: in mid-2013 only 31% of citizens from the Member States were still confident that the EU is a viable project (according to the Spring wave Eurobarometer).

However, Europeans' lack of confidence in the EU should not strike us as something new, since it is not directly or solely caused by the crisis. The financial downturn has only contributed to the increase of distrust and to the spreading of Eurosceptic attitudes. Various studies (McLaren, 2006, 2007; Leconte, 2010; Shuck and de Vreese, 2008; Radu, 2012; Negrea, 2011a, 2011b) have underscored the EU's failure to react timely to the decline of public support towards integration and the serious consequences to which this unfortunate reaction has led. The Dutch and French rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 are the most eloquent examples of a public refusal of an EU proposal. Besides, these were not singular events. In 2008, the EU was hit again by the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by the Irish people. Such events in which people were asked for their opinion, as well as many others that followed especially during the Eurocrisis, short-circuited EU's legitimacy and strength as a supranational body.

When discussing the Eurocrisis, there is an identifiable gap in Europe between the outburst of the banking crisis, in 2008, and the crisis management measures taken at EU level in 2009. This gap has proven to be very costly for the European project and has engaged the Union in a very risky process. Not surprisingly, at the end of 2008, many experts started to discuss about "Europe's crisis of leadership" or about "Europe's lack of union" in order to draw the EU officials' attention to the lack of coherence in decision-making. In 2008, two former Prime-Ministers and one European expert openly stated that "EU member states have been slow to act in concert. At first it was the European Commission that drew criticism for its slowness in making proposals to rally national governments and their policymakers. Now it is the Member States that are resisting the urgent need for a coordinated EU-wide policy response to the deepening crisis." (Amato, Davignon & Dehaene, 2008). Thus, the so-called "global crisis" has proved to be not so global after all, and its strongest and most enduring effects have been felt at the very heart of Europe (Bărgăoanu & Durach, 2013, p. 6).

As we will see, through their opinions, attitudes, and manifest support for the EU, the European citizens have sanctioned the decision vacuum present at the European level; for many

of them, this decision vacuum has revealed a multi-speed Europe or an overly ambitious project but with hardly any means and no clear vision or outcome. The lack of concerted decision-making, as well as the lack of solidarity in adopting and implementing sustainable recovery measures (Dobrescu, Negrea-Busuioc & Radu, 2013) engaged the Union in an acute legitimacy crisis.

This paper seeks to show the dynamics of EU public opinion between 2008 and 2013 (as revealed by the Eurobarometers) with a special focus on the rise of Euroscepticism. It is divided into four sections. The first section will provide a detailed presentation of various definitions of Euroscepticism; it will start with a brief incursion into the history of the term so as to then further concentrate on its evolution and development. Following Taggart's (1998) definition of Euroscepticism, we will examine further refinements and approaches to explain this phenomenon (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2002; Kopecky and Mudde, 2002; Krouwel and Abts, 2007). It will also focus on the measurements of Euroscepticism and the predictors that previous research has used in order to assess manifest Eurosceptic attitudes. From Gabel's (1998) empirical test of five individual-level theories of public support of the EU, to McLaren's (2007) study of mass-level euroscepticism, and to Shuck and de Vreese (2006)'s investigation of the Dutch rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, this section will include a review of the most relevant and influent studies that have empirically tested the factors determining the formation of Eurosceptic attitudes towards the EU and the integration process.

Sections two and four will present the methodology used and discuss the results, respectively. Our analysis will show the dynamics of Eurosceptic attitudes with respect to the following predictors: the perceived democratic performance of the EU, the perceived utility of EU membership, people's feelings towards the EU and people's perception of what it feels like to belong to the EU. The last section will include the conclusions drawn from our analysis of Eurosceptic attitudes as they are revealed by Eurobarometers and will point to possible venues for future research.

## **2. Euroscepticism – a Brief History of the Concept and a Review of the Accompanying Research**

From a historical point of view, the term "Euroscepticism" has not accompanied the institutional development of the European Union. The introduction of this term in the European vocabulary was favored by the notorious speech delivered by Margaret Thatcher in Bruges, in 1988, in which the British prime minister emphasized the British opposition to the idea of a European super-state headquartered in Brussels: "We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels" (Thatcher Archive, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107332>). Leconte (2010) considers that particular moment to comprise the essence of British opposition to the institutional and political development of the EU. The older term "anti-marketiers", which was used to express Britain's opposition to the single market, was soon replaced by the more sophisticated "Eurosceptic", which encompasses any kind of opposition to any aspect related to the European Union. Although initially considered as a phenomenon related to British politics (Harmsen & Spiering, 2005), The popularity of Euroscepticism has grown gradually together with the EU enlargement and with the intensifica-

tion of the integration process up to the point where it seems that the “rise of euroscepticism has become a corollary of the deepening process” (Taggart, 1998, p. 363).

Defining Euroscepticism more precisely has not proven to be an easy task. The most frequently used definition of the term express the opposition towards European integration (Taggart, 1998; Gabel, 1998; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2002). However, this explanation whose focus is on the hostility towards integration seems to inevitably lead to a definition which narrows the meaning of the term too much. A more accurate approach to Euroscepticism would consider that the term expresses not necessarily a hostile attitude, but a spectrum of attitudes towards the EU and the integration process, ranging from distrust, cynicism, opposition to mere detachment. To comply with this broader view, Taggart (1998) proposed a definition of Euroscepticism as “a contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration” (1998, p. 366). While recognizing the merits of this definition, Kopecky and Mudde (2002) underscore some of its weaknesses. They believe that “Euroscepticism is incorrectly used with regards to parties and ideologies which are essentially pro-European, as well as to those which are openly anti-European” (2002, p. 300). The two authors’ alternative to Taggart’s initial view is to characterize Euroscepticism by means of analyzing different types of public support for integration. Thus, Kopecky and Mudde distinguish between “diffuse”, unspecific support for “the general principles of European integration” and “specific” support for “actual integration” (2002, p. 300).

The growing literature on Euroscepticism suggests various classifications of this phenomenon. We shall briefly mention here the most influential approaches, which have also been backed up by reliable empirical research.

In their analysis of party-based Euroscepticism, Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002) have refined the definition proposed by Taggart (1998) and have described the *hard* and *soft* dimensions of the concept. The hard Euroscepticism comprises “the main opposition to the EU and the integration”, while the soft Euroscepticism “expresses a qualified opposition to the EU, and the feeling that the <<national interest>> is not placed on the same trajectory as the development of the EU (2002, p. 7).

Empirical research has shown four factors influencing the development of Eurosceptic attitudes towards the European integration: cost-benefit analysis of EU accession and membership – the utilitarian factors, fear of the impact of the integration upon the national identity – the identity factors, distrust in the supra-national institutions and the perceived threats to national sovereignty – the political factors and hostility towards the cultural and societal model of the EU – the cultural factors (Leconte, 2010; McLaren, 2004, 2006, 2007; Gabel, 1998; Gabel and Palmer, 1995). Out of these four set of factors, the utilitarian ones have been repeatedly confirmed by empirical research (Gabel (1998, McLaren 2007). Our analysis of the Eurobarometers also reveals that the Eurocrisis has prompted Europeans to reconsider their attitudes towards the EU and the integration process from a utilitarian perspective (see below).

Empirical measurements of Euroscepticism have been carried out mainly around referenda on different EU topics and around elections for the European Parliament. These are the occasions for the European citizens to make their opinions manifest and to have a say over important EU-related topics. For instance, Shuck and de Vreese (2006) examined the Dutch vote against the EU Constitutional Treaty in 2005. Furthermore, de Vreese and Tobiasen (2007) showed that the Europeans’ attitudes towards the EU and their perception of the European identity influenced the results of the European elections organized in Denmark in 2004. Similar results were reported by Elgun and Tillman (2007) from a study conducted in 13 countries



from Central and Eastern Europe. The authors showed that the negative attitudes towards others (racial, national and religious differences) are strong predictors of Euroscepticism.

De Vries and van Keerbergen (2007) identified correlations between pessimism built around the individual economic situation and exacerbated nationalistic feelings. The more economically disadvantaged an individual is, the more nationalist he/she tends to be. These findings relate to Christin and Trechsel's (2002) results linking nationalism to anti-EU attitudes (2002). We might add that there is a high probability that the current economic crisis has triggered a similar vicious circle: poor economic situation – powerful nationalistic feelings – strong anti-EU attitude. As far as the benefits from EU membership are concerned, Mahler et al. (2000) showed a strong relationship between net budgetary transfers from the EU to a member state and the level of its citizens' support for the EU.

In a 2011 study, van Spanje and de Vreese identified five predictors of the Eurosceptic vote in the 2009 parliamentary elections. By Eurosceptic vote, the authors describe the citizens' tendency to vote for members of Eurosceptic parties or for candidates who are renowned for their anti-European stance in the European Parliament. The five predictors are: 1. EU's democratic performance (the more inaccessible, opaque and undemocratic the EU and its institutions are perceived by its citizens, the more eurosceptic the latter will be), 2. negative evaluations of EU membership (the more negatively people evaluate EU membership, the higher the probability for a Eurosceptic vote), 3. negative feelings towards the EU (the more negative citizens' feelings towards the EU, the higher the probability for a Eurosceptic vote), 4. opposition to EU enlargement (the more inclined are the citizens to oppose the European integration, the higher the probability for a Eurosceptic vote), and 5. lack of European identity (the more inclined are the citizens to identify themselves with the EU, the higher the probability that they vote for a pro-European politician). The two authors established correlations between the EU's legitimacy deficit and Euroscepticism. According to them, the EU perceived legitimacy has the following key components: trust in the EU's institutions, people's capacity to identify with the European project and their trust in the European decision-making process. In our analysis, we have used four of de van Spanje and de Vreese's predictors to re-interpret the data from Eurobarometers. We have found that the EU's legitimacy crisis is linked to public perceptions of the EU's trustworthiness and with the rise of Eurosceptic attitudes towards the European integration.

### **3. Data and Methodology**

We have used secondary quantitative data analysis to investigate patterns of public Euroscepticism from 2008 to 2013. The Eurosceptic attitudes of various actors, such as elites, parties, experts, business leaders or mass media are not explored in this study and will be an object of further investigation.

We have based our empirical analysis on standard Eurobarometer (EB) surveys publicly available on the website of the Public Opinion Analysis sector of the European Commission. The data set which our study focused on consisted of the following standard EBs: EB 69 (Spring 2008), EB 70 (Autumn 2008), EB 71 (Spring 2009), EB 72 (Autumn 2009), EB 73 (Spring 2010), EB 74 (Autumn 2010), EB 75 (Spring 2011), EB 76 (Autumn 2011), EB 77 (Spring 2012), EB 78 (Autumn 2012), and EB 79 (Spring 2013). Our choice of this methodology was motivated by the advantages of secondary data analysis, such as economy in terms