

SUPPORTING THE EU WITH(OUT) POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM A NEW JOINER

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Abstract. *This article investigates the relationship between political knowledge and trust in the EU among the Romanian citizens between 2002 and 2009. It uses individual level data from the Candidate Countries (2001-2004) and Standard Eurobarometers (2005-2009) to check whether there is a direct linkage between the decreasing level of trust and the increasing level of knowledge in the most Euro-optimist new member state. The statistical analysis reveals that the more citizens know about the EU, the more they trust it. Such a result gains supplementary relevance in the context of decreasing support. Two other general results are relevant for the Romanian case. First, although the level of political knowledge increases as the accession gets closer, it continues to be quite low. Second, the Romanian citizens constantly overestimate their knowledge about the EU.*

Keywords: *European Union, citizens, political knowledge, trust*

Introduction

For approximately one decade, the Romanian citizens display the highest level of support for the European Union (EU) among the member states (Eurobarometers 2001-2009). Such an observation is not surprising as evidence indicates that until their accession, the citizens from candidate countries display higher levels of support than those coming from the old member states (Jacobs and Pollack, 2006). In this group, Romania is the absolute leader with impressive levels of support peaking almost 80% (Gherghina 2010). Another particularity of this most recent joiner is that its citizens have low and very low levels of political information about the EU (Gherghina and Jiglău 2008; Gherghina 2010). This article aims to investigate the relationship between these two characteristics. In doing so, I combine exploratory and inferential

analysis, using descriptive and bivariate statistical methods at individual level. The study uses data from the Candidate Countries Eurobarometers (CCEBs 2001-2004) and Standard Eurobarometers (EBs 2005-2009), examining the 2001-2009 period. In descriptive terms, I summarize the longitudinal evolutions of four different aspects, two emphasizing the EU trust and two knowledge related. On the one hand, I account for the trust Romanians vest in the EU and the image they project for themselves about the EU. On the other hand, I consider both objective and perceived levels of knowledge about the EU, comparing their trends over time. Such comparisons are done having the 2007 accession as a reference point to check whether this moment modified the trust and/or knowledge trends.

This analysis is embedded within the broader theoretical framework of types of

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support and motivations leading to popular support for the EU, mostly conducted in the old member states (Gabel and Palmer 1995; Gabel 1998; Hix 1999). In theory, Easton (1965) differentiates between types of support and labels them as diffuse (general) and specific (particular). Empirically, starting from this general typology, Kopecký and Mudde (2002) build two dimensions of support (for the EU and for European integration) and identify four different types of support: EU optimists, EU pessimists, Europhiles, Europhobes. Their research indicates that, in practice, the support for the EU is multi-layered, involving elites, political parties, and citizens. At elite and party level, there was a widespread consensus about the necessity of the EU accession, the entire 2004 electoral campaign transforming this into a salient issue on the agenda. Regarding the determinants of the EU support at citizens' level, there were a few competing explanations. The most prominent lies in the perception of economic benefits from membership (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993; Anderson and Reichert 1996; Gabel and Whitten 1997; Gabel 1998). A second explanation emphasizes the direct linkage between trust in the national institutions and the EU with citizens satisfied with the performance of the former being also more confident in the latter (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000; Rohrschneider 2002). A third cause for support consists of a wide range of ideological orientations and attitudes towards the domestic political issues (Anderson 1998).

Starting from these premises, this article moves beyond the causes of high levels of support by exploring the dynamic of trust in the EU, the image built by the Romanian citizens, and their knowledge about the EU for almost one decade. Complementary, I study the relationship between support and knowledge in the most likely case among the

member states: citizens are Euro-optimists and know relatively little about the EU. The first section sketches three theoretical arguments for which we would expect such a relationship to exist, revealing its equivocal nature. The second section briefly explains the variable operationalization and data sources, followed by an extended section including the general attitudinal trends registered in the last decade in Romania. The fourth section explores the relationship between trust in the EU and political knowledge regarding the European issues, whereas the conclusions summarize the main findings and provide room for further research.

Why Should Knowledge Matter?

Irrespective of the motivations and incentives to support the EU, such attitudes require, in theory, a minimal cognitive basis. It is hard to support an institution without knowing what it stands for. Following this logic, knowledge precedes support. There are two competing perspectives reflecting on the role of knowledge in developing attitudes of trust towards the EU. The first assumes that the more knowledge citizens acquire about the EU functioning, the more question marks can be raised. There are several aspects that may develop into negative perceptions of the EU as soon as people learn about them: the democratic deficit (Karp et al. 2003), the lack of transparency in the EU decision processes (Lodge 1994), the weak European political parties, the failure to adopt an EU constitution or to ratify treaties in the first attempt (e.g. The Lisbon Treaty), the difficult decision-making and implementation mechanisms. At empirical level, in the particular context of awareness about the European Parliament (EP), the level of knowledge is negatively correlated with support for the EP in the EU member states (Flickinger et al. 1995).

The second perspective implies cognitive mobilization. High levels of political awareness and developed skills in political communication allow individuals to identify themselves as citizens of a supranational political community (Inglehart et al. 1991). As the information about the EU is usually quite abstract, cognitive skills are necessary to process and understand this information. Irrespective of the content of the message, information about integration promotes support. As citizens know more about the EU, they become more familiar with the subject and feel less threatened by it (Inglehart et al. 1991, 147; Janssen 1991). In this respect, empirical evidence suggests that people interested in the EU politics favor their country's involvement in the EU (Anderson 1998). Moreover, greater knowledge about the EU maximizes the awareness of membership benefits and thus may end in a positive evaluation of the EU.

Although leading to different results and driven by opposed underlying mechanisms, both situations reflect how knowledge represents a precondition for attitudes formation. The knowledge of the EU can bring with it both a greater appreciation of, and frustration with, the EU – either response is possible. However, in certain circumstances attitude formation and lack of knowledge about the attitudes' object can co-exist. For example, if an issue is not salient for most citizens, the latter can use shortcuts for attitude formation. In the case of the EU support, knowledge about the EU becomes redundant when the elite reach a consensus and citizens follow the discourse of their representatives. As soon as the elites' supportive discourse towards accession is adopted by individuals in society, their positive attitudes have little or no cognitive bases.

Without arguing in favor of any approach, I explore which situation applies

to the Romanian citizens when expressing their supportive attitudes towards the EU. In this respect, I investigate whether the support for the EU is low among the knowledgeable citizens. Moreover, in longitudinal perspective, it is relevant to observe whether the support decreases at individual level as soon as people start learning more about the EU. The latter is a process expected to develop with higher intensity just before and during the post-accession period.

Data and Variable Operationalization

I use candidate countries and standard Eurobarometer survey data from 2002 to 2009 (one per year). These surveys are appropriate to map trends as they include large comparable datasets in terms of standardized questionnaires, sampling method, and data collection. For this study, all the "do not know/do not answer" responses were eliminated from the sample, being considered missing values. Trust in the EU is operationalized as the answer of the Romanian respondents to the questions directly involving this issue: "How much trust do you have in the EU?". There are two response alternatives: "tend to trust" and "tend not to trust". The image of the EU is operationalized as the answer of the Romanian respondents to the question: "In general does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative, very negative image?" The initial answers were coded on a 1-5 scale with neutral as medium value. I recoded this variable to have only three categories by combining the very positive and fairly positive answers into the "positive" category and the fairly negative and very negative answers into the "negative" category.

The political knowledge is an index for which I computed three items. As the battery of questions changes across time, I tried

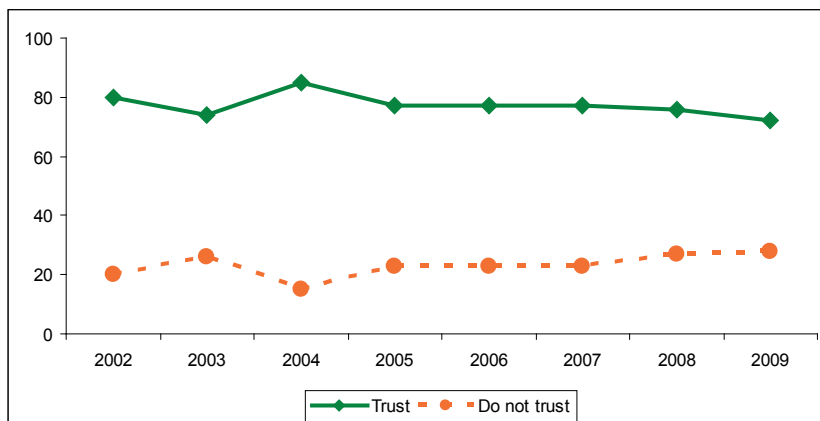
to include similar sets of questions as they tested the level of knowledge on specific issues. They are all "true/false" items and are equally weighted when forming the index. The first variable refers to the number of member states, the respondent being asked to mention whether the number of member states specified in the question is the real one. For the 2002-2003 CCEBs the respondents were asked to mention whether the Union consists of 15 member states and I coded all the "true" answers as being knowledgeable, whereas the rest as holding no knowledge (including here the "do not know"). Starting with the 2004 CCEB and continuing with the 2005-2008 Ebs, the question referred to 12 member states when the EU was 15 and to fifteen when the EU was 25 or 27. Therefore, the "false" answer is coded as knowledgeable answer, whereas the rest coded as lacking knowledge. The second item regards the direct election of the MEPs, all respondents who answered "true" were considered knowledgeable. In the 2008 EB, this item was replaced by Switzerland being a member of the EU, the "false" answer being correct. The third item varied the most: in the 2002-2004 CCEBs the question referred to the EU being founded after World War I (the "false" answer indicates knowledge about

the EU); in the 2005-2009 EBs the item referred to the last EP elections (the "false" answer indicates knowledge about the EU). For the 2009 EB a very specific question was introduced (i.e. the way in which the EU budget is spent) and this influenced the results as it will become visible in the following section. After computing the index, the resulting variable has four categories: no knowledge (people that answer wrong at all three questions), basic knowledge (one correct answer), medium knowledge (two correct answers), and high (all three answers being correct).

High Trust and Good Image

Graph 1 depicts the dynamics of trust (continuous line) and lack of trust (dotted line) in the EU among the Romanian citizens between 2002 and 2009. Overall, there is a relative decrease of the level of trust and a slight increase of the lack of trust. Despite these trends, the percentage of citizens trusting the EU is very high, more than 70% of the valid answers indicating every year the full support for the EU. The decrease took place from levels of approximately 80% before the accession to a minimum of 72% in the fall of 2009.

Graph 1: Percentages of Trust in the EU among the Romanian Citizens



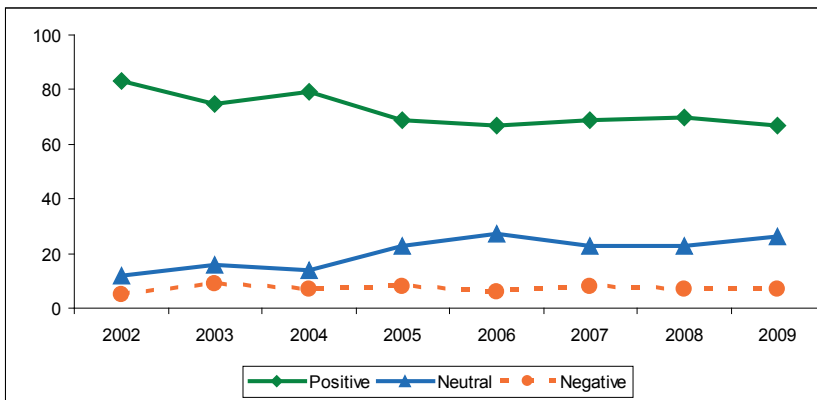
The peak from 2004 (85% trust in the EU) can be justified through the accession of many post-communist countries and the Romanian failure to join in that wave. The good example of the neighboring and their successful accession could have shed a positive light on the EU in the eyes of the Romanian citizens. Moreover, the electoral campaign from 2004 touched upon the European accession and often emphasized the benefits derived from membership. In fact, previous studies reveal that the drop in trust visible from 2003 in this graph was accidental. The Euro-optimism of Romanians reached constant levels above 80% before 2004, even when accounting for two EBs in every year (Cherghina 2010). Between 2005 and 2007 there was a constant level of trust in the EU (77%). Starting with the accession year, there is a slow decrease of support for the EU, with a bigger difference between 2008 and 2009 than between the accession and the following year.

The perceptions about the image of the EU display a similar trend. Graph 2 includes the aggregated dynamic of the percentages of Romanians having positive (continuous line), neutral (continuous line with triangles), and negative (dotted line) images about the EU. There are two directly observable issues

at this graph. First, the positive perception decreases over time from 83% in 2002 to 67% in 2009. It is hard to know what this perception is based on especially when comparing it to the previous graph. There are more people trusting the EU than having a positive image about it. When closely examining the individual level data it results that some of those who have neutral image about the EU also vest trust into it. The second general observation is that the level of negative image is relatively constant, at a very low level, situated below 10%. Looking again at individual data, we observe that only in isolated cases (one here and there) individuals with a negative image of the EU trust it. In none of these situations, the EU accession made a significant difference in the citizens' perceptions. There is practically no change of trend or major deviation due to this event.

At the same time, the neutral perceptions of the EU have a tendency to increase over time. There is an evolution from 12 (2002) to 26% (in 2009). This category may not contain substantive meaning as it can include all those subject who have no clear opinion on their perception about the EU. In other words, this can be seen as a masked/ alternative "do not know" category.

Graph 2: The Evolution of the EU Image for the Romanian Citizens



Three conclusions can be drawn on the basis of these aggregated data. First, *the Romanians trust the EU and have a positive image about it*. Second, *their perceptions were not influenced by the accession*. Third, *there is a descending trend both with respect to the trust in and the image of the EU*. However, the percentages are quite impressive.

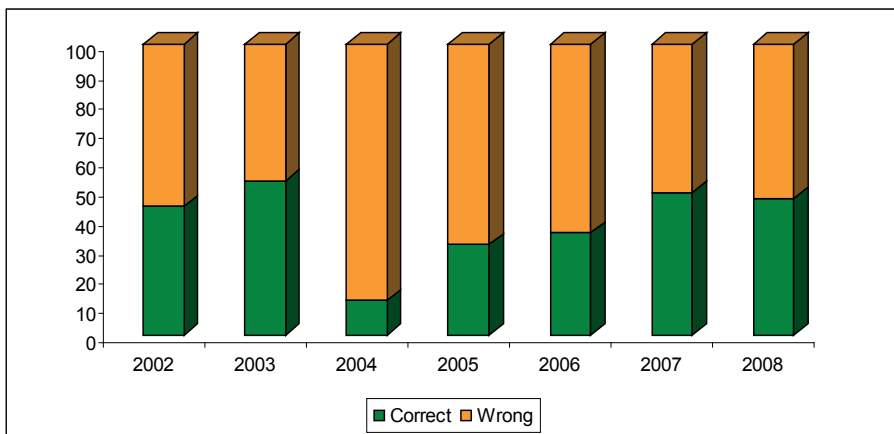
Overestimating Political Knowledge

The most basic question targeting the political knowledge of the respondents in the used survey regards the identification of the correct number of member states at the moment when the question is being asked. Graph 3 displays the evolution of the correct – wrong report of the Romanian respondents during the 2002-2008 period (2009 is not included as there was no question about the number of member states). The first striking element is the reduced knowledge on the number of member states: only in 2003 above 50%, reaching in 2004 a negative record of 12%. This should be seen in the context of a true/false question, the subjects were not even asked to mention the number of member states. There is

increased oscillation of the percentages of knowledgeable Romanians when answering this question: it increases from 2002 until 2003, it is followed by a sudden drop in 2004 and until 2008 there is an increase of this percentage. In 2009, the percentage decreases from 49 to 47%. What causes the drop in 2004? One plausible explanation resides in the type of addressed question. Until 2003, the question included the correct number of member states and the subjects only had to agree to that (i.e. they were asked whether the EU consisted of 15 member states). Starting 2004, the respondents had to figure out that the question included a wrong number of member states and to answer “false” in order to show their knowledge about the EU. As 2004 was the first year when the change took place, the effect of switching the question is visible.

The increased percentages of people indicating the correct answer about the member states from 2005 onwards may be due to the 2004 accession of the neighboring countries. Although Romania failed to join the EU, people may have started paying attention to news about it. However, such an explanation does not hold if we observe the pattern registered for 2007 and 2008. Once

Graph 3: The Knowledge about the Number of Member States



Romania got into the EU, the knowledge of its citizens regarding the number of member states should have significantly improved. This is not the case, less than 50% of the respondents being able to correctly identify the number of member states.

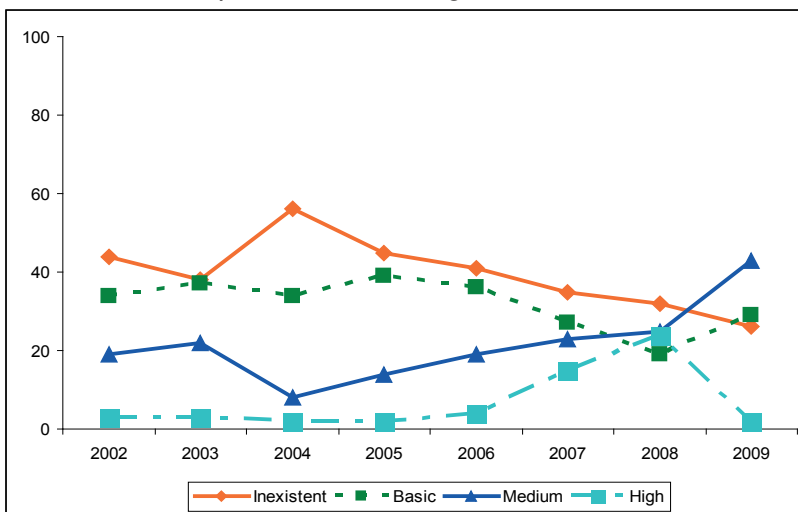
The situation is similar with the other components of the political knowledge. The question about the foundation of the EU after World War I was asked until 2004 and a maximum of 20% in 2004 identified that this statement was wrong. The direct elections of the MEPs is a tough question for most Romanians until 2007, a maximum of 37% correctly answered that this is an EU procedure. However, the learning by doing mechanism functioned with respect to this question: in 2009, 66% of the respondents correctly answered this question. When getting to specific questions such as Switzerland being an EU member (asked in the 2008 EB), almost half of the respondents (48%) got it right. Even more specific, the way in which the EU budget is spent was correctly identified by only 8% of the population. The individual level data indicate that among these respondents who correctly identified

the way of spending the European budget, at least half may have guessed the answer as they did not successfully answered simpler questions.

Graph 4 displays the evolution of the knowledge about the EU among the Romanian citizens. A very high percentage of respondents have no political knowledge about the EU, answering wrong to the questions about the number of member states, the direct way of electing the MEPs and to the third variable question. The 2004 peak can be justified through the same argument as before: a switch in the question about the member states leads to many errors of the respondents. This cannot be considered an excuse for not answering right to this question. Following the 2004 moment, there is a descending pattern for the people having no knowledge about the EU. In 2009, this percentage is below that of those having basic and medium knowledge.

The percentage of the respondents with basic knowledge follows a similar trend, but with minor oscillations. A reverse trend is visible at the respondents with medium knowledge, whose percentage increases

Graph 4: The Knowledge about the EU



from 19 in 2002 to 43 in 2009. A possible explanation for these patterns lies in the quantity and diversity offered to citizens as the accession moment got closer. The saliency of the EU in media coverage is for the Romanian case negatively related with the time left until the accession. At the same time, not many citizens are interested in searching information that is not immediately useful. Such a context favors the existence of high percentages of people with predominantly no or basic information in 2002-2004 within the population. The decrease of these percentages between 2005 and 2008 is compensated by the existence within the population of more people with higher levels of knowledge about the EU (i.e. medium).

The accession moment gains relevance when looking at the levels of people with high knowledge about the EU. There is a constant level until 2006 when, one year before the accession, it starts increasing.¹ It is logical to expect people from a new member state developing their levels of knowledge about the EU. However, the percentage did not reach spectacular peaks, in the year of the accession 15% of the respondents having high political knowledge. However, one year later, almost a quarter of the respondents (24%) was able to correctly answer the knowledge questions.

As these are the levels of objective knowledge, let us turn now to the difference between them and what Romanians perceived as knowledge. In other words, we investigate how large is the discrepancy between what the Romanians know and what they thought they know. Graph 5 is illustrative in this respect, showing both positive and negative values.² Theoretically, when the difference between the levels

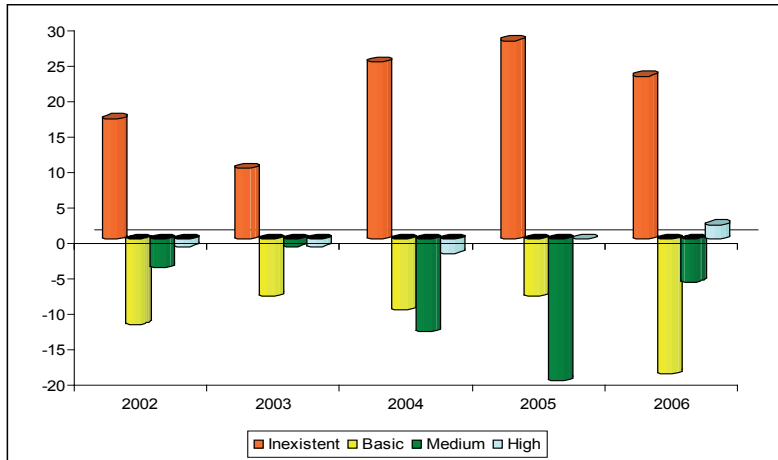
of objective and perceived knowledge is above 0, the subjects underestimate their knowledge. The evidence indicates that only one of the situations can be interpreted as such – the case of the 2006 high knowledge when the current knowledge is 2% above the perceived knowledge. For the rest of the cases above 0, we have the difference between levels real lack of knowledge and perceived lack of knowledge. Practically, they underestimate the level of inexistent knowledge. Therefore, the logical reciprocal indicates that this is an overestimation of the knowledge. Whenever this difference is negative, they overestimate the knowledge they have. Summing up, most of the bars in Graph 5 indicate that subjects have the tendency to overestimate their knowledge about the EU.

The biggest difference is registered for the category with no knowledge about the EU. For example, in the 2005 EB, 45% of the respondents have no political knowledge about the EU, compared with 17% who admitted this fact. The smallest overestimation of knowledge with respect to this category takes place in 2003 when the difference between the actual and perceived lack of knowledge is of 10%. For basic and medium knowledge the overestimation is moderate, but it is visible in every year. One final remark about this graph is that, overall, the overestimation of the high knowledge is very small. For the year 2005 the actual and perceived high knowledge about the EU are identical, their difference being 0. As previously mentioned, in the EB 2006 there is an underestimation of the actual high knowledge. Summing up, with the exception of the high knowledgeable citizens, most of the respondents tend to heavily overestimate their knowledge about the EU.

¹ As mentioned, the downturn from 2008 is mainly due to the specificity of the questions.

² The analyzed period is 2002-2006 as the question with perceived knowledge is no longer asked in the EBs.

Graph 5: The Difference between Objective and Perceived Knowledge



A Weak but Stable Relationship

Table 1 includes the association coefficients (gamma) between the trust in the EU and the levels of knowledge. The trust in the EU is a nominal variable (trust and lack of trust), whereas the knowledge variable has the same four categories as in graphs 4 and 5. The coefficients indicate weak to moderate positive associations, all but the one from 2004, being statistically significant at 0.01. These results suggest that the support for the EU increases with the level of knowledge about it. Respondents with no knowledge about the EU trust it the least. The intensity of the relationship is stronger in the two years before the 2004 missed accession wave and in the 2007 accession year. This partially confirms the theoretical assumption according to which as soon as citizens learn more about the EU they feel less threatened and have the tendency to trust it more. The association between trust and knowledge is weak but stable during the last decade for the Romanians. It holds even when the knowledge questions become specific and thorough information is required (i.e. 2009)

As this is solely a bivariate relationship, without controlling for the influence of other

variables, no substantive and definitive conclusions can be drawn. However, the similarity in intensity and direction of the relationship is a safe finding. In this respect, it is useful to take a closer look at the distribution of the respondents. Table 2 reflects the distribution of the percentages for the accession year and supports the

Table 1: The Longitudinal Relationship between Trust in the EU and Political Knowledge

Year	Coefficient (gamma)	N
2002	0.36**	799
2003	0.32**	845
2004	0.16	875
2005	0.19**	872
2006	0.26**	836
2007	0.31**	866
2008	0.19**	882
2009	0.25**	891

** Statistically significant at 0.01.

* Statistically significant at 0.05.

general story. The pattern described by the association coefficients is clearly illustrated by the extreme categories: 67% of those having no knowledge about the EU trust it, whereas 85% among those who know a lot about the EU trust it. There is also progressive distribution of percentages of trust among the basic and medium category, with 76% in the former and 85% in the latter. There is apparently no difference of attitudes towards the EU between those having medium and high knowledge. In the presence of such a difference, the association coefficient would have increased. By comparing the percentages of people lacking trust in the EU within the inexistent, medium, and high knowledge categories, there are twice as many without political knowledge relative to those medium and highly knowledgeable.

political parties on the public agenda. At the same time, the time factor cannot be ignored: at the beginning of the 2000's the Romanian public was generally less informed, with significant improvements of the knowledge levels when the accession was missed (2004) or realized (2007). Moreover, it is worth noting that Romanians overestimate their political knowledge about the EU. Most of the times, people without such knowledge have the tendency to declare that they have some. In parallel, the trust in the EU registers a descendent trend, with averages around 80% before the 2004 wave of accession and slightly more than 70% in 2009.

Such patterns of the aggregated data may indicate that the more Romanians know about the EU, the least they trust it. However, the

Table 2: The Relationship between Trust in the EU and Political Knowledge in the Accession Year

		Political knowledge			
		Inexistent	Basic	Medium	High
Trust in the EU	Lack of trust	33%	24%	15%	15%
	Trust	67%	76%	85%	85%

Conclusions

This article described the dynamics of knowledge about and trust in the EU among the Romanian citizens between 2002-2009, using individual level data from the CCEBs and EBs. The level of knowledge about the EU is generally modest, with less than half of the respondents being able to identify the correct number of the member states at any given moment in time (except of 2003 when the percentage was 53%). The knowledge improves when the EU becomes a salient issue for citizens, largely covered by the media, and emphasized by elites and

individual level analysis contradicts such an expectation and reveals a consistent positive relationship between the level of knowledge and the trust in the EU. Respondents with medium or high knowledge about the EU trust it more compared to those with no or little knowledge. Although the relationship is quite weak, it is statistically significant at 0.01 (with one exception), indicating a trend not only in the analyzed sample, but within the entire population.

There are two direct implications of these findings. On the one hand, at empirical level, it shows that citizens from one new member state can support even more the EU when

they know more about it. Such evidence confirms the results of Karp et al. (2003) and necessitates additional clarification in the context of decreasing levels of trust in the EU within the Romanian population. Knowing more about the EU substantiates the support for it and diminishes the risk to witness dramatic drops. The recent turbulences at European level (e.g. the Irish referendum, the Czech opposition to the Lisbon Treaty), the trust in the EU has high chances to decrease of the citizens have

no political knowledge about the European process and developments. On the other hand, at theoretical level, this study indicates knowledge as a potential explaining variable for the level of trust within the member states. In this respect, the article sets relevant bases for further research. This bivariate statistical analysis can be complemented by complex models on the Romanian case or it can be extended to the new member states to observe comparable features within the populations.

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