

# The Crisis of the European Union and its Reflection in the Romanian Public Sphere. Recent Findings

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**Abstract:** *This paper addresses the implications of the euro crisis, which turned from „a Greek mess” to a political, institutional, economic and confidence crisis of the European Union. In our view, the EU public sphere is relevant for the current debate surrounding the crisis because it represents the setting where solidarity among EU citizens and EU states is created. Given our interest in the concept of the EU public sphere and the way the crisis of the European Union influences the debates in the public sphere, the way in which solidarity among EU citizens and EU states is imagined and enacted, we carried out a research project focused on the Romanian public sphere in the context of the crisis. The research project was carried out around a crucial event in the process of crisis resolution: the signing of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union by 25 EU member states at the beginning of March 2012. The results show that in Romania, for the moment at least, the “EU” has not fallen victim to the crisis. There is a considerable drop in public trust in the EU, but it is our assessment that the descending trend could be reversed, provided a clear vision, accompanied by strong leadership, emerges.*

**Keywords:** *European public sphere, euro crisis, Euro scepticism, Treaty of Stability, Coordination and Governance*

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## 1. A Crisis in Search of a Name

Back in 2007-2008, while the United States was struggling with the devastating effects of the crisis on its economy, on the life of its citizens and on its global prestige, the European Union appeared to have avoided the worst of the global crisis. 2008 was a stormy year in Europe, though. For example, in October 2008, “two of Belgium’s five

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biggest banks – Fortis and Dexia – were bailed out by the Belgian government in alliance with the Dutch, French and Luxembourg authorities. Fortis, a Belgian-Dutch institution, won a \$15 billion capital injection, while Dexia, a Franco-Belgian municipal lender, got \$8.64 billion” (Elliott, Atkinson, 2009, p. 10). In the same week, “Hype Real Estate Mortgage Bank, Germany’s second biggest commercial property lender, was bailed out to the tune of \$35 billion” and “one week later, the Hype rescue agreed the previous week had collapsed and a more costly \$50 billion rescue had been arranged” (*idem*, p. 9). In October the same year, “the Irish and Greek governments had announced 100 per cent guarantees for all personal bank depositors” (*ibidem*, p. 10). National governments tried to bail-out their national economies; according to an IMF report, “similar to the bail-out strategy put in place by the Federal Reserve in the US, European governments provided guarantees for bank lending in their attempt to equilibrate the financial market. The total commitment done by euro area governments accounted for 28% of the area’s gross domestic product (GDP), which is comparable to the total commitment done by the Federal Reserve of 26% of the American GDP” (IMF, 2010).

No signs of concerns were expressed at the level of the European Union overall in 2007 - 2008 and, despite the difficulties, Europeans could still pride themselves on the superiority of their economic and social model. Shortly after that moment of pride and after the above-mentioned considerable efforts made by individual EU states to bail-out their individual economies, the European Union, especially its core - the euro zone - was hardly hit. 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. The crisis outburst in Greece; unfortunately, the place of immediate origin allowed for the superficial interpretation that the crisis was a mere consequence of the irresponsible behaviour of the Greek state and its citizens. Over a relatively short period of time, the crisis evolved from a “Greek mess” to a “European mess”, from “Greece - the sick man of Europe” (2009 - 2010) to “Europe – the sick man of world economy” (2009 until the present day).

As the events that turned a crisis in tiny Greece into a European/ global problem were unfolding, there was an upsurge in crisis rhetoric and various names were put on the table, such as Euro crisis, euro zone crisis, currency crisis, sovereign debt crisis, financial crisis, banking crisis, trade imbalance crisis, solvency crisis, Greek crisis, German crisis. The attempts at naming the crisis have become more and more complicated, more and more nuanced in order to offset immediate reaction and criticism. For example, the preferred term in the American newspapers is “Europe debt crisis”, A. Das and N. Roubini call it “periphery debt crisis” (FT, 3 April 2012), while the Final Report of the Future of Europe Group (a group made of the foreign ministers of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain) opts for the more “politically correct” version “the sovereign debt crisis in the euro area” (17 September 2012). The very variety of the crisis rhetoric reflects the complexity of the crisis in the first place and the theoretical and political stakes associated with its interpretations.

It was not until recently that the most apt, in our opinion, description of the crisis appeared: the crisis of the European Union. That name - put forward by the renowned German philosopher J. Habermas (2012) - encapsulates the essence of the crisis, which has been eluded by the previous interpretations: we do not have to do with a debt crisis,

with a solvency crisis, a financial or a banking crisis, with a Greek crisis, with a crisis of a periphery (whose and what periphery), but with a crisis of the European Union. A political crisis of the European Union created by the different versions as to its future; an institutional crisis of how the European States relate to each other; an economic crisis of the European Union created by its inability to deliver prosperity and create premises for future growth; a confidence crisis created by the huge gap between Europe's leaders and its citizens.

There is general consent that the current crisis, whatever its name, place the European Union at a crossroads (Dobrescu, 2011). The cumulative economic difficulties represent a tough challenge from the micro to the macro level. But the problems arising are not only practical in nature, but also highly symbolic. In a statement issued by the Council for the Future of Europe (*Europe is the solution, not the problem*, 6 September 2011) it is acknowledged that the vision of Europe that will succeed is that which "inspires the commitment of its citizens whose faith in a European future is shaken". In its struggle to stabilize the economic environment, the European Union faces significant symbolic losses - both locally and globally. "The last few years have seen Europe's reputation fall precipitously. From being the world's most widely admired political experiment enjoying widespread respect and a degree of leadership on policy issues with global impact like climate change and fighting Third World poverty, it has in the minds of many been brutally downgraded. Its new image is of a low-growth zone whose member governments have turned away from co-operation and are instead becoming a byword for short-sighted beggar-thy-neighbour tactics imperilling the euro." (Meritt, 2010).

As we have shown elsewhere (Bârgăoanu, 2011), the Union has been suffering from financial, economic, and political standpoints for a long period of time. It suffers from a lack of vision, a lack of a distinct global profile. Some of its leaders are labelled as dull or downright boring, while certain leaders of the member states take on a more and more pronounced role in taking over the economic reigns of the Union. The US has had, for some time, a policy of "benign ignorance" towards its ally across the Ocean, despite statements regarding a firm commitment to revive the trans-Atlantic partnership. In addition, there are demographic problems, such as an ageing population and discrepancies in the growth pace of various countries. These issues have developed in time, making some analysts consider that the current manifestations "are but the latest twists in a drama that began more than two decades ago" (Marsh, 2010).

## **2. EU Public Sphere and the Issue of EU Solidarity**

In this context, one may legitimately wonder whether the issues related to the EU public sphere and related topics such as EU communication, EU citizenship, EU democratic/communication deficit and EU identity are still worth discussing. In order to understand the worthiness of the topic, let us remind ourselves of the two main paradigms of the EU public sphere that have been put forward so far. These two paradigms do not exclude, but rather reinforce each other (Beciu, Perpelea, 2011, pp. 13-14). The former is linked to the traditional Habermasian view, that focuses on procedures and deliberations in the public sphere, its critical functions and the pressure that it exerts on the political field. The latter is encapsulated by C. Calhoun's view, that focuses on the symbolic functions of the public

sphere, on its expected capacity to create solidarity: “the public sphere be conceptualized not simply as a setting for rational debate and decision making - thus largely disregarding or transcending issues of identity - but as a setting for the development of social solidarity as a matter of choice, rather than necessity” (Calhoun, 2002, p. 148). As we have already underlined, these two paradigms are not mutually exclusive, but place their focus rather differently. For example, J. Habermas, who is highly illustrative for the former vision, makes clear that solidarity - together with critical debate, critical thinking, deliberation and participation - is among the key ingredients/outcomes of the public sphere; according to him, “it is not enough that common policies are institutionalized in Brussels and that the European citizens could influence these policies through the election of a parliament with its own factions. If the citizens are to be able to make factual use of their right to vote, and in the process develop a sense of solidarity through this practice, the European decision-making processes must become visible and accessible within the existing national public spheres.” (2009, p. 87).

Combining these two visions, we could rightly say that the EU public sphere - irrespective of the forms it takes, be it Europeanized public spheres, or transnational Europeanized public spheres along common EU topics - is relevant for the current debate around the crisis because it creates/ is the setting where solidarity among EU citizens and EU states is created.

Solidarity has both highly pragmatic and symbolic values, which are relevant for the present discussion. In pragmatic terms, solidarity is a matter of shared interests. Simplifying the terms of the crisis and one of its valid, albeit partial, interpretations according to which we deal with a trade imbalance crisis inside the European Union, as long as “the North” exports to “the South”, one can hardly talk about a Union of shared interests and about solidarity; as J. Delors rightly put it, “in a Europe of shared interests, one cannot win at the expense of others” (Eurozine.com, 1 July 2011). There are hard facts, old and new, behind that statement. For example, between 1998 and 2009, Germany’s export surplus [with Italy] has grown by 543% (Niglia, 2012). And according to a more recent example, “what on the surface appears to be good news for Germany – the record low yield at its latest government debt auction – is actually an indication of growing stress elsewhere in the region” (El-Erian, 2012).

The Polish thinker Remigiusz Sobanski rightly noticed that: “Europe is conscience rather than geography” (*apud* Sowa, 2008, p. 273). This European solidarity and the conscience of belonging to the Union are a communication and experience-sharing problem. Solidarity is a symbolic, social construct; it is not a political or administrative decision, not an institutional measure that can be enforced by regulations. Instead, it is triggered and born in the public sphere. According to C. Calhoun (2003), the public sphere has three dimensions important to the European integration. The first one is about participation in the process of collective decision making. The second dimension is related to cultural aspects (“the production of a social imaginary”) that shapes the notion of “Europe” by imagining it in a certain way. The third dimension is of our concern: the public sphere as “a medium of social integration, a form of social solidarity, as well as an arena for debating others.” (*idem*, p.1). Communication in the public sphere generates solidarity by participation in the process of creation and recreation of institutions. Collective choices connect and integrate people. This is the modern perspective on the

shape and role of the public sphere, opposed to the classic 18<sup>th</sup> century ideas of the public sphere as a dimension of civil society which could potentially steer the state (*idem*, p. 12).

Finally, whether we like it or not, the EU is responsible for loosening traditional relations, loyalties and allegiances, especially those with the national state and the national community. It is therefore still the EU's responsibility to set new relations, compatibilities and loyalties to a territory, to a much bigger territory. Solidarity – designated as a fundamental value of the EU by its founding fathers plays an important role in creating the new relationships and loyalties: “the expectation of solidarity at the Union level can be a strong cement of this process” (Barca, 2009). Communication and public spheres are important for creating those new relationships: they aim at turning isolated persons into citizens who trust one another, have something in common and are able to perform collectively in a meaningful way.

### **3. Research Project on the Romanian Public Sphere - Methodology**

Given our interest in the concept of the EU public sphere and the way the crisis of the European Union influences the debates in the public sphere, the way in which solidarity among EU citizens and EU states is imagined and enacted, we carried out a research project focused on the Romanian public sphere in the context of the crisis. The research was premised on the model of the Europeanised national public spheres. As we have shown elsewhere (Bârgăoanu, Durach, 2011), the literature describes three models for the European public sphere: a) the homogeneous, unique European public sphere (the *heavy* public sphere), b) the horizontally or vertically Europeanized national public spheres, and c) the *ad hoc* public sphere, fluid and created by some opinions on a series of common European topics and concerns. Relative consensus has been reached that the most viable model, both from a conceptual and a practical point of view, is that of the Europeanized national public spheres. With this in mind, it would be fairer to talk about “European public spheres” than to remain stuck with the ideal of a unique European public sphere. To be able to talk about Europeanized national public spheres, several criteria have been proposed: commonality of issues, simultaneity of discussion, mutual responsiveness between national public spheres (Habermas, 2009), common frames of reference, a common European perspective, “the same relevance criteria” (Th. Risse, 2003).

The research project was carried around a crucial event in the process of crisis resolution: the signing of the Treaty of Financial Governance by 25 EU member states on the 1 March 2012. It had three layers:

- a. content analysis of Romanian online portals and TV channels one month before and after the event, with a focus on the “Euro crisis” topic; the content analysis sought to identify the visibility and the prominence of the topic, the actors involved and the way in which media discourse frames it;
- b. expert interviews with high-profile Romanian specialists in finance and economy;
- c. national survey.

For the remaining of this article, we will only present the results of the expert interviews and of the national survey, with a view to revealing the perceptions of the euro crisis in the Romanian society - both at the popular and elite level - and at identifying the effects of this

perception on the attitudes toward the EU. We will compare quantitative and qualitative data resulting from the two methods. We will attempt to identify the differences and similarities between the general public's perception on (and interpretation of) the Euro crisis and the experts' opinions and explanations on the same subject. Apart from the more "technical" issues (such as economic mechanisms which led to the euro crisis), we will be interested in finding out how did the crisis influence the public opinion on the European Union and in offering at least a partial answer to the question "Is the European Union the ultimate victim of the crisis?".

The public opinion was measured using a national survey (N=1002) on European related topics, conducted between 28 and 30 April 2012. The design of the survey was based on the following research questions:

Q1. What is the degree of general knowledge about the Euro crisis?

Q2. What is the public opinion on the consequences and implications of the crisis?

Apart from the public opinion survey, we have conducted a number of 11 interviews with important Romanian public figures, such as: state officials, leading experts in the economic and financial field, and journalists working for business or financial publications. They are: L.A. (General Director BCR Pensii), R.S. (chief economist, Direction of Economic Studies, the National Romanian Bank), C.V. (editor, "Wall Street"), V.V. (President of the parliamentary Commission for economy, industry and services, former Minister of Economy and Commerce), A.V. (consultant of the Governor of the National Romanian Bank), L.V. (Secretary of State, the Ministry of Science), S.P. (editor-in -chief, "Ziarul Financiar"), I.Ș. (analyst), C.Ș. (editor-in-chief, "Capital"), L.O. (Minister of European Affairs), and V.L. (chief economist, the National Romanian Bank).

The particular context of discussion was the signing of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union. Interviews were taken from 25 March to 11 April, 2012. Experts were asked about the impact of the euro crisis on the future of the European Union, about predictions regarding the evolution of the European Union in the near future, and about personal estimations about the public opinion regarding people's attitude toward the European Union and possible changes due to the crisis.

We took into consideration the following research questions:

Q1. What is the opinion of the Romanian political actors and experts on the Euro crisis?

Q2. What is the opinion of the Romanian political actors and experts on EU's mistakes in coping with the Euro crisis?

Q3. What are the possible short-term solutions for dealing with the crisis and what are the long-term measures required?

In order to structure our analysis, we will focus on the following topics: Euro crisis (sources, influences, consequences, accountable actors), EU-related (the impact of the EU on everyday life), attitudes toward the EU (changes, evolutions), European identity (advantages and disadvantages of membership, presence or absence of an European identity), and the expected evolution of the economic situation (in the near future, the direction in which the EU is going).

#### 4. Data Analysis

The first set of questions, revolving around the perception on the Euro crisis, reveals some similarities between the experts' opinion and the general public's perspective. All experts interviewed agree that Romania is influenced by the Euro crisis, due to the fact that the country is "a tiny part in the EU mechanism" (L.A.). The process of influence takes place by contagion: the country's exports are targeted to euro zone countries, and most foreign investments in Romania come from the aforementioned economies, so the drastic changes that took place inside the Euro zone hit the Romanian economic system as well. The financial fluxes and the banking system are other mechanisms of influence mentioned in the interviews. One interviewee adds the psychological factor into the equation: "We (Romanians) are influenced in the decisions we make" (C.V.). On the same matter, the public opinion understands the connection between the economic crisis in Romania and the Euro crisis. Almost half (48.5%) of respondents believe that the local crisis and the Euro zone crisis are connected to a high or a very high degree.

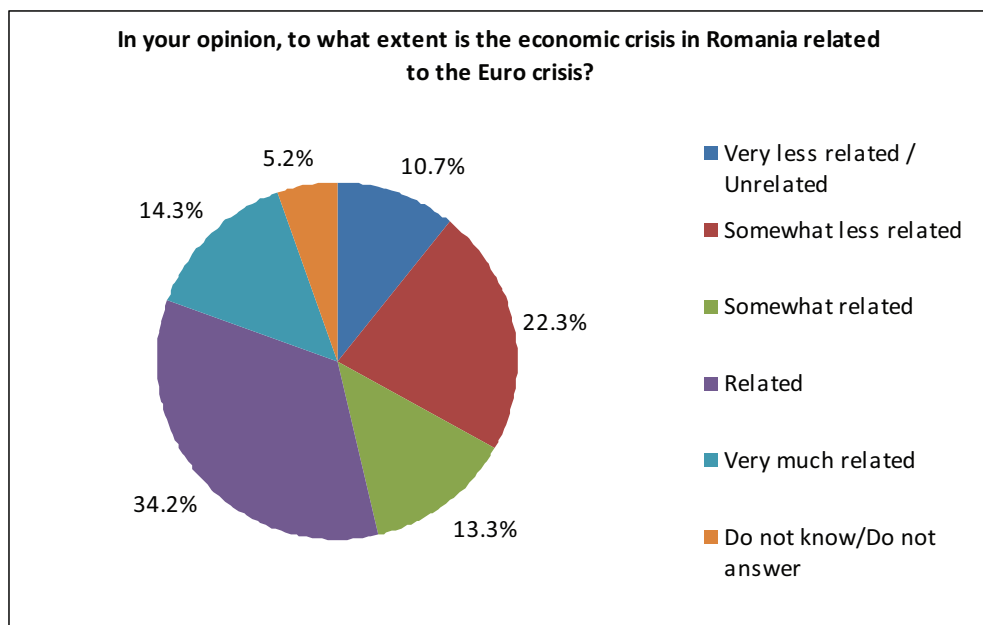


Fig. 1. The relation between the economic crisis in Romanian and the economic crisis in the EU

Concerning the roots of the crisis and the accountability issue, experts give five types of explanations. Some mentioned the design flaws of the Euro zone: "Without a fiscal union, a monetary union solves nothing" (L.A.). The Euro zone is affected also by the imbalances between the North and the South (V.L.) and by insufficient economic integration (L.O.). In A.V.'s words, "The United States of America act as a single actor in the global arena,

whereas in the case of Europe, only God knows how many speeds there are, how many problems, how many ambitions”.

Another category of interpretations argue that the Euro crisis originated in the global economic crisis started in 2007 (A.V., V.L., L.O., L.V., C.V.). In this frame of interpretation, the vulnerabilities of the global banking system surfaced quickly, shifting from the USA to the EU. Most of the public figures interviewed blame the hasty manner in which the member states started rescuing financial institutions. The process was compared to “a golden parachute that we opened blindly in order for the major banks to land safely”.

The third set of interpretations refers to the misuse of the public finance, in the absence of a high level of financial and economic education/culture (L.A., R.S., L.V.). The Euro crisis is the result of misuse of two elements: public debt and budgetary deficit in order to support the budgetary system and social policies (V.V.).

Last but not least, the free market mechanisms are responsible, due to lack of regulations, for the crisis of overproduction and inadequate individual economic behaviour. As we can infer from the interpretations above, there is not a single cause for the Euro crisis, but more of a combined perspective:

*“The accountability for the current crisis is shared between all: governments, individual households, financial institutions, non-financial institutions, and in the particular case of the Euro we must add to the list the European institutions that have designed and tolerated a suboptimal functional system for the Euro zone” (V. L.).*

When asked to name three actors accountable for the economic crisis in the EU, the respondents to the survey gave varied answers, ranging from institutions, to collective and individual actors, to member states, and to policies or economic factors. The main accountability was placed on the political class in general (mentioned first by 5.1% of respondents). Others mentioned banks first (4.4%), USA/the Americans (4.4%), Greece (2.9%), France (2%), governments of member states (1.7%). The EU as whole was mentioned first by 0.9%.

As a second answer, Germany was mentioned by 2% of people, followed by Greece (1.3%), low levels of productivity (1.2%), France (1.1%), the political class (1%). The EU was mentioned second by 0.1% of respondents.

As a third answer, Italy was mentioned by 1.2%, followed by France (0.7%), Germany (0.6%), Spain (0.4%), the population (0.4%).

Overall, the respondents to the survey put responsibility mainly on collective actors, such as: the political class (national and/or European), the population and/or certain groups (wealthy people, bankers, state presidents, parliament members, European leaders), and groups of member states (the underdeveloped states, the wealthy states, the powerful states). The most important European institutions (the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the European bank) were also mentioned, but the EU as a whole was blamed far less. Some states that had a great visibility during the peaks of the crisis were also labelled as being responsible: Ireland, UK, Italy, Germany, France, USA. Only a few individual actors were included on the list: the president of Romania Traian Băsescu, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the president of the European Commission, the French president. Other explanations were of political nature (measures,



policies, state decisions) or economic nature (sovereign debt, individual debt, inflation, the euro, overproduction, the financial system)

When asked to choose from a list, the results change. From a multitude of actors, the ones that are held most accountable for the crisis in the public eyes are: the politicians (18,5%), the International Monetary Fund (15.8%) and the banks (15.7%).

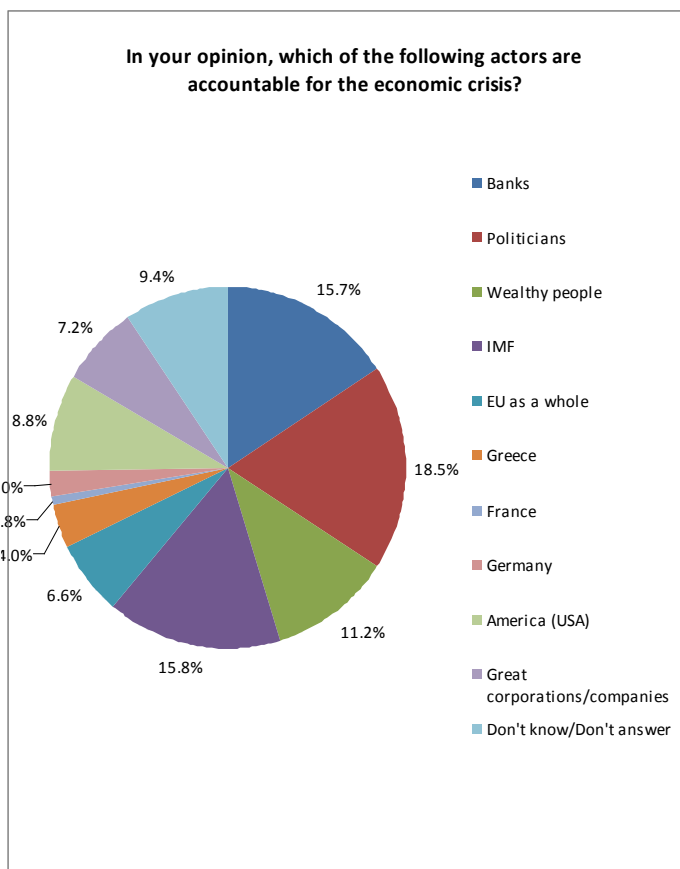


Fig. 2. In your opinion, which of the following actors are accountable for the economic crisis?

In what concerns the short-term evolution of the economic situation in the EU (12 month-time span), the experts agree there is an intimate link between the developments in the EU and developments in Romania. “Romania lacks a buffer, a protective shield. Unfortunately, this situation won’t change in the future, because one cannot create a buffer overnight” (L.A.). The worst case scenario anticipates an all-time low for the EU. It is imperative to avoid the risk of falling in a deep recession (L.O.), but this is a difficult task, as the EU has serious difficulties in managing itself (I.Ş.). On the same negative

page, Romania is expected to have a serious deficit in 2012, followed by an almost imperceptible economic growth in 2013 (S.P., L.A, R.S., V.V.).

The best case scenario for the EU includes “a slight economic growth that will bring comfortable stability” (C.Ş). Romania’s situation appears to be a bit blurry. The economic developments are influenced by the results of the following elections, which could affect the budgetary deficit (L.V.). The experts are reserved: “Now Romania has a bit of an ‘advantage’, so to say. [...] We are at our lowest and by consequence any improvement could appear” (C.Ş).

The public opinion seems to be undecided on what the future developments of the economic situation could be, with a tendency toward pessimism. Almost half of the respondents (a cumulated 48.5%) expect the economic situation in Romania to be worse or far worse in the next 12 months, 20.2% see no significant change and 31.3% are optimistic. The respondents give much more credit to the European Union than to the Romanian government. Only 28.8% believe that the economic situation in the EU as a whole will be worse or far worse, whereas the majority (51.6%) anticipates clear improvement. 19.5% see no change in the near future.

When we correlate the two questions, we can see that the evolutions of the two (the EU and Romania) go hand in hand in the public judgement: 39% of those who think the economic situation in Romania will be far worse see the same evolutions in the case of the EU, compared to only 6.9% who anticipate a significant improvement in the EU. Similarly, 52.9% of people who think the economic situation in Romania will be much better, have the same opinion in what concerns the EU, and only 5.9% think the economic situation in the EU will take a turn to the worse.

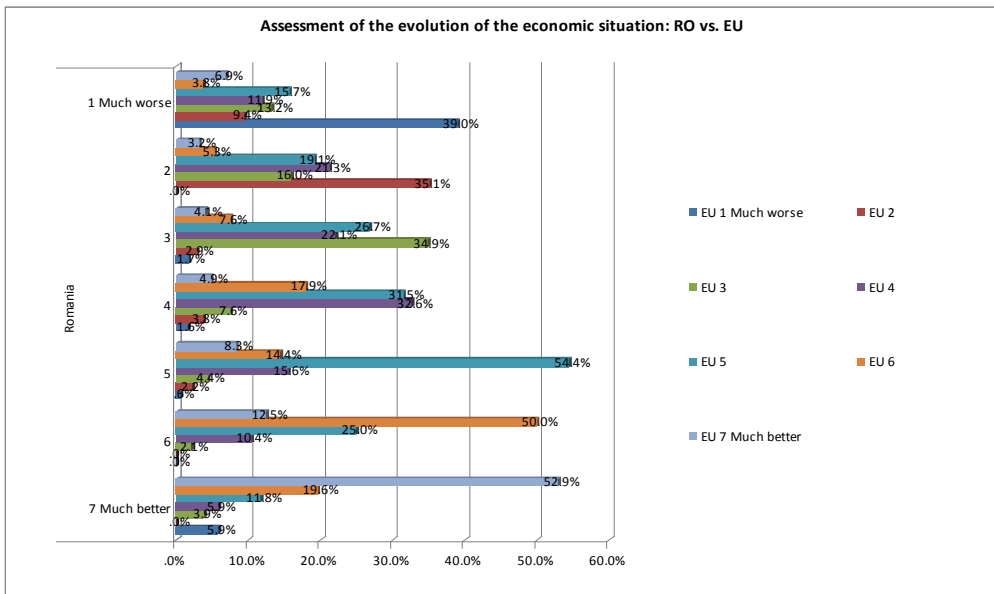


Fig. 3. Assessment of the evolution of the economic situation: RO vs. EU

Another set of questions in the interview and in the survey is dedicated to the attitudes towards the EU. More precisely, we wanted to find out whether the public opinion in Romania relates differently to the EU after the aggravation of the economic crisis. The experts were asked to think about ways in which the attitudes of the Romanian citizens changed.

Some of the experts interviewed saw no significant changes in the levels of trust, at least for the short-term (L.A., V.L., S.P., L.V., C.V.). Others are even more optimistic, and expect higher levels of trust in the EU, for a number of reasons. First, Romanians have the impression that the economic situation in the rest of the EU is more stable than in their own country. Secondly, the EU impersonates a saviour for Romania's development in the long run. Trust in the EU is a counter reaction to the distrust in the national government. Finally, the mobility to travel, study and work abroad fuells up the mirage of the Western civilization.

*"The typical Romanian citizen hates himself first and foremost and the main advantage of the EU is that it unshackles one from being oneself" (R.S.)*

*"Internal problems were so great and felt so intensely on the short term, that Brussels developed a more positive image" (C.V.)*

*"The EU is the train that pulls us forward" (V.)*

In this matter at least, the experts' opinions seem not to reflect reality very accurately. The survey question "How much trust do you have in the EU?" recorded surprising results. 43.7% of respondents have very little or little trust in the EU; only 22% trust the EU and only 5.2% of respondents admitted trusting the EU very much.

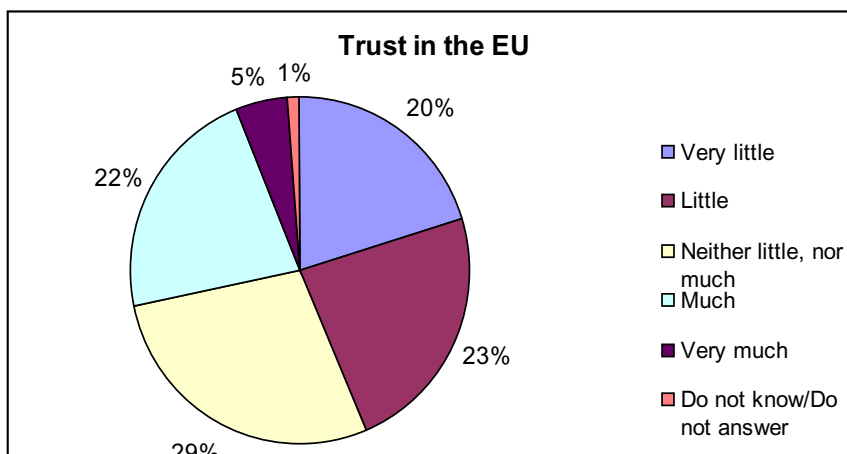


Fig. 4. Trust in the EU

Although this result might bring us closer to the EU27 average, when compared to Eurobarometer results in Romania from previous years, a drastic drop becomes obvious.

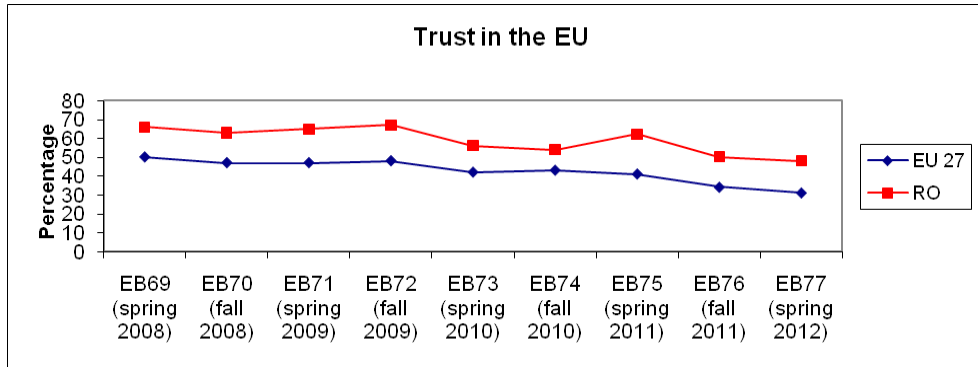


Fig. 5. Trust in the EU: trend (Eurobarometer results)

Although Romania manages to stay above the EU average, we can see that it follows a constantly descending trend with only slight and temporary improvement in 2010. For the first time ever, in spring 2012, less than half (48%) of Romanians trusted the EU. Nevertheless, the public opinion in this country remains less Euro sceptic than the average.

Results can be correlated to the answer to another question in the survey, regarding the direction in which things are going in the European Union. There is moderate optimism; 35.1% believe that the EU is going in a good/very good direction, compared to 24.8% who believe the opposite. A notable 31.2% are undecided.

In the context of this significant decrease in trust, it is legitimate to ask ourselves what are the perceived benefits of EU membership, both at personal and national level. During the interview, the experts and public figures were invited to express their opinion on the subject (“Do Romanians perceive the benefits of EU membership based on pragmatic evaluations or symbolic evaluations?”). Based on their answers, we can group the possible interpretations into two categories. Pragmatically speaking, the country’s membership to the EU is related to a higher standard of living, the freedom to travel, the possibility to work abroad, and free movement. The other category includes symbolic references, such as: the desire to overcome the feeling of inferiority, the desire to be in line with the highly developed states, and what can be called “historical consciousness”:

*“In what concerns mentalities and civic culture, we still have a lot to learn. At a historical level, we [Romania] are in Europe, because the difference between us and the Middle East or North-Eastern regions of Europe (Siberia) are far greater than those between us and the rest of the EU member states” (V.V.)*

Overall, there seems to be a balance between symbolic and pragmatic interpretations. This conclusion is backed up by the results of the survey. The majority (45.5%) believes that Romania experiences both advantages and disadvantages deriving from EU membership.

A small fraction (9,9%) sees only disadvantages. At a personal level, the situation differs. There is a greater leverage of opinions: 25.1% feel they have more advantages due to EU membership, 24.9% answered they experience both advantages and disadvantages and an equal 24.9% experience mostly disadvantages.

The perceived advantages of Romanian’s membership to the EU are linked to the levels of trust. Half of the respondents who have a lot of trust in the EU also believe that the advantages of membership surpass the disadvantages. Also, 30.5% of those who see only the disadvantages of EU membership and 36% of those who believe that the disadvantages are more numerous than the advantages have very low levels of trust in the EU.

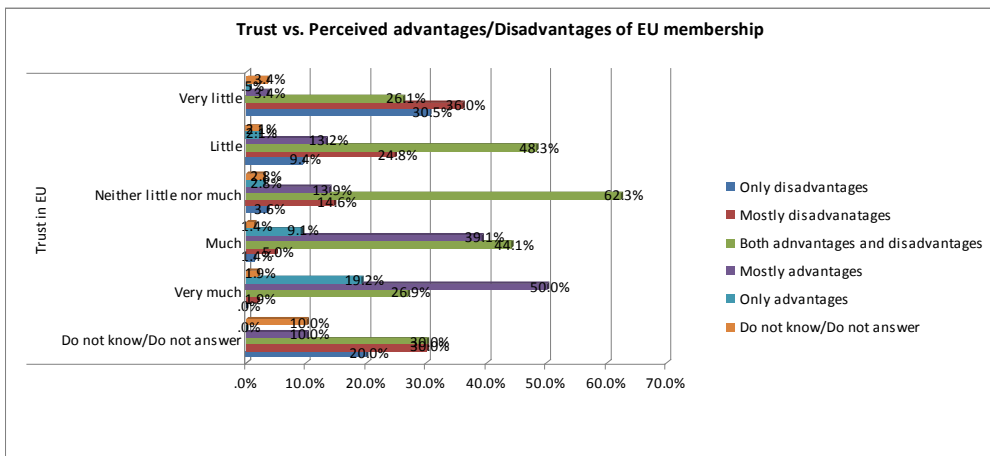


Fig. 6. Trust vs. Perceived advantages/ Disadvantages of EU membership

When asked “What does Romania’s membership to the EU mean for you?”, people turned to pragmatic and symbolic points of reference in an almost perfect balance. From a symbolic point of view, respondents answered “Being part of the civilized world” (74.2%), “being proud of being European” (59.2%), “peace and security” (66.2%). From a practical perspective, EU membership equals with “freedom of movement” (91.3%), “European funds” (72.5%), “financial advantages” (39.6%).

As we could see, Romanians evaluate EU membership in symbolic and pragmatic terms, but the question is: “do they actually feel European?”. We have included a question on the matter of a perceived double identity, Romanian and European, and the results are in line with our expectations.

The experts interviewed were asked to assess whether Romanians have developed a double identity, both national and European, and the results varied. One side carries the belief that the possibility of a double identity is remote. One argument in favour of this idea is that the Romanians are very nationalistic (C.Ş.). Adding to this, the Romanian society faces a serious crisis of identity; in such conditions, the development of a European identity meets hostile ground.

*“Romania is obviously facing an identity crisis. [...] At the moment, Romanians have no almost no distinct identity at all. The causes for this situation can be easily identified in the education crisis, the cultural crisis, the situation in which the old communist system has been replaced with a confusing capitalist system; we have no long-term benchmarks.” (C.Ş).*

The majority of the experts admit that a European identity is extremely desirable and a “prerequisite for a functional European project” (R.S.) but, on the short term, it should not be expected in the case of Romania. As long as the political class, which sets the tone in a society, stays focused on national issues and reinterprets European subjects from a limited, local perspective, it is almost impossible for citizens to feel both Romanian and European (C.V.)

Having a completely different position on this matter, other experts anticipate the development of a double identity in the near future, especially at young generations. One key aspect is the quality of life: “If Romanians’ lives are satisfactory, there won’t be a problem of identity” (L.A.). Some optimistic opinions state that a double identity already exists. Romanians feel European even if they are not yet aware of this fact.

*“One identity does not exclude the other. The European identity exists, although not explicitly identified as such by Romanians. This matter becomes palpable when travelling abroad. In such a situation, one feels part of a larger, albeit different family, having a lot of identities and particularities, but still a family.” (L.O.)*

In order to shed light on the matter, we have included in the survey one question about the perception of a double identity. Although the majority of respondents feel only Romanian (58.8%), there is also a consistent percentage that admits feeling “Mainly Romanian, but also European” (36.9%). This value entitles us to state that the perception of a double identity is not a marginal phenomenon.

We have found a positive correlation between the perceived double identity and the levels of trust in the European Union: 83.7% of those who have very little trust in the EU consider themselves to be only Romanian. The respondents who admit having a lot of trust in the EU feel Romanian, but also European (59.6%).

We expected the economic crisis in the EU to make regular citizens more aware of the impact of the decisions made at a European level. In order to test this hypothesis, we approached this subject in the expert interviews. The given answers highlight the following situation: people are more aware of the impact of EU decisions in their lives only when they are directly affected by those decisions.

*“Romania lacks the political culture necessary for European subjects to become important for the general public [...] From what I’ve seen as a journalist, after the crisis people started paying more attention to what happened outside the borders, because they became aware of global system that we live. The receptivity towards international and European subjects started to grow. This kind of awareness is characteristic to 2%, maybe 10% of the population.” (C.Ş).*

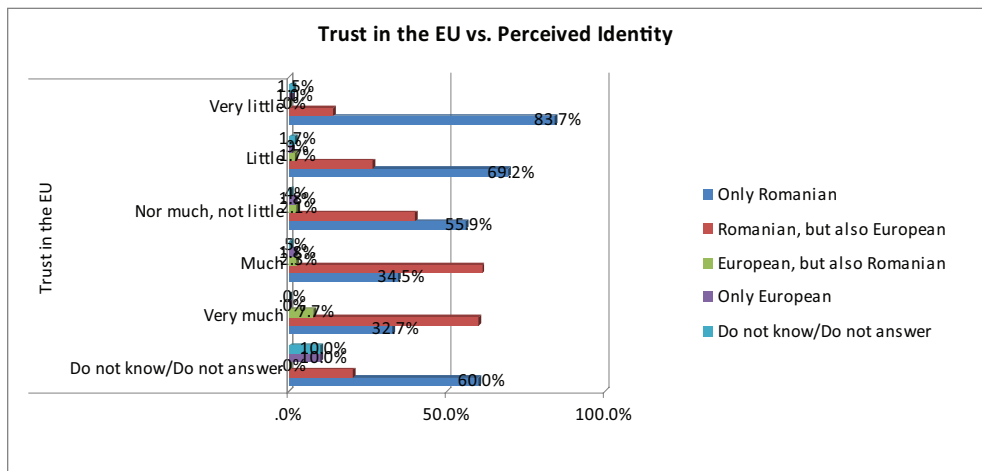


Fig. 7. Trust in the EU vs. Perceived Identity

There is a contradiction between the expert opinions and the results of the survey: 31.4 % of respondents feel that the decisions taken at an European level influence their lives, compared to only 22.7%, who feel that the impact is rather low. At the extremes, 12.3% feel they are influenced greatly by decisions taken at the European level, whereas 14.9% perceive a very low impact on their lives.

When asked to imagine how their lives would change if Romania exited the European Union, 29.9% see no change in their situation, 13.8% believe their lives would be far worse, and 21.6% imagine their lives would become moderately worse. Only 6.9% answered their lives would be much better, given such a scenario.

The results of the survey also suggest an emotional connection to the EU: 39.3% would regret the dissolution of the EU. The answers given to the next question in the survey, “In the next five years, would you like the EU to play a greater or smaller role in your life” indicate clear support for what we could call “more Europe”: the majority wants the EU to play a more important role the following years and only 23.2% desires the opposite.

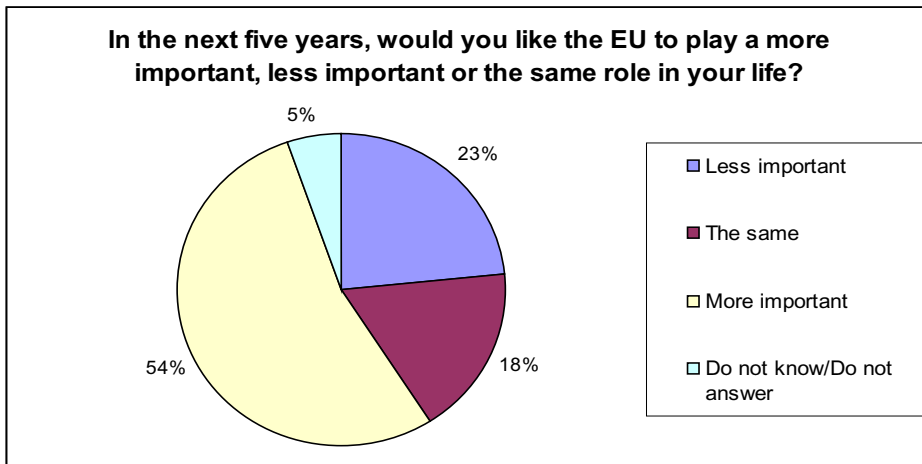


Fig. 8. In the next five years, would you like the EU to play a more important, less important or the same role in your life?

## 5. Discussion

A strong connection between the crisis in the Euro zone and the economic crisis in Romania is openly admitted both by the experts interviewed and the respondents in the survey. Almost half of the respondents are aware that the euro crisis and the Romanian crisis are linked. As explained by the experts, the process of contagion takes place through “hard” mechanisms (trade and investments) and “soft” mechanisms (psychological factors that influence economic decisions).

There is a lot of public debate on the roots and factors responsible for the crisis. Expert opinions focus more on structural factors and economic mechanisms, whereas the public opinion seems to be more concerned with directly placing blame on something/someone. The experts give five sets of explanations for the causes of the euro crisis, targeting the design flaws of the euro zone, the developments of the global economic crisis started in 2007, the process of rescuing financial institutions, the misuse of the state budget, and the mechanisms of the free market.

When asked to name the most important three factors accountable for the crisis, the survey respondents provided rather simplistic explanations. The accountable actors are the political class (seen as an indistinct group), followed by Germany (the second answer), and Italy (the third answer). Greece, the banks, USA, and France were also frequently mentioned as the first, second or third answer, while the EU was mentioned less frequently. Overall, the crisis seems to be rather faceless: the respondents placed accountability mostly on collective actors, groups or important institutions. When asked to pick the accountable actors from a list, the respondents in the survey consistently chose politicians, followed by the IMF and the banks.

Another area of concern was the evolution of the economic situation in the EU and in Romania on the short term. The forecast made by the experts varied from negative



(recession and a very uncomfortable economic situation in Romania - budgetary deficit, public debt) to slightly positive (very mild economic growth in the EU in 2013 and a potential improvement in the case of Romania). The tendency expressed by public opinion is towards pessimism when assessing the economic developments in Romania, while the European Union is given more credit. The evolutions of the economic situation in the EU and in Romania are perceived by the general public (and experts) as closely linked: those who see improvement in the EU also see improvement at a national level. This interpretation indicates that the European Union still impersonates a saviour, a force that pulls us higher or drags us down, according to the general evolutions.

Although the EU is not directly blamed for the crisis, there is a drop in the levels of trust. The economic crisis has eroded the level of trust, bringing it to an all-time low of 48% in spring 2012 (compared to 66% at the beginning of 2008). The results of our survey confirm the Eurobarometer data: only 22% have a moderate trust in the EU, a small fraction (5.2%) has a high level of trust in the EU, whereas 43.7% of respondents have little or very little trust. These results contradict the speculations of some experts, according to whom no fluctuations in the levels of trust in the EU are expected. Keeping this trend in mind, it is relevant to know if the Romanian citizens see the advantages and/or disadvantages of their countries' membership to the EU. The perception of Romania's benefits from EU membership is linked to the levels of trust, as the respondents who have a lot of trust in the EU also believe that the advantages are more numerous than the disadvantages.

The expert opinion that citizens evaluate the benefits of membership in both symbolic and pragmatic terms is confirmed by the answers given to the question "What does the EU mean for you?" Symbolically, respondents mentioned "Being part of the civilized world", "being proud of being European", "peace and security". Pragmatically, EU membership equals "freedom of movement", "European funds", and "financial advantages".

Identity is an important factor in the equation. The experts agree that European identity is a prerequisite of a functional European Union. Some opinions state that the formation of a double identity, European and Romanian, is a far off expectation, while the more optimistic experts expect the emergence of a double identity in the near future. The latter perspective is supported by the results provided by the survey: although the majority feels only Romanian, there is a consistent 36.9% that feel "mainly Romanian, but also European". The perception of a double identity is positively linked to the levels of trust in the EU.

One would expect the economic crisis to make people more aware of the impact of decisions made at the European level on their own lives. The expert opinions that Romanians lack the political culture necessary to make such a connection are contradicted by the results of the survey – the majority feels that the decisions at a European level do influence them at a personal level.

## **6. Conclusions**

The euro crisis is no ordinary crisis. Due to its implications on the future of the European Union and its institutional design, it represents a genuine existential test. Our research shows that in Romania and for the moment at least, the "EU" has not fallen

victim to the crisis. There is a considerable drop in public trust in the EU, but it is our assessment that the descending trend could be reversed, provided a clear vision, accompanied by strong leadership, emerges. Although Romanians' attitudes toward the EU are negatively affected by the economic downturn of the last years, public opinion remains optimistic about the direction in which the EU is heading, and has a positive outlook on the evolution of the European economic situation within the next 12 months. In what concerns Romania's future, the perspective is much more pessimistic. Taking into consideration the perception of a connection between Romania and the EU, we would have expected that optimism regarding the latter would raise optimism regarding the former; the results contradict these expectations. The paradox is only apparent and it can be explained by one distinctive feature of the Romanian public opinion. Since EU accession, Romanians have pictured the EU as a saviour and as a safe haven. This frame still lingers in the collective memory, fuelled by a chronic discontent with the national political class and a tendency towards self-victimization.

The crisis raises practical and symbolic challenges for the EU. The former can be summarised to one question: political union or economic union? This unsolved dilemma was ignored during prosperous times; when facing prospects of deep recession, social movements, and centrifugal tendencies, such existentialist debates are revived. Whatever vision of Europe will succeed, the main symbolic challenge for the EU is to inspire the commitment of citizens to the new profile of the EU. The European leaders of the future must give convincing answers to the question on EU's new *raison d'être*. The situation calls for a new kind of solidarity, one that comes from the deep understanding of what the shared interests of the member states are in the year 2012, not what they were a decade, or even five years ago. Solidarity built up in the public sphere is sustainable, authentic and genuine and it makes collective choices easier and wiser.

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