

United by or Against Euroscepticism? An Assessment of Public Attitudes towards Europe in the Context of the Crisis

Edited by Alina Bârgăoanu, Loredana Radu and Diego Varela.
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Book Review by Anca Ulman¹

Abstract: *Published as a collection of academic articles under the coordination of PhDs Alina Bârgăoanu, Loredana Radu and Diego Varela, the volume "United by or Against Euroscepticism? An Assessment of Public Attitudes towards Europe in the Context of the Crisis" draws a comprehensive image of the public attitudes concerning the European Union, with an emphasis on what has been known as Euroscepticism. Doubled by different perspectives and supported by multiple sources, the phenomenon is coloured in balanced tones from an unbiased light. Euroscepticism and the broader context of the leadership crisis in the EU are permanently mirrored in this book as a connection between the two is sought. The argumentation can be followed logically and chronologically, as it gradually unveils EU public support from the union level to the national level and from the beginning of the crisis towards its expected end.*

Keywords: *EU, Euroscepticism, crisis, multifaceted perspective*

Text and context

The volume coordinators have proved long theoretical and practical involvement in the issues related to EU-scepticism, Euroscepticism and populist discourse in the EU that took the form of research, academic work, paperwork, conference participation and project management. *United By or Against Euroscepticism? An Assessment of Public Attitudes towards Europe in the Context of the Crisis*, is the result of collaborative work between the book coordinators and 17 co-authors with academic experience and research interests in different areas belonging to the social sciences field (Communication, Sociology, Public Affairs, Political Science, Philosophy, Media studies). It is the variety of points of view their specializations infer and their international background that support a round, complete view over the concepts.

The book was published in 2015, at a time when public attention was captured by multiple events with European resonance and when the media focus was on the word "crisis" and its derivatives. The economic difficulties imposed by the crisis of the early 2000s were merely

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the trigger for consequences coming with the speed of a waterfall and the steep incline was favoured, if not formed, by the poor stability of the European project. The “unity in diversity” slogan became obsolete as the reality was rather represented by disunity. The heterogeneous composition of the European Union was proving its weaknesses.

Formulated as a question, the title is relevant for the both sides of Euroscepticism, gathering the defenders as well as the opponents of the European project under the same analysis. The term “united” might seem strange or unfitted when the subject covers the growing feeling of discontent regarding the EU membership. In fact, what we believe its use implies is the common spirit laying behind all the European nations, the sense of similarity and belonging exceeding any formal association, the connected history. The explanation is probably stated by the authors themselves: “we are critical pro-Europeanists and we believe that criticizing the EU does not equal contesting the European project” (p. 11).

The introductory chapter of the book asks the question in the title: *United By or Against Euroscepticism?*. Although the rhetorical character of the question stays to the end of the chapter, the reader is empowered to give his/her own answer. Support-questions are formulated and answered in a manner that gradually reveals the most important aspects of Euroscepticism.

“Why and how did this happen? (...) What has changed then in just seven years, since the beginning of the crisis? (...) What is the future of the EU? (...) Do Eurosceptics speak with one (European) voice?” (pp. 2- 11)

Chronologically-oriented and logically-connected, they are responsible with setting the context for the phenomena described by the contributors. Moreover, answering these questions means adjusting the position of the three authors who, far from engaging into technical argumentation, plead the symbolic dimension of the EU.

Contributions and contributors

Before describing how the EU-related attitudes are approached throughout the chapters, it is important to get better acquainted with the co-authors and the book design.

Various contributions draw the lines of Euroscepticism and offer a multifaceted view on the events crossing it. Judged by content management, the book describes the larger image before focusing on the national or regional realities. From the North to the South or from the West to the East, Europe is portrayed in the colours of the Eurobarometers and seen through utilitarian lenses before the attention is captured by the local nuances. Time-wise, the content is characterized by a future-oriented perspective, seeking to anticipate trends and foresee changes generated by the multi-layered crisis. The concept of Euroscepticism benefits from a comprehensive analysis, from its roots in 1988 towards its massive use nowadays.

The list of contributors is defined by heterogeneity, a feature proportionally transmitted to the chapters of the book. With authors originating in or professionally assigned to Russia, Turkey, Romania, Ukraine, Slovenia, Poland, The Netherlands, Italy or Spain and proving expertise or interests in EU studies, media studies, political science, philosophy, communication studies or sociology, the book proves the intention of objectivity.

The East, the West, the Rest

The subject is formally structured into four sections coinciding with the previously described logic. *“Eurocepticism – cross-national perspectives”*, the first section of the book, considers the EU’s actual situation from the inside, emanating from the national spheres and spreading throughout the union. What this chapter suggests is that EU legitimacy often becomes an economic matter:

“With Europe fighting the echoes of the economic crisis, criticism towards Brussels is higher than ever. Many Europeans resent the EU for continued rounds of austerity measures and for its perceived lack of democratic legitimacy.” (p. 18)

Research demonstrated that even traditionally Euro-optimistic countries (the Mediterranean and the Eastern European countries) reversed their views when cuts in payments and rises in tax were in sight. On the other hand, a divide between creditor and debtor countries was recorded both in the public discourse at the national level and in the surveys addressed to the people, fuelling the opposition towards the EU and creating the premises for an Utilitarian type of Eurocepticism.

“Western Europe: Growing Discontent and Placid Euroapathy” gives the name of the next group of contributions. While the title concentrates the attention over a certain part of the EU, the articles evaluate the public attitudes toward the Union in an individual manner, considering each of the recorded societies in their own frame. The findings prove that Eurocepticism is not an absolute value with precise characteristics, but rather a concept prone to adaptation; although it might register similar levels of intensity in distinct countries, the causal system behind it can be fundamentally different. According to one of the contributors, the EU is perceived as a “foreign embassy” in the UK and, at the same time, as an “enlightened despot” in Spain. The reasons and the outcomes of this situation are subject to interpretation in the first article of the chapter. The Dutch have their own representations of the ruling Union:

“If one wants to explain Eurocepticism in the Netherlands, it stands to reason that development of the present financial turmoil, labour tensions caused by ordinary workers’ fear of losing their jobs to Eastern European immigrants, the overall rise of populism and, in that perspective, the falling participation in formal politics, and the expectation of diminishing welfare in the near future should be considered.” (p. 90)

The situation on the Eastern front works under a different set of rules. Although not isolated from the growing Eurocepticism, the people in this part of the continent (with an emphasis on Romanians, Slovenians, Turkish and Ukrainians) can still see and feel the benefits of EU membership. *“Eastern Europe: De-mystification of Europe”* gathers various sets of research directed towards sketching the reflection of the EU to the population.

The young generation in Romania is considered under the magnifying glass in an attempt to figure the future of the Union by taking into account the present image of the EU. Contrasting perspectives contribute to an accurate representation of the EU, while the young are portrayed according to the opinions they expressed during the interviews. In a similar manner, the Slovenian case is characterized by findings in the national surveys. From 2009 to 2012, Eurocepticism pulse rates are connected to EU identification, with perception of the EU and

European citizenship feeling as quantifiable measurements. When candidate countries are in sight, the visibility of EU-related events bears high importance to the integration mechanism. For Turkey and Ukraine, Euroscepticism has particular meanings to be understood in their own environment.

The final considerations are anticipatory and suit the logic of the book. As unexpected as it might seem, Euroscepticism has its own bright side and the theory behind this view proves it right. Far from suggesting the imminent collapse of the EU, the authors assigned to the chapter "*Euroscepticism and the Future of the European Union*" invite to awareness and deep knowledge of the concept. The separation between the ideologically and tactically-motivated Eurosceptic actions is not just one of the scholars' whims, but the imperative step in prevention.

Conclusions

Without having an exhaustive aim, "*United By or Against Euroscepticism? An Assessment of Public Attitudes towards Europe in the Context of the Crisis*" manages to formulate a complete analysis of the current reflection of the EU to its own citizens. Theoretical references and statistical data support the objectivity of the interpretations, which can easily be extended to further analyses. The personal background of the contributors explains their preference for a certain area of interest and it becomes visible in style, without interfering with the results. If comparison is allowed, this book bears resemblance to the EU configuration: it is the result of team work, but the actors express themselves according to their own identity.