Contours of EU Peripheries in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

The Perspectives of Political Elites

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Abstract

This chapter presents the rationale behind employing the term 'EU peripheries' in the book and clarifies the theoretical framework adopted to define this term within the context of the EU integration process. The first section scrutinizes the concept of 'EU peripheries' as it will be theorized in the book. Its main aim is to critically examine the evolving connotations of the term, particularly in light of several crises of the last decade. Subsequently the chapter delves into the diverse

manifestations of emerging forms of EU contestation at the peripheries, followed by the methodology section and an outline of the book's structure. In the last section we examine the selected country cases and their contribution to the proposed conceptualization of EU peripheries, drawing connections with existing literature on the subject from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Finally, the chapter outlines the unique aspects of our approach and its potential contributions to existing scholarship in this field.

Keywords: EU peripheries, political elites, geopolitical shift, EU integration, contestation

Introduction

> Margins become privileged sites for observing the formation and re-formation of space. Understanding from the margin's point of view thus reveals what is otherwise obscured.
>
> <div align="right">Noel Parker (2008:10)</div>

This book aims to explore the diverse nature of the European Union's interactions with its peripheries by focusing on the perceptions of politicians in the context of contestation during a period of rising regional tensions marked most recently by the war in Ukraine. The volume casts important new empirical and conceptual light on the diverse motivations that underpin the political elites' attitudes towards the EU and the integration process. Consequently, the book presents a comprehensive examination from both theoretical and empirical standpoints regarding the EU's interactions with distinct categories of its periphery, encompassing member states (e.g., Romania and Hungary), candidate countries (e.g., Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Türkiye), and potential candidate countries (e.g., Kosovo and Georgia[1]).

The book has two main objectives. The first is to problematize the various understandings of the EU's interactions with its different peripheries by outlining the constructed nature of 'peripherality'. The second is to explore in a comparative manner the various domestic political elites' attitudes towards the EU and their complex motivations in countries at different stages in the EU accession process over a period of accumulation of crises and war. Therefore, we aim to tackle the issue of peripherality in the EU integration process as a multidimensional problem. We build on definitions of 'peripheries' from

post-structuralism, constructivism, and critical geopolitics, which are differentiated by various degrees of liminality in relation to the EU (taken as the main centre of reference), and through this conceptual background we aim to analyse the last decades' crisis-driven dynamics within various EU and non-EU countries. These empirically rich case studies will enable both interpretations of and debates on the EU integration process marked by diverse forms of contestation of or attraction to the adoption of the rules, and the main characteristics of these dynamics will be viewed as closely related to the 'self-perceived' nature of the societies in question in relation to the EU. Acknowledging the need to systematize and deepen our knowledge of the reality of the existing EU peripheries, we aim to focus on the question of peripherality through the lens of various peripheral regions, such as the Eastern neighbourhood, the Western Balkans, the Black Sea region, and also South-East and Central Europe.

The primary research inquiries in this scholarly work revolve around two fundamental aspects: first, the interpretation of political elites concerning their respective nations' stances vis-à-vis the EU; and second, the nuanced understanding of and significance attributed by these elites to the notion of the EU periphery as it unfolds in the current geopolitical context, which has fundamentally reshaped how the EU relates to some of its candidate and potential candidate countries. By exploring such questions, the book's overarching contribution lies in its exploration and analysis of the pivotal discourse surrounding the reconfigurations of the EU's centre–periphery dynamics as well as the evolving relationships between the EU and its neighbouring countries. In short, our central research question in this book is: *How is the concept of 'EU periphery' defined by the perspectives of political elites interpreting their countries' positions towards the EU?* To tackle this question, the book will explore different insiders' accounts of the EU's declining or rising appeal as seen by political elites in turbulent times defined by the war in Ukraine and rising illiberal practices in several member states and in candidate countries in the EU's neighbourhood.

We will therefore discuss the very meaning of 'EU peripheries' in its complexity, reflected not only in the EU's strategic decisions but also in the subjective perceptions of political elites from the countries in the EU periphery themselves. The term 'political elites' in this context specifically encompasses elected politicians, including representatives of relevant political parties within both the government

and the opposition, who hold positions in national parliaments and are actively engaged in decision-making processes pertaining to EU affairs (for more, see the methodology section below). Additionally, it encompasses individuals who have participated in joint parliamentary committees involving their respective national parliaments and members of the European Parliament, thereby exerting influence over EU-related matters. Similarly, a more nuanced examination is required to fully comprehend the elites' shifts from contestation to full support in its various forms in the EU's peripheries.

This book stands out by presenting a critical examination and challenging of the diverse peripheries within the EU. It achieves this by uniting experts from different disciplines of European studies, hailing from various countries and representing a range of career stages. The volume aims to conceptualize and empirically map the political conflicts that shape policy-makers' perceptions of the EU in eight countries from 2010 to the present. In this respect, the chapters include original qualitative data from each case study that reflects shifts in domestic actors' perceptions before and during the rapidly worsening situation in Ukraine and its visible impact at the regional and global level. The subsequent sections will initially scrutinize the concept of 'EU peripheries' within the context of EU integration as it will be theorized in the book. Subsequently, the chapter will delve into the diverse manifestations of emerging forms of EU contestation at the peripheries, followed by the methodology section and finally an outline of the book's structure.

Theorizing 'EU Peripheries' in the Context of EU Integration

As stated, one of the primary objectives of our book is to critically examine the evolving connotations of the EU's peripheries within the broader context of the EU integration process, particularly considering several recent crises. In this section, we will elucidate the rationale behind employing the term 'EU peripheries' and clarify the theoretical framework adopted to define the term within the context of the EU integration process. Subsequently, we will examine the selected country cases and their contribution to the proposed conceptualization of EU peripheries, drawing connections with existing literature on the subject from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Additionally, we will

outline the unique aspects of our approach and its potential contributions to existing scholarship in this field.

The term 'EU periphery' has several contradictory connotations in terms of geographical, economic, cultural/ideational, and political factors. Recent studies abound focusing strictly on the economic perspective, particularly in the context of the Eurozone crisis, and looking at core–periphery relations in the European Monetary Union (Campos & Macchiarelli, 2021; also see Gräbner et al., 2020). Classically, referring to the strictly economic side of the concept 'periphery', the dependency theory literature discusses the 'core versus periphery divide' with a predominantly economic focus that assumes a hierarchical order (with the core in a superior position to the periphery) (Öniş & Kutlay, 2019).

Although we are aware of these strictly economic underpinnings of the term, we opt for a meaning that tackles the more political and geopolitical essence of the 'periphery', connected to a certain group of countries and their shifting political relationship with the EU on a Europeanization–de-Europeanization continuum. This perspective assumes that peripheral countries are, in one way or another, under the political influence of the EU (the so-called 'transformative power' taken from the Europeanization research agenda; see Grabbe, 2006), due to their status either as new entrants or prospective or current candidate states, or as states within the framework of EU neighbourhood policy. It is also important to note that the impact of the EU's actions can also be understood under the more direct impact of conditionalities (see, for example, Bieber, 2018; Džankić et al., 2019; Hamburg, 2022; Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 2018; Zucconi, 2019; Cianetti et al., 2020; Lushaku Sadriu, 2019). As Celi et al. (2022) argues, there is a need for a more critical overview of the current forms and manifestations of peripherality in the EU, and outside the EU, as well as a better understanding of peripheries' self-representations and political self-realization.

Our perspective also goes in a different direction of assessing core–periphery relations in the EU integration context by reflecting on how geopolitical contexts shift the dynamics between the EU and its peripheries, with a greater focus on complex interdependencies in the realm of meaning-making rather than on a hierarchical, static core–periphery relation. We take an inter-disciplinary perspective that will help us to illustrate the peculiar and evolving nature of the 'EU

peripheries' – and in this case, the plurality of power relations inducing more politicization into the EU integration process and thus reflecting on reverse dynamics between the EU and its peripheries, opening the possibility for the peripheries to impact and shape the core (as Noel Parker's quote suggests in the epigraph to this chapter). This implies going beyond the dependency thesis underlying the peripheral position and using the label 'periphery' not with negative connotations but rather as a distinctive form of critique from the sidelines. This in turn implies understanding the EU integration process from the peripheries' perspective as expressed in the discourses of political elites (for both the countries that are partially integrated and those that have recently initiated the integration process). This is relevant to showing how peripheral societies understand, debate, and construct their identity in the European context during a period of successive crises.

Providing a theoretical conceptualization of EU peripheries without being strictly limited to an economic understanding of asymmetries as in other strands of EU integration literature (Börzel & Langbein, 2019; Gräbner et al., 2020) or simply looking at how the decisions of the core model the periphery, one may focus on the dual process taking place in profoundly changed contexts such as the war in Ukraine, where the periphery also has a new perspective on the core. In this regard, the contributors to this book undertake a reassessment of the concept of the EU periphery within the context of the profound systemic challenges that have confronted European integration over the past decade. By focusing their analysis on recent events and examining their influence on elite perceptions, the chapters present eight distinct case studies in order to shed light on the evolving understanding of EU peripheries.

Our approach to selecting case studies that fall within the notion of 'EU peripheries' is contingent on the political relationship that each respective country maintains with the EU. Within the context of this political relationship, the book encompasses cases from a diverse range of EU policy-making frameworks, including two member states (Hungary and Romania), four candidate countries (Türkiye, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova), and two potential candidate countries (Georgia and Kosovo). The primary rationale for including member states is their status within the EU decision-making process, characterized by an incomplete attainment of full integration with the EU or resistance towards adopting specific norms,

standards, and policies. The chapters dedicated to Romania and Hungary extensively examine the degree to which these countries, often regarded as 'laggards' in specific policy domains and even considered outliers or reactionaries within the EU, are categorized as politically peripheral. For non-EU member states, whether they are candidates or potential candidates, the contributors to the book analyse the evolution of the EU's foreign and security decisions over the past decade, investigating instances of differentiated treatment or accelerated processes, aiming to comprehend the extent to which the EU has generated specific dynamics of exclusion. These dynamics encompass not only political dimensions but also aspects of citizenship, ethnicity, and religion. In this regard, the book delves into the perceptions of political elites in EU and non-EU countries that have encountered various forms of exclusion, examining how their attitudes towards the EU and the integration process may have evolved over the past decade, particularly considering recent events such as the ongoing war in Ukraine and the challenges it has posed to the integration process.

We adopt a constructivist standpoint and, in alignment with other critical authors in EU studies, argue that the concept of the EU periphery is not fixed; rather, it can change with the accession of new states or the exit of member states (Parker, 2008; Celi et al., 2022). For example, in the context of the EU integration process, each enlargement wave has changed the meaning of 'EU periphery'. The configuration of the EU periphery has witnessed notable shifts in an eastern or south-eastern direction during distinct time periods, namely 2004, 2007, and, most recently, 2013. These changes have occurred as certain new countries gain membership in the EU, thereby leading to the emergence of new external regions referred to as the EU periphery. It is important to note that this dynamic transformation is influenced not only by the EU's enlargement policy per se but also by other global events that lie beyond the scope of EU decision-making authority. Additionally, political elites' perceptions of and engagement with EU institutions play a significant role in shaping the course of the integration process. In this respect, theoretically, our main claim is closely associated with post-structuralist and constructivist perspectives. Both of these perspectives argue that when EU integration dynamics change, so does the meaning of the EU periphery. To paraphrase Alexander Wendts' (1992) words, 'the periphery is what states make of it', and this depends on the position of the observer.

This complex meaning-making process depends on whether it is seen with an outsider's gaze (from the perspective of the EU core) or with an insider's gaze (of those who inhabit the peripheral space itself). Following the arguments provided by Noel Parker's (2008) theoretical framework, the outside perspective on the EU periphery, which often uses 'Orientalizing narratives' and pejorative terms to construct the periphery as the Other of Europe, needs to be completed by an inside gaze looking at how political elites in the EU periphery define their relations with the EU and the way they themselves problematize the meaning of 'periphery' in the current turbulent times. In this book, our main contributors – scholars from the countries in focus – reflect on the specificities of each context, including reflections on institutional legacies, structural constraints, or electoral dynamics and how they interact in shaping these fast-moving realities.

One might contend that different post-structuralist studies employ varied terminologies that are only partially synonymous with the notion of 'periphery', such as 'marginality' (Parker, 2008) or 'liminality' (Rumelili, 2012). To mitigate potential confusion, we have chosen to consistently employ the concept of 'periphery' throughout the entire study. Indeed, we shall predominantly utilize it in this conceptual literature review specifically in its plural form as 'EU peripheries'. This deliberate choice stems from our intention to comprehensively explore the diverse nature of peripheral spaces within the EU. Our aim is to provide a comparative perspective on multiple peripheral spaces in relation to the EU core, encompassing both its internal regions (such as Romania and Hungary) and its neighbouring areas (such as Türkiye, the Balkans, and the post-Soviet space).

As discussed, we aim to make a significant contribution to the existing literature by conducting a comparative analysis of various perspectives from the EU peripheries. By adopting an 'insider's gaze' approach, we strive to shed light on obscured aspects of the EU integration process. Parker's (2008) work serves as the foundation for our theoretical discussions of EU peripheries while also considering recent geopolitical changes within the EU and its surrounding borders. We therefore acknowledge that the concept of 'periphery' carries historical baggage and negative connotations. However, starting from conventional perspectives, we embrace Parker's definition of marginality, which allows for the possibility of peripheral regions impacting the centre (in this case, the EU) and leaving it fully exposed to influences from its various

peripheries. Post-structuralist approaches discuss how these political aspects of peripherality are discursively constructed from the inside and outside of the periphery itself and what material conditions are connected to this discursive 'peripheralization'. Our perspective is EU-centred, as we examine the shifting peripheries on all sides of the EU's formal borders, both internally and externally, and explore their evolving interactions. In this context, the EU is perceived as a source of political order, acting as a centre with the political power to define different peripheries.

We believe that both cores and peripheries are defined by their relationships, and therefore they are not random. Their existence depends on each other's position. The identities of both the core and the periphery are, therefore, determined to some degree by their interrelationships. From this perspective, post-structuralist accounts focus on the fluidity of spaces constructed around centres. In Parker's words, 'we turn to the margins as sites where the fluidity of identities will surface and be played out' (2008, p. 11). His view is rooted in the philosophical significance of the marginal in Derrida's post-structuralism, which underlines the profound interconnected nature of the two concepts: 'without margins (edges), centers (metropolises, capitals) could not be centers; without centers, margins' marginal position(s) could not be identified' (Derrida, 1972, paraphrased in Parker, 2008, p. 11). 'Yet the margins' very existence holds up to view the center's incompleteness' (Parker, 2008, p. 11). This coincides with the expanding literature on European identity in both international relations and anthropology, discussing how identities are constructed in the international arena in a dynamic way. This perspective is closely aligned with the constructivist portrayal of the EU's enlargement policy, which aims to serve the interests of both prospective members and the EU itself to strengthen its political, economic, and normative influence. As a result, we consider this theoretical framework to be highly valuable and relevant in an academic context.

In conventional perspectives, the term 'peripheral' implies a passive condition of being shaped by or excluded from the centre (Parker, 2008, p. 9). In contrast, within this research, the dynamics of centre–periphery relations are perceived as interactive and mutually influential, with the periphery also exerting positive effects on the centre. In essence, in post-structuralist interpretations, peripheries are credited with the ability to surpass boundaries and alter both physical and

symbolic domains, irrespective of the impositions sought by sovereign states and markets from the centre (Kuus, 2007; Ballinger, 2017). This understanding of the concept leaves space for a more 'empowered' type of periphery, rather than a dependent and underdeveloped one as presented in pure economic studies. Taking into consideration the arguments and their implications, this study aims to assess how the EU, conceptualized as a space of socio-political order through the EU integration process, can be comprehended from the perspective of its various peripheries.

We also build on contributions of critical geopolitics that have highlighted the fact that defining a certain political space as a periphery is not something we should take for granted (like simply referring to that country's position on the map); rather we should analyse the multiple processes of 'sense-making' and framing that are likely to impact how a geographical space is treated as peripheral by a centre of power (Goldsworthy, 1998; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Kojanic, 2020). We adopt the concept of EU peripheries from a critical post-structuralist standpoint, viewing it as an ongoing process of asymmetrical relations dynamically constructed and reconstructed in the Europeanization and de-Europeanization processes over the past decade.

Unravelling Different Forms of Contestation at the EU's Peripheries

Studying a period characterized by successive crises, commonly referred to as a 'poly-crisis' (Zeitlin & Nicoli, 2020), and specifically examining a tense period marked by an ongoing war at the immediate borders of the EU, holds significant value in comprehending the emergence of polarized opinions and shifting perspectives regarding the EU both internally and externally. The 2008 economic crisis showcased the transformative influence of global crises on the conceptualization of core–periphery relations. This phenomenon was further evident during subsequent events such as the refugee crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and most recently, the war in Ukraine. The EU currently confronts unparalleled instability in its neighbouring regions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The past years have therefore witnessed significant transformations in the EU's neighbouring regions, with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia-Herzegovina becoming candidate countries and member states such as Romania assuming

stronger positions in the Council. These developments are marked by some South-East European countries' efforts to assist Ukrainian refugees and bolster their military strategic positions as leaders of NATO's eastern flank.

These changes are even more puzzling given that EU studies scholars have shown that, pushed by recent crises such as the Eurozone crisis, migration crisis, and Brexit, European integration has become an increasingly contested process (Brack & Gürkan, 2021; Özçelik et al., 2023). Starting in February 2022, the war in Ukraine significantly changed this process because it determined some decisions that were previously 'unthinkable' for the EU: to offer candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova (which were previously associated countries before, seeking membership but, as part of the Eastern Partnership, never promised it) and to Bosnia and Herzegovina (which had been stagnating since it first applied for candidate status in 2016, due to its lack of reforms). The geopolitical context of the war in Ukraine and numerous security concerns in the EU's neighbourhood determined this radical shift in the EU's policy. But experts argue that in some countries, the accession process is most positively regarded, whereas in other countries in EU's periphery it remains more contested than ever, following an intensifying trend of so-called de-Europeanization (Alpan & Öztürk, 2022). Scholars have concluded that the EU faces transformative and normative constraints due to recent events, which involve disputes regarding the EU and efforts to move away from its institutional or normative frameworks, occurring both within and outside the EU (Foster & Grzymski, 2022; Makarychev & Butnaru-Troncotă, 2022).

Extensive research has been conducted on various domestic actors who adopt anti-EU arguments, perceiving the Union as an illegitimate supranational entity that undermines national sovereignty, poses a threat to national identities, or exacerbates domestic social and economic challenges within member states (Pirro et al., 2018; Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018). Yet there is significantly less research on how the EU is contested outside the EU (Stojić, 2021). In addressing this lacuna in the extant literature, we focus on the diverse mechanisms triggering contestation and resistance towards the EU integration process in different peripheral spaces, from within and from its immediate neighbourhood. We thus engage with recent contributions to the European integration agenda in crisis research (Schimmelfennig, 2022; Brack &

Gürkan, 2021). The topic is also of increased policy relevance because of the recently launched European Political Community, proposed by President Emmanuel Macron of France, which materialized in 2022 – an intergovernmental format that aims to foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest for countries in the EU's neighbourhood, the UK, and others. These evolutions prove that the complex ways in which successive crises have impacted the EU's relations with its neighbourhood still require in-depth research, and this is the area where our edited volume will make a new contribution.

In analysing the most recent crises in the EU, namely the Eurozone, Schengen, and Brexit, in order to comprehend the EU's current crisis, Börzel and Risse (2018) put more emphasis on politicization and identity politics. In addition to the validity of contemporary integration theories, this book similarly argues that changes in EU politics are inherently significant for the politicization and political contestation of the EU, and our assumption is that the motivating factors for these attitudes share a set of common patterns in different countries' relations with the EU (old candidate country, new candidate country, potential candidate country, or even Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states that experience different forms of de-Europeanization). However, the important nuance here is that contesting the EU is not confined to member states; it has also extended towards the non-member states in the EU's periphery, limiting the transformative capacity of the EU outside its borders. This complex phenomenon has also suffered severe changes since the war in Ukraine started.

As Özçelik et al. (2023, p. 688) claim:

> together with the rising costs of harmonizing with the EU (particularly for the new EU members), the low credibility of the EU membership (particularly for the case of a candidate or potential candidate), the decrease in the EU's attractiveness (particularly for the non-member states), the increasing influence of Eurosceptics as veto players in national policy-making processes, as well as the increasing establishment of the illiberal forces (e.g., China and Russia) have provided a fertile ground for contesting the EU at domestic politics in its periphery.

International and regional contexts are part of a larger framework that influences EU institutions, regulations, and policies. Neither the EU nor its member states, therefore, are immune to changes in the international system. Defining it in a specific EU integration context,

scholars discuss EU contestation as a form of 'raising objections and critical engagement with the EU's norms, policies, and practices' (Wiener, 2018, p. 2) but also as 'a way to express differences of experience, expectation, and opinion' (Wiener, 2014, p. 11). Regardless of objections and challenges posed by various EU contestation practices, contestation need not result in non-compliance with EU norms, or in simply reversing EU-induced reforms (as the literature on de-Europeanization suggests), but can lead to a wider array of ambivalent reactions towards the EU.

Wiener and Puetter (2009, p. 7) contend that 'norm contestation is a necessary component in raising the level of acceptance of EU norms'. We build on this theoretical observation, while we plan to assess the various ambivalent positions of countries in the EU periphery and their shifting perspectives towards the EU. This understanding implies that countries can still be actively engaged in the EU integration process while resisting or contesting some aspects of it at the same time. This means that they formally still embark on seeking prospective EU membership (thus aiming for convergence with EU requirements), while on certain topics they take a differentiated or even opposite perspective (adopting a divergent position towards the EU). Almost all of the eight countries that we discuss as our case studies can illustrate such an ambiguous position on very different topics in relation to the EU, and that makes the very concept of contestation in EU periphery more challenging but also more appealing for an in-depth comparative analysis. In taking this approach we do not assume that EU contestation is a dominant narrative in these spaces, but we have decided to focus primarily on a more nuanced understanding of if and why political elites contest the EU while being committed at the same time to the EU integration process.

While there have been numerous attempts to define contestation, the role of contestation as an integral part of European integration processes from which specific policy options are derived can be asserted (Wienner & Puetter, 2009, pp. 2–3). Multiple crises, such as the Eurozone, migration, COVID-19, and most recently the war in Ukraine, can in fact present additional obstacles to EU integration and trigger contestation dynamics in domestic settings in member and non-member states. In this respect, Özçelik et al. (2023) argue that contestation of the EU may happen at three different levels. At the first level, domestic actors contest the adoption of EU policies, norms, and

values. Different venues and forums may be preferred by domestic actors to express their objections on national or international occasions. Disputes occur at the second level because member states disagree during the policy-making process. This level of contestation hinders the European integration process. This is referred to as 'intra-EU contestation' (Petri et al., 2020; Thevenin et al., 2020, pp. 452–454). At this level, only member states may challenge the EU during decision-making and policy-making events, such as summits of the European Council or meetings of the Council of the EU. The third level of contestation may exist if rival powers such as the United States, Russia, and China contest EU policies, norms, and values (see Aydın-Düzgit & Noutcheva, 2022; Dandashly & Noutcheva, 2022). Due to the clash with norms, policies, and values upheld by rival powers, contestation at this level has a negative impact on the EU's transformative power in its surroundings. The political and economic influence of rival powers in the EU's periphery will determine the magnitude of this negative effect. Illiberal states (Russia or China) may offer better incentives, or they may challenge the EU in their shared neighbourhoods and at global forums by challenging the legitimacy of EU norms and policies (Aydın-Düzgit & Noutcheva, 2022, p. 2).

Although we are aware of such a differentiation among different levels of contestation, our specific focus is on domestic contestation in different member and non-member countries of the EU at its peripheries. The most important reason for making an in-depth analysis at the domestic level is that the domestic root causes of contestation between the EU and the peripheral states have received comparatively little attention so far. Existing studies in the literature have been conducted either focusing on a single country case (for Türkiye: Alpan & Öztürk, 2022; Bodur-Ün & Arıkan, 2022; for Hungary, Ágh, 2015; for Serbia: Castaldo & Pinna, 2018; Stojić, 2021) or through a comparison of several countries involved in EU politics within a similar framework (for South-East Europe: Kapidžić, 2020; for East and Central Europe: Lorenz & Anders, 2021; for the European neighbourhood: Dandashly & Noutcheva, 2022; for Eastern Europe: Deugd & Hoen, 2022; for new members and a candidate state: Soyaltın-Colella, 2022). Focusing on several countries that interact with the EU at several levels and under legally different frameworks (i.e., member, candidate, and neighbour countries), this book seeks to fill the gap in the extant literature.

It is also imperative to unpack the concept of de-Europeanization, as it bears profound significance concerning the notion of contestation. Despite being a relatively recent concept in EU studies, de-Europeanization provides valuable insights by highlighting the potential reversibility of EU-induced reforms and instances of resistance and contestation against EU norms, values, and institutions (Alpan & Öztürk, 2022)**.** The concept has been thoroughly examined in multiple systematic empirical studies, addressing its adverse effects not only on regions beyond the EU's boundaries (such as candidate countries seeking future membership) but also within the EU's member states themselves (Lazăr & Butnaru-Troncotă, 2022). De-Europeanization is also explained as a split between general societal preferences and those of the political class, perceived as a selfish collective actor pursuing its own interests (Martin-Russu, 2022). This perspective warrants further examination and deliberation. The emergence of such trends was observed in the post-accession dynamics of the most recent EU member states (see, for instance, the chapters on Hungary and Romania), indicating a state of stagnation or potential reversal of the reforms that had previously taken place. This situation has raised concerns regarding the trajectory to be pursued by the present pre-accession countries, which do not enjoy the same level of societal enthusiasm towards the EU as was evident during the enlargement wave of 2004–2007. Therefore, the original incentives (the size of the EU's rewards, the determinacy of the conditions, the credibility of conditionality, and the size of the adjustment costs of compliance for target governments; see Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020) have been reanalysed from three particular standpoints (pre-accession Central and Eastern European countries, post-accession Central and Eastern European countries, and pre-accession South-East European countries), pointing out that the major problem for current new member states as well as for (potential) candidates consists in a downsizing of the EU's credibility regarding both sanctions (for the first group) and rewards (for the second).

Failing to offer and implement proper actions when its members fail to comply with the existing *acquis* (here is mentioned the case of the illiberal democracies), and failing to support a solid image of the membership promise for (potential) candidate countries, the EU faces a lack of compliance fuelled by domestic political elites eager not to pay immediate electoral costs when 'background conditions have obviously changed, owing to the domestic politicization of the EU in

the member states, the prevalence of identity politics, and the geopolitical competition for influence in the East of Europe' (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2020, p. 22). Due to the latest political developments in the most recent EU member states such as Romania and Bulgaria (Buzogány, 2021; Martin-Russu, 2022), as well as taking into account new approaches from the specialized literature on the enlargement countries (Džankić et al., 2018; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020), we consider that a new possible pathway must also be forged, including one more category, that of de-Europeanization.

We therefore include reflections around the concept of de-Europeanization in EU peripheries, understood as a rowing back of initial changes triggered at the domestic level by EU influence, broadly defined. It is not a duplication of the existing concept of 'retrenchment': the main difference between retrenchment and de-Europeanization consists in the time when that specific action occurs. If retrenchment takes place at the moment of the first impact between the supranational and the national level, de-Europeanization occurs at an undefined. after the so-called 'positive' changes (i.e., getting closer to the *acquis communautaire*) have already been observed at the national level. For various reasons that we will analyse later, 'progress' pauses and change reverses, sometimes not even stopping in the place where it initially started. We concur with Martin-Russu's (2022, p. 27) analysis concerning the correlation between retrenchment and de-Europeanization. However, in contrast to her perspective, we contend that de-Europeanization extends beyond the confines of the initial framework proposed by Radaelli (2003), encompassing not only the process of 'absorption' but also the aspects of 'accommodation' and potentially even the phenomenon of 'inertia' that may culminate in a significant level of 'retrenchment'.

A Methodological Examination of Political Elite Perceptions of EU Integration

The primary rationale for investigating the perceptions of political elites is rooted in the recognition that EU integration is fundamentally an elite-driven process. Political elites were considered pivotal both for the phase of institutionalizing the Union's architecture and for the successive Europeanization stage, when the already functional supranational dimension began to impact the polity-politics-policy domestic

elements of member states. The factors at the national level that determine these variations must be better understood through a focus on the role of domestic political elites. The indisputable role of the political elites in the creation of the European Communities and, later, the EU, as well as in their development, is one of the main tenets of classic neofunctionalism (Ion, 2013).

We define elites, using Oxford Online Bibliographies' definition, as groups that have 'vastly disproportionate access to or control over a social resource' (Khan, 2011) – resources valuable by themselves or through their ability to be exchanged and that generate access or control in other societal segments as well. Thus, among the different types of elites that can exist (political, social, economic, cultural, etc.), our interest falls on the political elites that have decision-making power, or at least are part of the decision-making process, in the EU integration process. The main assumption here is that, in many ways, these elites' perceptions of the EU influence their country's actions on the EU integration path.

Understanding patterns of contestation and de-Europeanization among political elites in the EU's peripheries is crucial for several reasons. First, it helps us to identify instances where changes in societal attitudes towards the EU could indicate de-Europeanization, potentially erasing significant divisions between political and social groups. Second, in a political science analysis, any actor should be tagged as not selfish but rational when they pursue the satisfaction of their own interests. Indeed, when aggregating the preferences of multiple rational actors (individual or collective), irrational results can typically appear (Arrow, 2012). In addition, the presumed so-called selfish character of domestic political elites is not always supported by analyses indicating that the commitment of other societal voices, broadly defined, towards the EU's values is real and not declarative or susceptible to a U-turn at key moments (in the case of the non-Ukrainian migrants, for example).

From the above analysis, we keep two main ideas in mind. First, de-Europeanization is a step (or multiple steps) back after several reforms have already been performed. It challenges the perception of inalterable EU-determined changes. Second, political elites (regardless of their relationship with the rest of the actors in the respective state) matter in this back-and-forth movement. We can therefore analyse the interpretation of political elites concerning their respective nations' stances

vis-à-vis the EU and focus on political elites' subjective perceptions of the notion of the EU periphery. In this respect, the underlying assumption of the study is that elite perceptions are a significant variable in explaining the nature of the interaction between the EU and actors situated in the peripheral space, and that the nature of acceptance or contestation of EU processes is intrinsically linked to it. The book, therefore, highlights how European construction and deconstruction proceed by looking at the manner in which political elites from several countries on the EU's peripheries engage with the conflicting meanings of Europe in times of crisis.

The book primarily centres on examining the perspectives of elected politicians, specifically members of national parliaments, in eight diverse countries. Its overarching objective is to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the EU is perceived by these political actors. To ensure methodological rigour, the research design incorporates a carefully considered selection process for the qualitative analysis, taking into account various criteria. These criteria encompass gender, age, political party affiliation, and levels of knowledge pertaining to EU affairs. By employing such a comprehensive approach, the study aims to enhance the scholarly and academic validity of its findings.

To make a genuine comparison between case countries, it is also essential to investigate which practices are more dominant and how and why different perceptions of the EU emerge, beyond the strictly bureaucratically defined interactions between the EU Commission and national governments. Some scholars have posited that the evolution of the EU's institutional framework has played a significant role in fostering elite convergence across Europe (Cotta & Best, 2007). This process of convergence, however, simultaneously generates a countervailing momentum that fuels the rise of Euroscepticism, as noted by the same scholars in a subsequent publication (Best, Lengyel, & Verzichelli, 2012: 11).

Within the broad spectrum of potential political elite attitudes towards the EU, we have chosen to concentrate on a specific category of elites for all of our case studies: members of national parliaments. This deliberate focus stems from the fact that these national political elites are directly accountable to their respective electorates and are cautious about incurring the wrath of their voters due to unpopular policies imposed by European institutions. As a result, this book undertakes a comprehensive examination of the perceptions held by

elected politicians (members of parliament) in seven out of the eight selected case countries. The sole exception is Hungary, where conducting interviews with politicians proved exceedingly challenging. Hence, the authors made the decision to analyse the public discourse of elites within the Hungarian parliament instead. This methodological adjustment ensures that a comprehensive understanding of contestation and its manifestation within the perspectives of these political actors is attained.

EU integration has always been an elite-driven process, and as such, we believe that analysing the way different politicians see and discuss the EU's role in their country is a very fruitful avenue for in-depth research. Each case study employs semi-structured interviews with political elites about the major events that have shaped their country's relationship with the EU over the last decade. This provides an opportunity to assess in a comparative manner not only the limits of the EU's power to transfer its rules to its periphery when the credibility of the accession process is low, but also how this dynamic has changed in the context of war in Ukraine (as in case of Moldova, Ukraine, and Bosnia-Herzegovina being offered the status of candidate states – previously simply not an option on the EU's table at all).

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has had a notable impact on the external actions of the EU, manifesting itself in two key dimensions. First, the crisis has constrained the allocation of resources by both member state governments and European institutions, limiting their capacity to dedicate adequate attention and resources to foreign policy endeavours encompassing areas such as defence and international cooperation. Concurrently, this constraint on resources has had implications for certain foundational elements of the EU's international identity. Specifically, it has influenced the underlying self-perception that shapes the EU's interactions with external actors, thereby influencing the determination of its ultimate objectives within the realm of external action.

A wide array of discourses emerges from the research and interviews. It is noteworthy that both pro-European and Eurosceptic voices are found within the periphery, and the content of their messages is significantly influenced by the political realities arising from recent crises.

From a methodological standpoint, the primary objective of the authors is to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of these

processes within countries that have witnessed distinctive trajectories over the past decade. These trajectories encompass post-accession exceptionalism, characterized by stagnation, a lack of reforms, deepening political crises, and the looming threats of secession or external interference, as observed in the cases of Romania and Hungary. Türkiye's EU membership prospects have long been the subject of ambivalence and contentious debates, extending beyond mere political and economic considerations. These discussions have encompassed cultural, religious, and societal dimensions, further complicating the evaluation of its potential accession to the EU. Countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo have faced significant challenges characterized by ambiguous EU membership prospects. Analogous to the situation in Türkiye, the EU membership prospects of these countries have been mired in protracted contention, the focus of prolonged disputes that transcend political and economic considerations, encompassing a broader range of cultural, religious, and societal dimensions.

Another set of countries under examination is those that have signed association agreements with the EU as part of the Eastern Partnership without any concrete membership perspective. However, in the exceptional context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, these countries, including Georgia, were offered candidate status, and were encompassed within the EU's enlargement policy. It is noteworthy that they underwent this transition despite their internal struggles and their failure to fully adhere to the Copenhagen Criteria. Hence, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova are investigated due to their unique circumstances. These countries faced the challenge of the Russian invasion of Ukraine while signing association agreements, thereby bringing them under the purview of the EU's enlargement policy.

The selection of diverse case countries is of paramount importance as it enables a comprehensive examination of how the perceptions of elites in the chosen countries exhibit similarities or contrasts. This analysis serves as a foundation for making meaningful generalizations that can inform further research, particularly in the context of countries situated on the peripheries of the EU. Our research anticipates that in certain instances, perceptions of the EU will be influenced by negative filters stemming from various factors. These factors include the ramifications of the Eurozone and refugee crises, as well as the protracted process of a significant member state, such as the UK, exiting the EU. Additionally, there may be feelings of being subjected to

double standards and unfair treatment, as exemplified by the cases of the rejection of Romania's and Bulgaria's applications to join the Schengen area.

In other cases, we anticipate that the exceptionally challenging circumstances arising from the war in Ukraine will lead countries such as Ukraine and Moldova to perceive the EU as their primary guarantee against Russian aggression. Consequently, these countries may view the integration process as their principal focus in foreign policy. Our analysis will incorporate an examination of the evolving core–periphery relations during the tumultuous dynamics of the war and their impact on the perceptions of the EU among relevant actors. Furthermore, despite the external dynamics outside the EU, we will also consider recent instances of significant shifts in positions towards the EU. Notably, we will explore cases such as Hungary and Romania, which have experienced periods of anti-EU sentiment and visible democratic regression. We believe that including these examples will contribute to the existing literature by providing an additional layer of analysis and insight.

All chapters consider within their focus the emergence of dissenting voices questioning the benefits of EU membership, as our research aims to examine the self-perception of political elites concerning the relationship between their respective countries and the EU. Using specific questions from our semi-structured interview framework, we intend to identify and investigate the perspectives held by political elites on this crucial aspect. The authors conducting the interviews preserved consistency by adhering to a similar set of questions. These questions included: how would you best describe the current relationship between your country and the EU? Considering the past decade, what are the major issues and critical junctures that your country and the EU have experienced? What are the significant achievements and failures of your country in its relationship with the EU so far? How do you envision the evolution of the relationship with the EU? How has the ongoing war in Ukraine impacted the relationship between your country and the EU?

One of the notable contributions of this book resides in its methodological choice of employing qualitative analysis. Investigating the interests of political elites poses challenges in terms of measurability. Therefore, a qualitative analysis provides a valuable means to gain insights into the positioning of elites within the context of contestation.

By employing this approach, the book offers valuable insights into the intricate dynamics and perspectives of political elites, enhancing our understanding of their role within the broader framework of EU perceptions and interactions.

Structure of the Book

The book begins by establishing a theoretical framework and methodological approach that examine various political and social contexts characterized by their 'peripheric' nature in relation to the EU and its associated processes.

Following this introductory chapter, the remaining chapters are divided into three parts. The two chapters in Part I are devoted to the cases of Hungary and Romania, two EU members explored as different forms of the EU's 'inner peripheries'. The four chapters in Part II are devoted to candidate countries: Ukraine, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Türkiye. The two chapters in Part III are devoted to prospective candidate countries, namely Kosovo and Georgia. Finally, the last chapter draws together in a comparative manner all chapters' contributions and draws overall conclusions.

With a particular emphasis on the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Chapter 2 investigates how the Hungarian national political elites view the EU's global 'actorness' and the formulation of its foreign and security policies. It highlights the fact that Hungary is now in an increasingly peripheral position as the Hungarian approach has become a significant cause of contestation in defining a unified foreign policy orientation at the EU level. The chapter seeks to contribute to a thorough understanding of how political elites in the EU periphery define their relationship with the EU by using critical discourse analysis of parliamentary debates within the Hungarian national parliament and enhancing existing findings from official documents and scholarly articles. In order to shed light on the intricate dynamics that create the EU's periphery, this study aims to offer an 'inside gaze' into the viewpoints and attitudes of the country's political elites.

Chapter 3 provides an examination of Romania as an illustrative case of the EU's 'inner periphery'. The chapter asserts that Romania has often been categorized in mainstream Europeanization literature as one of the 'laggards' in terms of EU accession and scrutinizes the symbolic consequences of this stigma. The authors aim to elucidate the

perceptions of Romanian elites regarding the EU itself, as well as their perspectives on Romania's political and symbolic position within the EU. To accomplish this, they employ a broad theoretical framework that includes concepts such as liminality, constructed centre–periphery relations, party-based Euroscepticism, and critical geopolitics. They use a mixed-method approach, including analysis of Eurobarometer statistical data from 2007 to 2022, discourse analysis, and semi-structured interviews with members of the Romanian parliament. This allows them to investigate whether significant events that occurred between 2020 and 2022, such as the economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak of the Ukrainian war, and Romania's exclusion from the Schengen zone, have influenced Romanian elites' perceptions of the EU and increased forms of Euroscepticism. The chapter discusses the ambivalent nature of various forms of 'subtle' Euroscepticism especially in connection with the disappointments of the Schengen rejection.

Chapter 4 delves into the perceptions and contestations of Ukrainian political elites regarding Ukraine's current and desired position within the EU and Europe as a whole, as well as the evolving understanding of peripherality. To examine the discourse and framings of EU–Ukraine integration dynamics over the last three decades, the chapter relies primarily on interviews with political elites conducted in late 2021. The authors investigate parliamentarians' collective response to Russia's ongoing aggression since 2014, as well as their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. To do this, they also add samples of more recent data and elite opinions from February 2022 when the war in Ukraine started. The chapter assesses the extent and intensity of the divergence between hopes and expectations and the perceived performance of the EU in specific contexts by employing the framework of 'critical expectation gaps' in foreign policy analysis. This investigation contributes to a comprehensive understanding of Ukraine's complex dynamics with the EU and sheds light on Ukrainian political elites' evolving perspectives in response to significant geopolitical and health crises.

Chapter 5 delves into the Republic of Moldova's evolving peripheral status, specifically the shift from the Russian Federation's influence to that of the EU. The analysis focuses primarily on the promotion of visions and aspirations for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession by various political parties and key political actors, including both

government and opposition figures. The chapter aims to capture and interpret politicians' perceptions of recent developments, including the ongoing war and overlapping crises, using a historiographical lens and the path-dependency paradigm. The study looks at how political parties and key actors in the Republic of Moldova have constructed and advocated for their respective visions of EU integration, considering the implications of these visions for the country's peripheral status. In the end the chapter aims to provide insights into how the Republic of Moldova's peripheral status has been influenced by changing geopolitical dynamics and domestic political considerations by exploring politicians' perspectives within this evolving context.

Chapter 6 examines the shifting sentiments among local political elites regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) EU integration process. While the public in BiH continue to exhibit widespread support for the country's EU integration, the chapter aims to explore whether there have been notable changes in attitudes and feelings among local political elites. The study, which is based on semi-structured interviews with members of BiH's parliaments, sheds light on the general lack of enthusiasm among political elites for the Euro-integration process. This finding is contextualized in relation to BiH's accession challenges, which are framed through the lens of local ethno-national dynamics.

Chapter 7 investigates the evolving perspective of the Turkish political elite regarding the EU and European integration in the post-2010s period. The chapter investigates the waning influence of EU conditionality and the growing disillusionment among political elites and the public. The analysis considers a variety of factors that have contributed to turbulence in Turkish–EU relations, such as the March 2016 migration agreement and a variety of domestic and international developments. The authors emphasize the shift in Turkish–EU relations from conditionality to transnationalism. This shift is being driven by several factors, including the migration crisis and its impact on European politics, as well as a growing perception among Turkish political elites that the EU's commitments and promises have not been kept. As a result, the influence of EU conditionality as a mechanism for shaping Turkish domestic policies and reforms has waned. Furthermore, the conflict in Ukraine has had a significant impact on the dynamics of Turkish–EU relations. The conflict's geopolitical considerations and realpolitik have overshadowed normative concerns, contributing to the Turkish political elite's transactional approach.

Chapter 8 examines the intriguing phenomenon of Georgian political elites simultaneously supporting and opposing the EU and EU integration. This puzzle includes both incumbent and opposition members of the Georgian parliament. The chapter investigates how political elites frame their perceptions of the EU and EU integration, as well as the factors that contribute to their simultaneous support and contestation, using the theoretical framework of rational choice institutionalism and a mixed-method (interviews and secondary data) approach. The chapter sheds light on the multifaceted nature of political elites' perceptions and actions regarding EU integration by analysing changes in their attitudes and engagement with Europe.

Chapter 9 sheds light on a unique dimension of centre–periphery interaction in EU–Kosovo relations, a country that is still unrecognized by five EU member states. A specific theoretical approach is employed to reflect the type of interaction between these two entities, not only in a static hierarchical centre–periphery line or conceptualized only through quantitative indicators that show how the EU as a centre models the behaviour of the states in its periphery, but also in subjective and political terms that show how the EU is perceived, imitated, debated, and contested by political elites in various peripheral spaces. The chapter investigates the ambivalent perceptions of the EU of the Kosovar political elite, who, while contesting and criticizing the way the EU has treated Kosovo in relation to certain stages of cooperation, have continued to show full commitment to convergence with it, keeping the issue of EU integration as a top priority of the country's foreign policy. This study contends that the political elites in Kosovo have not developed a coherent political strategy to oppose and contest the EU's role. Instead, political elites express their scepticism and contestation of the EU in a reactive manner in response to frustration with how the EU has approached and interacted with Kosovo on the topic of visa liberalization.

The concluding chapter presents a comparative analysis of the key findings derived from all the case studies. It provides a comprehensive synthesis of the novel insights generated by the examination of various countries on the EU's periphery. The chapter aims to identify commonalities, divergences, and overarching patterns that contribute to a better understanding of EU–periphery dynamics by analysing the individual case studies in conjunction with one another. The comparative analysis emphasizes the study's significance and relevance to the

broader field of research on EU integration and peripheral relations. It highlights the unique contributions made by each case study, shedding light on the complexities and multifaceted nature of the EU's interactions with its periphery. Furthermore, the chapter identifies areas that require further research, acknowledging that the study's findings provide a foundation for future investigations as well as a basis for expanding knowledge in the field.

Notes

1 During the writing process of this book, Georgia had not officially acquired candidate status; therefore, it was designated as a Potential Candidate. The final version of the book was submitted in September 2023. However, Georgia was granted candidate status in December 2023, subject to the completion of the requisite steps delineated in the Commission recommendation of 8 November 2023.

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