

## CONCLUSION

# Reconsidering EU Accession in the EU's Peripheries

## The Ambivalence of Elite Disillusionment and Contestation in Troubled Times

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Stating that the EU means different things to different people depending on the types of interactions they have with it is already a truism. This book has sought to investigate the diverse nature of the EU's interactions with different countries that are at different stages of EU accession. It has focused on political elites' perceptions of the EU over the past decade, during which the Union has faced several crises, including migration, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the start of the Ukrainian war. We aimed to scrutinize the specific interpretations and understandings of the EU in turbulent times and to make a connection

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with how these recent crises have impacted politicians' views on EU integration but also on their country's status as an 'EU periphery'.

An important strand of recent constructivist literature has studied the complex ideational, social, and power-based mechanisms that create centres and peripheries within the EU and in relation to its neighbours. Based on post-structuralist and constructivist analyses that we took as the basis of the theoretical framework of the study, we assumed that the identities of both the core and the periphery are, therefore, determined to some degree by their interrelationship. From this perspective, in defining EU peripheries we relied on post-structuralist accounts and their focus on the 'fluidity of spaces' constructed around centres and defined as peripheries but holding various meanings. The main assumption that all of the different case studies shared is that the relations between centre and periphery are dynamic and defined as a two-way street. This view departs from the pejorative meanings most often associated with the concept of 'periphery' in conventional perspectives.

One of the main ideas that we wanted to advance in this book is that there is much to learn about Europe and the EU through understanding its peripheries and their ever-changing relationships in the context of recent crises. As such, one of the main contributions of our book to the literature in the field is the comparative analysis of different instances of an 'insider's gaze' into the EU's peripheries and into the shifting realities of the EU integration process in the context of recent years' turbulent crises and war in Ukraine.

This final chapter aims to sum up the findings of the studies that have attempted to compare the attitudes of these diverse domestic political elites towards the EU, and their motivations at various stages of the EU accession process (e.g., member states that have been left out of the Schengen zone despite their efforts to fulfil the required conditionalities, candidate countries that have seen the process frozen for almost a decade, potential candidate states that have little prospect of opening negotiations). In this respect, the book presents eight distinct case studies that fall within the concept of 'EU peripheries' (a position that we aimed to problematize) depending on the political relationship each country has with the EU: two member states (Hungary and Romania), four candidate countries (Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Türkiye), and two potential candidate countries (Georgia and Kosovo).

Each chapter adopts an inter-disciplinary approach, grounded in post-structuralist and constructivist perspectives, to highlight the peculiar and evolving nature of 'EU peripheries', focusing on the plurality of power relations inducing more politicization into the EU integration process and thus opening the possibility for the peripheries to influence and shape the core. This implies comprehending the EU integration process from the perspective of the periphery as expressed in the discourses of political elites. Beyond this common perspective and the common design of the basic questions of the semi-structured interviews, all chapters use different theoretical backgrounds and different types of data beyond that collected through the interviews, and together they provide rich and diverse contributions to current debates in EU studies.

Conceptually, there are several prominent conclusions that can be drawn from the book. In terms of the way 'peripherality' is internalized and understood, all countries exhibit complex and nuanced understandings of their own peripherality, going beyond a simple binary categorization. They recognize that certain dimensions may align with peripherality while contesting it in others. Ukraine contests the notion of being Europe's periphery, emphasizing its historical, cultural, and geopolitical significance. However, when it comes to a political-economic and developmental point of view, there is some conditional acceptance of the idea of peripherality, since 'subjective' asymmetries of sorts (socio-economic development, geopolitical weight, international authority, etc.) are drawn into the interviewed Ukrainian parliamentarians' perspectives. Unlike Ukraine, the Turkish political elites see Türkiye quite as a part of the 'centre' and engaged in bilateral relations, seeing both parties as equal partners equidistant from decision-making processes. Nevertheless, in terms of Türkiye's identity-related relationship to the EU, the country is still seen as peripheral to the democratization and modernization processes regarded as indispensable to European integration. In the case of the Romanian elites, although the tendency to self-identify as peripheral to European integration is higher, there is also a higher degree of alignment with the standards and expectations of core EU member states.

There are also several important conclusions about the relationship with the EU of the countries considered in the volume. The relationship between Ukraine and the EU is characterized by a desire for recognition and equal standing, while the relationship between Hungary

and the EU is marked by contestation and divergent interpretations. Romania's relationship with the EU explores the concept of liminality and examines whether exceptional treatment has led to a liminal interpretation of its position within the EU. Additionally, Türkiye's relationship with the EU has shifted from normative to pragmatic and strategic, focusing on security considerations. The Hungarian case contributes to the understanding of peripherality by illustrating how Hungary's divergent national foreign policy interests, geographical proximity to the war, and kin-state politics with the Hungarian community in Ukraine shape its relationship with the EU. Hungary's contestation within the formulation of a unified foreign policy direction at the EU level pushes it further into the periphery.

Political elites in Georgia perceive EU integration as a strategic process that brings opportunities and challenges. The incumbent government adopts a cherry-picking strategy to selectively implement reforms that align with its survivalist agenda while avoiding others. The opposition, on the other hand, supports the EU unconditionally as it serves their interests in competing with the incumbent government. This aligns with the framework's argument that political actors contextualize EU-related events based on their ordered interests and expectations. Similar considerations can also be found in the case of Moldova, where the EU is primarily perceived as a guarantor of peace, a provider of wellbeing, and a normative benchmark for internal policies. This aligns with the framework's consideration of the perception of the EU as a strategic process that produces opportunities and challenges for political elites.

There are also theoretically and empirically relevant instances of contestation of the EU. Political elites in Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, and Kosovo contest various aspects of the EU, such as its actorness, effectiveness, and response to critical situations. The Turkish elite's perspective reflects contestation at the domestic level, where objections and critical engagement with EU norms and policies exist. The deteriorating EU–Turkey relationship can be seen as a form of contestation at the domestic level, where Turkish actors contest the adoption of EU policies, norms, and values. The Turkish elite's perception of Turkey's position within the EU aligns with contestation at the domestic level, while the challenges faced by the EU and its relationship with Turkey reflect contestation dynamics at both the domestic and the intra-EU levels. The studies nonetheless highlight that existing instances of

contestation can hinder the EU's ability to influence these societies and to promote its norms and values in future.

Party positions remain relevant. They significantly shape the interpretation of the EU's actorness in critical issues. This is evident in Hungary, where the government, opposition parties, and the far right construct their own narratives around the EU's role based on their political interests. In contrast, the perception of the EU in Ukraine may be more unified across political parties. Nevertheless, the influence of contextual factors cannot be disregarded: historical, geopolitical, and socio-economic factors shape the perceptions and contestations of political elites in each country. These factors are critical to understanding peripherality and the expectations placed on the EU.

The chapters themselves highlight important issues in understanding perceptions of EU dynamics.

In [Chapter 2](#), 'Perceptions of the Hungarian Political Elites of the EU's Foreign and Security Policy during the War in Ukraine', Melek Aylin Özoflu and Krisztina Arató focus on the reasons that can lead to contestation of the EU in its internal periphery, selecting a case study – the tensions between the EU's foreign policy interests and Hungary – which demonstrates, at least in the context of the war in Ukraine, divergent attitudes in relation to the so-called mainstream European position. Methodologically, this is the only chapter that does not include original qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews but instead uses as an equivalent a critical discourse analysis of the minutes of parliamentary debates within the Hungarian national parliament and of other official documents or associated literature. The analysis is oriented towards a focus on the language used by the Hungarian political elites in a determined timeframe: between the outbreak of the crisis, i.e., 24 February 2022, and the Hungarian national consultation on EU sanctions against Russia, i.e., 15 January 2023. Overall, the chapter confirms and connects to other relevant studies in the literature suggesting that the governing elites in Hungary have an overtly Eurosceptic narrative. It illustrates this by analysing MP discourses that strongly contest the EU's positioning with regard to the war in Ukraine and Russia, the main argument advanced being the desire to defend the national interests (security and economic) of the Hungarian state. Moreover, the two authors show that most of the opposition parties (with a neutral exception – more Eurosceptic, not pro-Russian, but rather strongly nationalist and anti-globalist) adopt a

discourse aligned with European values and policies, but the authors question whether this position truly reflects their democratic creed or whether it is just used as a tool to delegitimize the ruling forces in view of future electoral gains.

On the other hand, in [Chapter 3](#), ‘The Ambivalent “Eurosceptics” of the EU’s “Inner Periphery”: Assessing Perceptions of the EU among Political Elites in Romania during Turbulent Times’, Miruna Butnaru Troncotă and Radu-Alexandru Cucută try to make sense of elite perceptions of the EU and of their view on Romania’s political and symbolic position within the EU by using a composite theoretical framework based on concepts such as liminality, centre–periphery constructed relations, party-based Euroscepticism, and critical geopolitics. The main hypothesis of the chapter concerns the extent to which Romanian political elites, as representatives of Romanian society, see the country as part of the EU’s ‘inner periphery’. The main findings highlight the peculiar character of the Romanian Eurosceptic discourse and its ambivalent nature in the context of Romania’s second Schengen rejection in late 2022.

The chapter offers an up-to-date mapping of these often contradictory meanings attached to Romania as treated by the EU as ‘periphery’ that contributes to a better and more nuanced understanding of Romanian elites’ paradoxes. This paradoxical self-perception that we encounter in the Romanian elite discourses refers to opposing attitudes sometimes held by those identifying with the same political party or even by the same person: nationalist arguments referring to Romania being treated as an ‘EU colony’ coexisting with very harsh self-criticism stating that Romania does not in fact live up to EU standards and that its ‘backwardness’ justifies the country’s ‘rightful position’ in the EU periphery.

The image of Romania as a part of ‘EU’s inner periphery’ is not necessarily a result of recent crises and events (such as the Schengen rejection or problems with the fight against corruption) but rather comes on a continuum that started in the pre-accession period. Procedurally speaking, Romania was treated as an ‘exception’ to the general rule of EU accession; this created the premises for the feeling of being ‘not fully an EU member’, locating the country from the beginning in a liminal position, an in-betweenness associated with the image of ‘exception to the rule’ that has served in the EU studies epistemic community as a ‘stigma’. For the Romanian case, the analysed period (2020–2022)

has relevance because after the December 2020 parliamentary elections, the subject of nationalism resurfaced in Romanian politics. This coincides with the fact that in the same year, the first Eurosceptic right-wing populist party (AUR) entered the Romanian parliament. In this context, we argue that the period between 2020 and 2022 represents a critical conjecture because the EU was hit not just by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic but also by the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine. The analysis thus illustrates that Romania's Schengen rejection in December 2022, together with the disillusionment resulting from previous EU crises and the more active presence of a populist far-right party (AUR) in the Romanian parliament and very visible in public discourse since 2020, created a favourable symbolic space for discursive representations that enforce Eurosceptic attitudes. Many Romanian politicians practically associate their frustration with Austria's veto in the Council with Romania's treatment as one of EU's inner peripheries. The findings illustrate how these favourable conditions for discursive manifestations of Euroscepticism are reflected in the discourse of Romanian political elites, who are eager to voice their feelings of frustration at being associated with the image of 'being on the EU periphery', 'not being a full member state', or being treated as a 'second-class member state'.

In [Chapter 4](#), 'Cha(lle)nging Peripherality: "Critical Expectation Gaps" and EU-Ukraine Relations in Post-Euromaidan Perceptions of Ukrainian Political Elites', Roman Kalytchak and Andriy Tyushka highlight the pro-European orientation of Ukrainian political elites through an analysis that focuses on their discourse in the stage preceding the outbreak of the war. Starting from the unquestioned Euro-optimism of Ukrainian society after 1991, the chapter proposes a courageous questioning of the idea of the periphery by Ukrainian political elites, a redefinition of the terms methodologically supported by a qualitative narrative inquiry that involves, beyond desk research (of political parties' electoral programmes or manifestos, publicly available interviews, and op-eds by Ukrainian elite representatives), an analysis of the discourse of 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of the full spectrum of political forces in the incumbent parliament of September 2021 – February 2022. Hence, '[a]nalytically framed using the "critical expectation gaps" approach, this study explores how wide or how narrow the perceived gap is between Ukrainian political elites' hopes and expectations of EU engagement

and the actual dynamics of the EU's performance – and why.' The value of the study comes from the major emphasis placed on the investigation of pro-European attitudes before February 2022, with a series of current accents (COVID-19, post-war) that support the basic hypothesis; on a similar note, in the BiH contribution in this volume, one could note the observation regarding the importance of studying the Ukrainian political elites, an underdeveloped field of investigation, although 'EU integration has always been an elite-driven process'.

A fundamental element of the chapter is the strong contestation by political elites of the label of 'periphery', the sole positioning of this kind within the case studies presented in this volume. Opting for the idea of 'strategic marginality', representatives of the elites promote the use of this concept because "margins" usually connotes the idea of belongingness to an entity or formation, be it a state or a regional organization, albeit at the external borders or ends of that entity'. The interviews confirm a strong sense of both territoriality and value belonging to the European space, with very few grey areas that draw attention to the potential challenges involved in the joint exercise of sovereignty in certain EU-level policy segments. The scarcity of Eurosceptic positions can be argued to relate to the fact that 'Ukraine's position as a membership-seeking state is that of a partner aspiring to join a community of equals' and, moreover, the fact that (during the interview collection period, so before the war), elites perceive 'Ukraine as an emerging leader and new centre of gravity in Europe, the centre of "New Europe"'. The chapter concludes that after the start of the war, discourse and perceptions did not change significantly in a context in which the image of Ukraine in Europe began to be increasingly visible and more linked to a mutually assumed future European course. Even if the outbreak of the war and the EU's attitude towards Ukraine mitigated critical expectation gaps, the authors remain cautious, because 'it is uncertain whether this gap will not widen in the future, given Ukraine's massive suffering of war and sacrifice in the name of Europe'.

In [Chapter 5](#), 'Republic of Moldova: The Challenges of a Periphery's Shifting Identity, from the Russian Federation's Sphere of Influence to EU Accession', Nicolae Toderaş and Daniel Pascal do not contest the tag of EU periphery often attributed to the Republic of Moldova and base their analysis on the premise that the only clear democratic political option of this state is the European one. The chapter represents a balanced analysis of what was, is, and could be the political path of



the Republic of Moldova. From the authors' point of view, the idea of periphery is assumed both by the political elites of Moldova and by the citizens, the change in the last decades being the desire to be no longer a periphery of the Russian Federation but one of the EU – with the advantages this entails; the envisaged scenario is one of a common European course that, in the future, through the enlarging of the borders of the EU, would automatically cancel the status of peripheral state. This is why Toderăş and Pascal's analysis emphasizes not the idea of periphery – uncontested and understood as a temporary status with a series of future opportunities – but whether domestic political elites perceive this European course as irreversible or not, and their determination to contribute to the irreversibility of the process.

The multiple European and national crises, as well as the involvement of Eurosceptic parties, have to some extent affected the pro-European attitude of Moldovan citizens, although the authors believe that an adequate discourse among incumbent political elites could successfully counter this trend. Moreover, the interviews show the clear orientation of the mentioned political forces towards the European course of the Republic of Moldova, without any other option taken into account, indicating a long-term political commitment, largely unaffected by possible future electoral disruptions, to this desired goal. Even if aware of the importance of the current Ukrainian crisis, which has 'generated windows of opportunity' otherwise unavailable, the authors' conclusions indicate that, oscillating between a deep attachment and a sometimes cautious approach determined by the volatile internal political stability and the Eurosceptic wave that is growing at the EU level, the majority of political elites interviewed, more or less determined to effectively take action, consider that the European path of the Republic of Moldova is rather irreversible.

In [Chapter 6](#), 'Rather Lukewarm: Shifting Perceptions towards the EU among Bosnia and Herzegovina's Political Elites', Hatidža Jahić and Adnan Muminović investigate the lack of enthusiasm that BiH political elites reveal for the EU integration process, the main cause being related not to the insufficient reforms undertaken at the domestic level but to the perception of the erosion of the EU's credibility faced with the 'erratic and arbitrary changing of the conditions put before the country' by the Union. As in the Ukrainian case, the authors maintain 'that the EU integration process has always been elite driven', and they underline the current positioning of the BiH elites, which, faced with

high political costs, may even translate their frustrations into encouraging severe domestic Eurosceptic narratives and actions. The authors argue that the shortcomings observed in the effectiveness of the EU's conditionality in BiH's case are caused mainly by low credibility regarding the country's membership perspective, and by the high domestic costs that ethnic political elites would have to pay for achieving the EU goal. Moreover, the context would be hampered by the presumed presence of several stereotypical attitudes, such as Islamophobia, towards a country that is also considered a part of the troubled Balkans. The conclusions of the chapter are extremely interesting and bold. First, they indicate the attempts of some politicians to force the hand of Brussels (to ease its reforming demands), by stipulating the possibility that increasing frustration may turn into Euroscepticism or even anti-European discourse. Second, they draw attention to the more critical attitude of the representatives of the Serbian group, which contradict the expectation that the so-called stereotypical and Islamophobic attitude of the EU would determine a similar response from the Bosnian group, for example. Third, the authors point to the general tendency of domestic political elites to exclusively blame the EU for its low credibility in the eyes of the population, although the EU has usually been just a scapegoat in the face of a lack of desire among the same elites to assume the high costs of the reforms required not only for potential EU membership but also for a democratic path for the country. In the end, the fatalist positioning of domestic political elites is put to the test, as they currently must justify how the granting of candidate country status is compatible with the EU's low credibility image, which they have carefully constructed within the last few years.

[Chapter 7](#), 'Perceiving "Europe" in Dire Times: Elite Perceptions of the European Integration in Turkish Politics after the 2010s', authored by Başak Alpan and Ali Onur Özçelik, evaluates the perceptions of the political elite in Türkiye regarding the EU and the process of European integration during the post-2010 period. This period marked a significant shift in EU conditionality within the country, accompanied by sentiments of disenchantment and disillusionment among both political elites and the public towards the EU. The chapter highlights how the Turkish political elite perceives Türkiye as peripheral to European integration, with a shift in this perception since 2010. The findings show that the post-2010 period has been marked by discourse about double standards, with the EU's 'insincerity' and 'insensitivity' to Turkish

priorities and values stemming from history and state tradition. The period of 'de-Europeanization' or 'Europeanization-as-denial' began as early as 2008, with the political commitment to European integration changing within the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and among other domestic political actors. The contestation of the EU within the wider Turkish public further contributed to changing perceptions and attitudes towards European integration. The conclusions illustrate how the issue of identity has generated substantial dynamics of disagreement and conflicting perspectives, reflecting the divergence of understandings and values between Türkiye and the EU on matters of governance and democratic principles.

**Chapter 8**, 'From Dreaming of to Dealing with Europe: How the Political Elite in Georgia Frames and Contests the EU', authored by David Aprasidze, is interested mainly, besides the general supporting or contesting attitudes regarding the EU, in Georgia's political elite's possible discourse shifts following the recently opened EU membership perspective. The chapter follows a rational choice institutionalist theoretical foundation, emphasizing – for the political forces in the current Georgian parliament – the importance of the opportunities and challenges that the EU has brought in structuring their position towards the Union, yet underlining the value of alternative theoretical explanations (such as sociological institutionalism) in properly understanding and depicting the current context.

The analysis points out that the current ruling political elites are 'largely satisfied with the status of "liminal periphery", since it allows them to ... [implement] reforms fitting into their agenda while avoiding others', while the membership potentiality (as revealed by the 12 priorities that Georgia would have to deal with in order to be granted candidate status) is seen as more constraining, with a clearly defined conditionality framework. This can also explain why these elites show increased resistance and why they 'use opportunities presented by competing forces such as Russia to boost their own manoeuvrability in dealing with the EU'. On the other hand, the open pro-European orientation of the opposition is just as well explained in terms of opportunities, because it could represent only a platform to challenge (electorally) the ruling forces. The chapter explains, therefore, a situation that contradicts previous research in which the credibility of the membership perspective was perceived as a powerful tool in generating reforms and support among applicant countries. So, even if it is often

underlined that ‘scholars believe[d] that the European Neighbourhood Policy cannot produce outcomes in democratization and modernization to the level that enlargement policy can’, Aprasidze proves that the stricter conditionality of the membership perspective has ‘produced cleavages and contestations that did not exist in Georgia before around the EU’. This conclusion justifies the survival/cherry-picking strategy of Georgian elites who decide to opt only for those reforms that will not endanger their status; if one also mentions the existence of alternatives to the EU path, one easily understands why the whole context ‘increases the manoeuvrability of incumbents to counter the external pressure from the EU’.

Finally, Bardhok Bashota, Dren Gërguri, and Leonora Bajrami, in ‘The Ambivalence of Kosovo–EU Relations in the Last Decade: The Perspective of Kosovo’s Political Elites’ (Chapter 9), shed light on a special dimension in EU–Kosovo relations in terms of centre–periphery interaction. An added value of this study is the exploration of the ambivalent line of the Kosovar political elite in relation to perceptions of the EU. The Kosovar political elite, while contesting and critical of the way that the EU has treated Kosovo in relation to certain stages of cooperation, have continued to show full commitment to and convergence with it, keeping the issue of EU integration as a top priority of the country’s foreign policy. This study also argues that the political elites in Kosovo have not developed any structured political strategy to resist and contest the role of the EU. Instead, political elites express their scepticism and contestation towards the EU in a reactive manner and in the form of frustration with the way the EU has approached and interacted with Kosovo.

Overall, the relationships between the studied countries and the EU are dynamic and subject to change. The chapters highlight the evolving nature of these relationships and the need to adapt our understanding of contestation and peripherality accordingly. In this respect, critical situations such as the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic have had an impact on the contestations, perceptions, and dynamics of the relationship in the countries at the EU’s periphery – in some cases strengthening solidarity and the need for ‘more EU’, in others raising doubts and disappointment over challenges that countries have faced over recent years. There is a need for further research on the correlation between national party positions and the interpretation of the EU’s actorness in critical issues. For example, understanding how

party alignments influence perceptions of the EU can provide insights into the dynamics of contestation and peripherality within the EU. Nevertheless, the studies brought forth in this volume are a worthwhile first step towards looking at the EU and the peripheries it creates from an alternative, and sometimes ignored, point of view.