CHAPTER 3

The Ambivalent 'Eurosceptics' of the EU's 'Inner Periphery'

Assessing Perceptions of the EU among Political Elites in Romania during Turbulent Times

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Abstract

The nature of perceptions of the EU among Romania's elites is an under-studied and seldom explored issue. The central research question of this chapter is whether the major events of the 2020–2022 interval (marked by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the start of the war in Ukraine, and the rejection of Romania's second attempt to join the Schengen area) have altered Romanian elites' perceptions of the EU. The empirical part discusses qualitative data

resulting from ten semi-structured interviews, analysed in relation to three main theoretical taxonomies of political party attitudes towards the EU – those of Kopecký and Mudde (2002), Lubbers and Scheepers (2005), and Krouwel and Abts (2007) – to highlight the particularities of Romanian Eurosceptic discourse and its ambivalent nature.

Keywords: European Union, EU accession, political elites, periphery, perceptions, Romania

Introduction

Romania submitted its application for EU membership back in 1995, preceded by the 'Snagov Declaration', a document endorsed by all of the extant 14 parliamentary political parties. The declaration highlighted the parties' full consensual support for EU membership. Ever since, EU integration has been one of the major cross-party goals in post-communist Romania. Public opinion polls such as Eurobarometer repeatedly have Romanian citizens as some of the most enthusiastic supporters of the EU, and their trust in EU institutions has been consistently above the EU average and above that of other post-communist countries such as Poland, Hungary, Czechia, or Slovakia (Troncotă & Loy, 2018). Moreover, symbolic domestic communication about the EU based on populist anti-EU rhetoric has not been present at all in mainstream Romanian public debates (except for short episodes during the 2017–2018 anti-corruption protests, when the Romanian government led by the Socialist Liviu Dragnea expressed several controversial anti-EU positions; Butnaru Troncotă & Ioniță, 2022). Despite this domestic political consensus and the citizens' thriving Euro-enthusiasm, and with no significant challenger party spreading Eurosceptic messages in the national political arena, serious discussions on a potential Romanian wave of Euroscepticism have remained episodic (Gherghina & Mișcoiu, 2014). A series of events that occurred between 2020 and 2022 brought several changes to this unanimously pro-EU pattern of Romanian politics (Mișcoiu, 2021). Yet the topic of an emerging form of party-based Euroscepticism in Romania, distinct from similar manifestations in Poland or Hungary or even in Bulgaria, remains still under-researched.

The January 2023 European Parliament report covering the 15 years since Romania's accession shows a drop of almost 10 per cent in the EU's favourability rating over the last couple of years among Romanian

respondents. Romania has thus dropped below the EU average, while the EU average itself, now at 62 per cent, has increased from the 59 per cent mark reached in 2020 (European Parliament, 2023). The shift is even more worrying when compared with the 71 per cent of public opinion that was positive towards EU membership in 2007, when Romania officially became an EU member. Consequently, it is legitimate to enquire whether we are witnessing more visible forms of Euroscepticism and contestation of the EU in Romania and what could be the context for this shift. As we know that the opinion polls themselves do not tell us much about the causes of change in public perceptions, we believe that a more in-depth focus on political elites provides a chance to delve deeper into and gain a better understanding of this shift in EU perceptions in Romania. This is because political elites can tap into mass attitudes towards the EU and European integration, and they tend to follow them and so reflect them at the decision-making level, for obvious electoral purposes.

EU studies scholars have shown that, pushed by recent crises, European integration has become an increasingly contested process (Foster & Grzymski, 2022), and emerging studies have focused specifically on the impact of this contestation not only in the founding member states such as Germany, Italy, or France, but also at the EU's political and geographical margins (Stojić, 2022). In this vein, a burgeoning literature has developed around the concept of 'party-based Euroscepticism', and within these scholarly debates elite opinions have been seen as relevant when researching evolving forms of contestation in the EU's peripheries. As Böttger and Van Loozen (2012) have shown, European integration has, even back to the 'founding fathers' in the 1950s, been understood as an elite-driven phenomenon, around which the public was seen as having a 'permissive consensus'. But this was the case mainly in the first decades of the process and applied mostly to the six founding states of the European Community. Neofunctionalism later argued that internal crises brought the demise of the 'permissive consensus', to be replaced by a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2005; 2009). As such, the scholarly debates have focused on the development of Euroscepticism at a national level as a central aspect of the reorientation of positions on the EU/Europe, propagated by 'party-based Euroscepticism' that took specific forms in the new post-communist member states, already manifesting when they were candidate countries (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004).

In this context, the views of Romania's political representatives on the EU are still under-studied. There are numerous studies focused on the more illustrative CEE cases of Poland and Hungary (see e.g. Csehi & Zgut, 2021; Vogel & Göncz, 2018), especially in the context of their democratic decline and rule-of-law crises between 2017 and 2018 and the confrontational rhetoric between these countries' leaders and EU representatives over the last years (Brack et al., 2019). But there are far fewer studies focused on the case of political elites' views on the EU in Romania. Previous studies have shown how Romanian elites differ from their Polish and Hungarian counterparts – something very visible during the 2017–2019 Future of Europe debates (see more in Butnaru-Troncotă & Ioniță, 2022). Our study tries to address this gap in the literature, adding an update regarding recent events, and reflecting also on how perceptions have evolved following the most recent crises between 2020 and 2022. In the Romanian case, this period has a particular relevance because after the December 2020 parliamentary elections, the subject of nationalism resurfaced in Romanian politics when the first Eurosceptic right-wing populist party (Alliance for the Union of Romanians, AUR) entered the Romanian parliament. In this context, we argue that the period between 2020 and 2022 represents a critical conjuncture as 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 main question that our chapter addresses is: how did all of these major events taking place between 2020 and 2022 affect perspectives on the EU among Romanian political elites?

To answer this, we used original qualitative data from ten extended semi-structured interviews with nine members of the current Romanian parliament and one senior politician directly involved in Romania's EU pre-accession negotiations.[1] We aimed to interpret and contextualize the results with reference to Austria's veto against Romania's accession to Schengen, a subject that brought the EU back into the Romanian public sphere and stirred reactions broadly in the media (Hotnews, 2022; G4media, 2022) and across different groups – citizens and elites alike. Thus, the hypothesis at the centre of the present volume is tested in this chapter: is Romania regarded by its own political elites as part of the EU's 'inner periphery', and what is the meaning attached to this term, depending not merely on geographical position or on economic indicators but also on how its domestic political elites

(who interact with EU institutions) perceive and engage in the integration process?

Another important theoretical anchor for our analysis is the idea of 'EU peripheries' as political constructions (see more in Chapter 1). In Foucauldian terms of knowledge and power, the periphery is and becomes what the centre defines it to be. From a constructivist point of view, the identity of actors considered part of the periphery is co-constituted and results from the inter-subjective interactions between what is perceived as the 'centre' and the periphery, as well as the interactions among different actors self-perceived as part of periphery themselves. This is why we find it relevant to explore the types of interpretations, attitudes, and reactions that political elites hold about recent Romania–EU relations, in order to explore how various representations of Romania's position in the EU have emerged among its 'political entrepreneurs'. We do not claim that these perceptions determine these actors' behaviour, but just mapping the often contradictory meanings attached to Romania as treated by the EU as a periphery can still contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding of the paradoxes experienced by Romania's elites. These paradoxes entail contradictory attitudes expressed sometimes by the same person, or manifested in the same political party, consisting of both nationalist arguments referring to Romania being treated as an 'EU colony' and very harsh self-criticism stating that Romania does not in fact keep up with EU standards and that its 'backwardness' justifies the country's position in the EU periphery.

The chapter is divided into five sections as follows: the first section explores the image shared by EU scholars of Romania and Bulgaria as constant 'laggards' of the EU accession process, a status that appeared before the two countries joined the EU and was prolonged for almost two decades in the post-accession period; the second section reviews the main arguments of previous studies that have focused on elite Euroscepticism and presents the main theoretical categories defined by Kopecký and Mudde (2002), Lubbers and Scheepers (2005), and Krouwel and Abts (2007), outlining the main analytical model that will be used to interpret the qualitative data; the third section presents the main methodological considerations and briefly reflects on the limits of political elite-based interviews; the fourth section discusses the context of Romania's elite perceptions with an emphasis on the debates around the country's December 2022 failed Schengen bid; the last

section interprets the main findings using the aforementioned theoretical perspectives and methods, highlighting the conclusions alongside avenues for future research.

Constructing the EU's 'Inner Periphery': Eastern Enlargement and the Stigma of Being the 'Laggards' of EU Accession

The fifth enlargement wave, consisting of Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the EU, also labelled pejoratively the 'Eastern enlargement', attracted a special focus in the Europeanization research literature. In EU studies literature, Romania was commonly regarded as the laggard among the post-communist countries that sought EU membership and thus it became subject to a stricter application of rule-of-law conditionality in 2004 (Levitz & Pop-Eleches, 2010). The case of Romania was illustrative in highlighting the role of 'differentiated integration', which entailed the exceptional procedure of the Coordination and Verification Mechanism (CVM), alongside the country's delay in joining the Eurozone and the Schengen area.

Initially, in the 2000s, looking at the rapid pace of reforms and successful democratization in CEE countries, EU enlargement was widely hailed in the literature as 'the most successful foreign policy of the EU'. But soon after 2007, when Romania and Bulgaria entered the EU with a 'delay' and with a set of exceptional clauses, the analysts of enlargement began to signal a visible 'crisis of the enlargement process' (Brunet, 2013). The year 2007 thus remains an important milestone both for scholars of enlargement and for EU policy-makers, as it represented a cornerstone in terms of how the EU would rethink and redesign its future enlargement negotiations with the new generations of candidate countries. As a lesson learnt from the hurdles faced by Bulgaria and Romania in the integration process and their 'unfinished reforms', the EU launched stricter conditionality for the new candidate countries in the Western Balkans and a special focus on rule-of-law reform, together with a more rigorous system of monitoring reforms. The disappointment of certain EU member states in this process soon lead to very visible 'enlargement fatigue', something that officially confirmed at the political level by Jean Claude Juncker's announcement, before he began his term as president of the European Commission, that during his mandate there would be no further enlargement (Juncker, 2014).

The EU's 'leap' from 15 to 25 (and later to 28) members was supposed to have ended the Cold War legacy of separate and hostile camps divided into Eastern and Western Europe. Still, there were numerous material and symbolic elements highlighting the visible divide between what now became 'new' versus 'old' member states within the EU. An important observation to start with is that even if they were all considered parts of the same group, the post-communist countries were not all treated the same; a certain differentiation among them by the EU institutions was visible from the beginning. This was only later officially confirmed, with the Eastern enlargement taking place in two stages – first in 2004 (CEE countries) and then in 2007 (Romania and Bulgaria, decoupled from the rest). Out of the 12 states announcing their intention to seek EU membership back in 1993, by 1998 a total of ten countries from CEE had formally begun their membership negotiations. The process occurred in two stages – first, in 1998, the countries that received a green light were the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. Due to instability and lack of reforms, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovakia were not invited to start accession negotiations following the 1997 Luxembourg European Council. Despite the opposition of some member states, Romania and Bulgaria were invited to start negotiations at the 1999 Helsinki Summit. By 2000, all ten CEE countries had thus been invited to start negotiations (Grabbe, 2002). During the 2002 Copenhagen European Council, the 'big bang' enlargement was officially scheduled to take place in 2004, but Romania and Bulgaria were not among the states which were allowed to accede to the EU that year. The EU called for further progress in meeting the membership criteria in general and in reforming the administration and the judiciary in particular, while the Commission launched a completely new procedure to adapt to the 'exceptional' situation of the two countries. Consequently, Romania was treated by the EU as 'an exception to the general rule' of enlargement, and this contributed to its labelling in the conventional Europeanization literature as the laggard of the post-communist countries seeking to join the EU.

After Romania and Bulgaria had provisionally closed all *acquis* chapters, the Brussels European Council of 16–17 December 2004 confirmed the accession date of 2007 yet introduced the instrument of 'safeguard clauses' (Trauner, 2009). This exceptional procedure which had never been used previously by the EU meant that the Commission

could withhold the benefits of membership before accession or in the three years after accession, if certain reforms had not been completed. Thus, the two countries had a delay of almost two and half years compared with other post-communist countries in the CEE; they signed the Accession Treaty to the EU on 25 April 2005, and based on this they were to become EU member states on 1 January 2007.

This persisting label of 'reform laggards' and its explicit negative connotations have clung to both Romania and Bulgaria ever since they handed in their applications for accession in the early 1990s. Moreover, the 'laggard' label continued to appear in literature concerning Romania's Europeanization long after its accession process had concluded. Romania's case was thus studied in the academic literature using the unique concept of 'post-accession compliance', referring to the political conditionalities placed by the EU only on Romania and Bulgaria for the first time in the history of EU enlargement, which were monitored regularly during the accession process (Pridham, 2007a). Moreover, a new mechanism was specially designed by the European Commission that would monitor compliance with these conditionalities in the fields of the fight against corruption and rule of law after accession. When they joined the EU on 1 January 2007, Romania and Bulgaria still had progress to make in the fields of judicial reform, corruption, and (for Bulgaria) organized crime. The Commission set up the CVM as a transitional measure to assist the two countries in remedying these shortcomings. Subsequently, the Commission reported on progress on a regular basis and the CVM was extended for almost 15 years (it finally concluded in 2022). It is not uncommon to see that Romania and Bulgaria's 'special status' remains central to the analysis of the EU. Gallagher (2009), for example, argues that Romania's predatory rulers have inflicted a humiliating defeat on the EU. He argues that Brussels was 'tricked' into offering full membership to Romania in return for substantial reforms which its rulers refused to carry out. Authors such as Pridham (2007b) and Trauner (2009) who have analysed Romania's post-accession compliance with EU law have argued that failures in the areas of justice, administrative, and agricultural reform show how the country moved backwards politically during the years of negotiations and after accession.

This pejorative laggard status was kept alive also by Romania's near-constant placement at the bottom of the convergence indicators rankings. Only very recently have more nuanced analyses begun to shift

the perspective. Dimitrova (2021) argues that there is not sufficient evidence to assess Romania and Bulgaria as exceptions or laggards. On the contrary, there are many instances in which they could be qualified as 'regular member states'. On the one hand, analysing from a strict 'transposition of the *EU acquis*' point of view, as Ram (2012, p. 417) argues: 'Romania and Bulgaria have a good record in general, which has even improved since accession. On the other hand, looking at judicial reform and combating organized crime and corruption – the evolution is very modest or in some cases has regressed since accession.' This led to an unprecedented gesture at the time, when the EU froze Bulgaria's pre-accession funds in 2008 (Gow, 2008).

The label was reinforced by unfavourable comparisons with the states that had joined the EU in 2004. During the decade and a half since their delayed accession, both Bulgaria and Romania have been identified in the relevant literature as examples of 'successful laggards' (Noutcheva & Bechev, 2008), or as illustrations of 'Balkan particularism' (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007), 'Balkan Exceptionalism' (Papadimitriou & Gateva, 2009), 'post-accession hooliganism' (Ganev 2013), or the 'roots of enlargement exceptionalism' (Dimitrova, 2021). Even if different indicators are used to measure Europeanization, the mainstream literature in the field tends to point to a mostly negative perception of Eastern enlargement, associating a wide range of mostly negative characteristics or metaphors with Romania's accession such as 'backsliding' (Rupnik, 2007), 'shallow' (Ladrech, 2009), 'empty shells' (Dimitrova, 2010), 'enlargement on paper against enlargement in practice' (Trauner, 2009), 'back-pedaling' (Buzogány, 2012), and 'eternal laggards' (Dimitrova, 2021) or naming Romania and Bulgaria as the 'two Cinderellas of EU accession' (Dimitrov & Plachkova, 2021). Even a superficial look at these dominant metaphors and types of argument used by prominent EU scholars makes it easy to identify elements of stigma connected with the delayed accession and the exceptionality clauses. Scrutinizing some of the most referenced articles on the topic on Google Scholar, we can observe how this stigmatizing label fits within the metaphorical 'race' of accession, where there are supposedly 'frontrunners' and 'laggards' and Romania and Bulgaria are explicitly associated with the latter (Pridham, 2007b; Chiva, 2009; Trauner, 2009; Andreev, 2009; Spendzharova & Vachudova, 2012).

This focus makes it easier to highlight Romania's shortcomings in complying with EU conditionality, while making other more positive

transformations beyond the strict interpretation of EU conditionality less visible. This process can be analysed as a form of 'academic peripheralization', reflected in the ways that both Romanian political elites and scholars themselves internalize this perspective in their own assessments of the process, even in situations when indicators do not point to such a bad track record. Labels often used in influential academic discourse are relevant because peripheral regions of the EU are not just spatially or economically distant; they are also perceived as different by the centre (the location of epistemic authority in this case) – and their difference is often symbolically and politically constructed as Otherness (*alterity*).

The image of Romania as a part of the EU's 'inner periphery' is not necessarily a result of recent crises and events (such the failed Schengen bid or problems in combating corruption); rather, it is part of a continuum that started in the pre-accession period. Procedurally speaking, Romania was treated as an exception to the general rule of EU accession and this created the premises for the feeling of being 'not fully an EU member'; this in turn positioned the country from the beginning with an in-betweenness that served in the EU studies epistemic community as a stigma.

Shades of Euroscepticism and How to Differentiate Its Nuances

Like many complex and often confusing concepts, the EU is understood in very different ways by different social categories. The same differentiation applies to the ways that it is contested. Taking stock of this variety of understandings of the EU implies that there are diverse types of Euroscepticism as well as various forms of EU support. Immediately after the Eurozone crisis, Euroscepticism become widespread in the European public sphere at all levels: in public opinion, among political parties and civil society groups, even in media discourses. Scholars have argued that the broad set of attitudes critical of the EU covered by the umbrella term 'Euroscepticism' manifests in different ways: public opinion becoming more hostile towards the EU (decreasing trust in the EU as reported by the Eurobarometer data); increasing support for political parties that oppose the EU or the further European integration; and an increase in Eurosceptic rhetoric in public debates. In fact, it has been argued that Euroscepticism has become

increasingly 'embedded' within European nation states (Usherwood & Startin, 2013). This tendency has been accelerated by the post-Brexit uncertainty (after 2017). We will briefly explore the main arguments of previous studies that have focused on elite Euroscepticism and present the main theoretical categories for grasping the complexity of political parties' EU attitudes, particularly in the context of the awakening of public interest in the EU which contributed to its increased politicization (Haapala & Oleart Pérez de Seoane, 2021).

There is a wide consensus in the literature that in the post-Maastricht period, Euroscepticism has become a more significant phenomenon than in earlier decades, and that there has been a shift from a 'permissive consensus' to a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2008; Down & Wilson, 2008). Post-functionalist authors have argued that the process of European unification is driven mainly by the self-interest of elites who enjoy a wide margin of autonomy, as opposed to the general population, in pursuing policies of European integration (Best et al., 2012). According to this approach, political elites see the EU integration process as 'a means to advance political goals which they would not be able to enforce alone' (Haller, 2008, p. 42). In this sense, the theory of permissive consensus perceives public and elite interest in European integration as being mutually reinforcing. Moreover, different facets of the EU's subsequent crises in the last decade brought about different obstacles to European integration: supranational versus national proposals for the Future of Europe, specific forms of 'supranational politicization' of the question (Butnaru-Troncotă & Ioniță, 2021), and whether identity politics were activated via these crises (Börzel & Risse, 2018). De Wilde and Trenz (2012) have highlighted the diversity of Eurosceptic positions across different party families in the European Parliament and often even within the same party family. Even though there are other categorizations that have emerged more recently, dealing with the potential changes in parties' attitudes towards the EU in the light of the multiple crises that engulfed the Union throughout the 2010s, we found it useful to explore elite contestation narratives in Romania using these initial categories, considering also that Euroscepticism is a much-delayed phenomenon in the case of Romania as compared with other CEE countries. The main argument recently presented in the literature is that Euroscepticism is not a unitary, coherent position, and it covers very different types of party attitudes to European integration (Borțun, 2022). Moreover, Borțun

argues for the need to go 'beyond the binary classification of party-based Euroscepticism, and discuss whether those structural and overlapping EU crises might also have led to changes in how we understand and classify party-based Euroscepticism' (Borţun, 2022, p. 1417).

Studies especially focused on the emergence of various forms of Euroscepticism cover different elements of the phenomenon and different actors expressing some form of opposition to the EU, ranging from 'Europhobia' to 'Europhilia' among different sections of national elites. There are also studies that focus on the shift visible in many Western member states towards opposing European integration, contesting the EU, and Euroscepticism (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; de Vries, 2018; Leruth et al., 2018). Other studies look at how the most recent crises have fuelled Euroscepticism and how this in turn influenced the results of the 2019 European elections (Braun et al., 2019; Brack, 2020). All of these studies make use of a set of much older concepts highlighting the analytical value of 'party-based Euroscepticism' advanced by Kopecký and Mudde (2002), Lubbers and Scheepers (2005), and Krouwel and Abts (2007). The present chapter also makes significant use of these models to interpret our qualitative data.

Kopecký and Mudde's Categorization

One of the most comprehensive perspectives is that formulated by Kopecký and Mudde (2002), which was put forward as 'an alternative way of categorizing opposition to Europe by defining the term Euroscepticism in relation to other (party) positions on "Europe"' (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, p. 300). They make a distinction between four major types of attitudes towards the EU (Euro-enthusiasts, Eurosceptics, Euro-pragmatists, and Euro-rejects), focusing on different positions with regard to how parties identify with both the idea and the practice of European integration.

Based on their understanding, the Europhiles are defined as believing in the key ideas of European integration: 'institutionalized cooperation based on common sovereignty (the political element) and a liberal integrated market economy' (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, p. 301). Thus, the Europhile attitude may include those who 'see European integration as a project for the creation of a new supranational state (for example, the federalists), but also for those who see European integration exclusively from an economic point of view (for example, the

creation of a free trade area)' (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, p. 301). By contrast, the Europhobes oppose all of the above principles that are the basis of the EU. The classification leads to the formulation of four main ideal type categories of party positions on Europe: *Euro-enthusiasts*, *Eurosceptics*, *Euro-rejects*, and *Euro-pragmatists (*Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, pp. 301–303) (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Kopecký and Mudde's 'Typology of party positions on Europe'

Party position	Typical features
Euro-enthusiasts	Combines Europhile and EU-optimist positions: ++ support both the idea and the practice of European integration
Eurosceptics	Combines Europhile and EU-pessimist positions: + support the idea but – oppose the practice
Euro-pragmatists	Combines Europhobe and EU-optimist positions – oppose the idea but + support the practice
Euro-rejects	Combines Europhobe and EU-pessimist positions – – oppose both the idea and the practice

Source: authors' construction based on Kopecký and Mudde (2002, pp. 302–303).

Despite its widespread use in integration studies and Euroscepticism research over the last two decades, Kopecký and Mudde's (2002) typology has not been used in relation to political elites in Romania or Bulgaria. Moreover, it can be argued that between the extremes of Europhobia and Europhilia there are multiple possible positions and most often political elites shift on this continuum based on numerous contextual factors; we find this scale useful for exploring Romanian political elites' perceptions of the EU.

Lubbers and Scheepers' Categorization

Another important distinction is between 'political' and 'instrumental' Euroscepticism, formalized by Lubbers and Scheepers (2005). They explore the extent to which nationalist characteristics drive political

Euroscepticism, in addition to political and economic characteristics (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2005, p. 644).

This is a complementary perspective useful in our analysis because it deals with a different distinction than the one described by Kopecký and Mudde (2002). Lubbers and Scheepers analyse political Euroscepticism in 21 European countries (not including Romania and Bulgaria, which were not EU members at that time). Their contribution is relevant because they show that 'political euro-scepticism is associated particularly strongly to fears about European immigrants and losses of wealth and traditions due to the inflow of new immigrants' (Lubbers & Scheepers 2005, p. 664). They make a distinction between utilitarian, or economic, explanations of Euroscepticism and political explanations. In their view, 'political' Euroscepticism is concerned primarily with the process of European integration (understood as a focus on 'the importance of political interest, knowledge and trust'), whereas 'instrumental' Euroscepticism is concerned with its outcomes (understood as 'a cost–benefit evaluation that is crucial for people's attitude towards the EU') (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2005, p. 645). Moreover, this distinction is relevant because it allows for more nuances when making a distinction between nationalist and economic drivers of Euroscepticism. As Borțun (2022, p. 1418) points out, 'while "political Euroscepticism" entails a preference for national over EU prerogatives in certain, if not all, key policy areas, "instrumental Euroscepticism" is framed in cost–benefit terms, with its adepts emphasizing the negative consequences of EU membership'.

Krouwel and Abts' Categorization

The third and the most nuanced categorization of party-based Euroscepticism is offered by Krouwel and Abts (2007). They develop a two-dimensional conceptualization by combining the target and the degree of popular discontent with the EU and European integration. This allows us to delve deeper into the structure of political discontent and its effects on political trust in EU member states by distinguishing between different types of Euroscepticism on a sliding scale of political attitudes, which in this categorization runs from trust, through scepticism, to political distrust, cynicism, and alienation. Their two-dimensional framework distinguishes between 'the targets of political support and the degree of reflexivity, that is to say the extent to

which individuals are able to differentiate evaluations between different actors and institutions in a political system' (Krouwel & Abts, 2007, p. 256). The article shows that 'the dynamics between increasing levels of political discontent and populist mobilization of latent negative evaluations of European integration can actually have significant impact in national and European politics' (Krouwel & Abts, 2007, p. 254). In this sense, it is important to look at elites' political actions at the EU level as being highly constrained by public opinion regarding the accelerated process of European integration. The varying degrees and targets of public discontent can be traced in recent Eurobarometer data, and we have found this a fruitful additional avenue of research in discussing Romanian political elites' evolving perceptions alongside the most recent evolutions of Romanian citizens' levels of trust in both EU and national institutions. Krouwel and Abts illustrate that populist parties are successful in elections particularly because they very carefully watch and capitalize on shifts in public trust in the EU. Consequently, what citizens think about the EU (as reflected by Eurobarometer polls) is related to what political elites think about the EU.

There is consistent research already pointing to the fact that trust in the EU has always fluctuated over time. In this context of fluctuating trust, Krouwel and Abts underline that 'skepticism could be defined as reluctant (dis)trust of political power, meaning that skeptics can always revoke their confidence in specific political actors and institutions. Since (dis)trust never becomes unconditional, skepticism is a matter of doubt rather than denial' (2007, p. 259). The two authors propose a very complex and detailed scale, with five major categories starting from *Euro-confidence* (the most positive attitude towards the EU) continuing with *Euroscepticism*, which is in fact a combination of acceptance and mild criticism, and three other categories – *Euro-distrust*, *Euro-cynicism*, and *Euro-alienation* (the most extreme negative rejection of the EU as a whole) (see Table 3.2). They underline the fact that this last category, Euro-alienation, mirrors the fourth category of Kopecký and Mudde (2002) – Euro-rejects – in that it is 'rather applicable to extremist parties, no matter what their ideological affiliation is (far right or left), because they are simply ideologically opposed to European integration *per se*' (Krouwel & Abts, 2007, p. 263). This resonates very well with the other authors' argument that Euro-rejects 'may be nationalists, socialists, or isolationists, or simply because they believe the idea of European integration is a folly in the face of the

Table 3.2: Categorization based on Krouwel and Abts' 'Sliding scale of European discontent'

Categories	Definition of the attitude	Transposition of the attitude into opinions and actions (or how to recognize this attitude)
+ Euro-confidence (the most extreme attitude of satisfaction with the EU)	'A preconceived and pre-reflexive generalized attitude of obedient assent to EU politics'	'They evaluate EU policy output as satisfactory; and they support further development of European integration'
Euroscepticism	'A trade-off between some dissatisfaction with current EU performance and confidence in the overall project of European integration. Eurosceptics are ambivalent about European authorities and the regime'	'They adopt a critical attitude towards particular EU policy initiatives, and they may be sceptical about deepening or widening'
Euro-distrust	'Based on frustrations with the perceived failure of the EU to meet their expectations and demands'	'They are frequently disappointed, which results in a negative evaluation of the current operation, as well as pessimism about the future performance of the EU'
Euro-cynicism	'Combines a generalized disdain for European authorities with outright disbelief in the virtuous functioning of the EU institutions and fatalism about the future of the European project'	'They disclose a "generalized negativism" and they reject the whole project of European integration'
– Euro-alienation (the most extreme attitude of dissociation from and dissatisfaction with the EU)	'The enduring and profound rejection of the EU. We can distinguish here two subgroups: the *Euro-estranged* and the *Euro-rejects*'	'The milder form of Euro-estrangement indicates a loss of diffuse support for European integration and favourable attitudes towards the European project, as well as a lack of identification with the European political community – Euro-rejects are principled and ideologically opposed to the European integration'

Source: authors' construction based on Krouwel and Abts (2007, pp. 261–262).

diversity existing among European states' (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, p. 301).

Another important takeaway from Krouwel and Abts (2007) that is useful for our analysis is the political opportunities that these various positions bring to a wider and more democratic public and European debate. In other words, Euroscepticism is, to a certain extent, healthy for a plural European public debate. In contrast with other theoretical perspectives on the topic, the authors suggest in fact that rather than viewing Eurosceptic or Euro-distrustful attitudes as incompatible with or in opposition to pro-European positions, we should consider them as 'reconcilable with positive evaluations of the larger European project' (Krouwel & Abts, 2007, p. 263). Moreover, they argue that 'Cynicism and alienation, on the other hand, are in strict opposition to the EU and incompatible with the idea of European integration' (Krouwel & Abts, 2007, p. 263). Our analysis agrees with this perspective: criticism of the EU or of EU integration is not a zero-sum game for political actors; in fact, it provides political elites with significant room for manoeuvre, and we will try to observe these nuances in Romanian political elites' discourse on the EU and EU integration.

Methodological Note

In the current context of EU 'poly-crises' marked by war at the Union's borders and deep instability, political elites' views on the EU matter more than before. That is why the motivation of the political elites in their response to EU democratic conditionalities, as well as their interaction with democratic pressures, are undoubtedly relevant (Surubaru & Nitoiu, 2020). Best et al. (2012) have argued that the process of European integration is continuously dependent on and driven by the accord of its national elites. Moreover, political elites are in direct contact with the EU's supranational institutions. National elites think, talk, and act under changing conditions, following different standards and political agendas (see for example what Best et al., 2012, label 'Eurelitism' to precisely define the elitist character of European integration, mediated by the strategies of domestic political actors). Based on these perspectives, and assuming the limitations of a strictly elite-centred analysis of the EU in Romania, our study embraces the assumption that political elite perceptions have been a driving factor in the country's EU integration endeavours. The overall aim is to assess the visions

and attitudes developed by Romanian political elites and their different perceptions of the EU in times of crises (post-Brexit), especially in the 2020–2022 interval. Our study makes the additional assumption that the visions, attitudes, and opinions of Romanian political elites regarding the EU have been impacted by recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and, most recently, the failed attempt to join the Schengen area. We also want to see whether the decline in trust in the EU visible in Eurobarometer data (European Parliament, 2023) is visibly reflected in the elites' discourse.

In addition to the Eurobarometer data, our study makes use of original empirical data obtained from semi-structured interviews with politicians, a method rarely employed by studies dealing with Romania. We found research interviews an adequate approach to mapping subjective perceptions, while at the same time being aware of the method's implicit limitations. The interviews were conducted in the Romanian language – for the sake of clarity – and translation into English of selected extracts poses the risk of partially distorting the meanings expressed by the participants (the risk of being 'lost in translation'). To alleviate this risk, we tried to combine the qualitative data collected with other data (opinion polls and observations from recent literature in Romania) in order to better contextualize our main assumption: that Romania's failed Schengen bid in December 2022, together with disillusionment as a result of previous EU crises and the more active presence of a populist far-right party (AUR) from 2020, created a favourable symbolic space for discursive representations that enforce Romania's image as one of EU's inner peripheries. The data collected from the semi-structured interviews was used to evaluate how Romanian politicians make use in their discourses of the various negative connotations and feelings of frustration associated with this image of being in the EU periphery, not being a full member state, or being treated as a second-class member state.

The main methodological assumption that we started with was that neither elites nor citizens have fixed views on Europe. In the past, large waves of Euroscepticism have been followed by a period of civic passivity or even by a U-turn towards Euro-enthusiasm. Citizens' and political elites' views are deeply connected to one another, and they are context bound. It is only logical to assume that a period of successive crises at EU and global level (such as the poly-crises of the last decade) would deeply influence both citizens' and elites' views of the EU.

One initial assumption could be that Euroscepticism, together with open contestation of the EU in public debates, becomes more visible in times of crisis, but our endeavour is an attempt to see more deeply the nuances of this phenomenon and its contextual factors in the case of Romania. This is why we have chosen to focus particularly on the period between 2020 and 2022, which coincided with impactful events that brought the EU back into the national public sphere – namely, the measures taken in the context of combating the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects; the start of the Russian invasion in Ukraine and the wave of solidarity of member states and the EU as a whole in supporting Ukraine; and the decision to once again reject Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen area, as a result of Austria's veto at the end of 2022. We conducted interviews with Romanian MPs between February and March 2023 – very shortly after this last event, which was charged with numerous emotional outbursts of disappointment towards the EU, especially regarding how some member states treat Romania even after 16 years of membership.

Drawing on insights from the most recent EU public opinion research, together with original data from our in-depth research interviews with political elites in Romania, also enables us to identify contextual factors that facilitated or inhibited certain attitudes among Romanian politicians regarding EU integration between 2020 and 2022. We used the data provided by our ten semi-structured interviews with members of the Romanian parliament (nine from the current parliament and one former high-profile politician involved in Romania's EU accession). To avoid biases, we tried to keep the group of selected interviewees as diverse as possible; thus, we used multiple criteria of selection. The first criterion was the respondent's knowledge and experience of EU affairs. We included former ministers, former members of the European Parliament (MEPs), and retired politicians involved in Romania's pre-accession negotiations. The second was ideological positioning based on the political party the interviewee represented, with the intent to include as many different political perspectives as possible. Thus, we included representatives from both government parties (five) and opposition parties (four), and MPs representing Romania's ethnic minorities (one). The third criterion was gender, and here we did not maintain a good balance, as we managed to include only two women compared with eight men (although this does in fact reflect the gender imbalance in the Romanian parliament). The age

distribution of the interviewees was also broad, with five politicians between 21 and 40 years of age and four more experienced politicians between 41 and 60 years of age, as well as one retired politician (over 61). The interviews had a fixed structure of five general questions/items that were common to all of the case studies in this book, but we also adapted the flow of the conversations to the specific context of Romania, adding ten more specific questions connected to the different topics. The fixed format of eight main questions addressed to all politicians included the following topics: what is your opinion about the most recent rejection to enter the Schengen zone? Do you think that this might raise the level of Euroscepticism in Romania? How would you assess Romania's image in the EU for the last two years? What were the major events that affected this image in relation to the EU? How would you assess Romania's overall membership in the EU? How did Romania change over the last 16 years of EU membership? And the last two questions were the same for all ten interviewees: do you believe Romania is part of the EU's periphery? How would you define that position? The discussion with interviewees sometimes led to additional questions around these topics, and sometimes the order of the questions was changed, adapting in each case to the flow of the conversation. All respondents signed agreements to be included in the study and to protect their identity, and we use codes from IN1 to IN10 to replace their names (for more details about respondents, see Appendix, Table A3.1).

The Symbolic Costs of the Schengen Rejections: How Political Elites See Romania's Place in the EU

The Paradoxes of 'Euro-Enthusiasm'

As already mentioned, there are few studies focused on whether and how the EU is contested in Romania, and just a limited number of these studies are dedicated specifically to political elites. Nevertheless, they remain useful for better understanding the context of our interview data.

The first rejection of Romania's application for accession to Schengen, in 2011, is discussed in the literature as one of the first moments when we can observe a Europeanization of the national public sphere –that is, when an EU-related topic becomes a central focus in national

media and a nationwide debate evolves around it, with polarized perspectives (Dobrescu & Bârgăoanu, 2011). A conclusion of that first moment was that 'Romanian elites chose to normalize Europe and to narrate EU in a banal way' (Radu & Bârgăoanu, 2015, p. 174). Moreover, it is interesting to see that elites' role is taken seriously in terms of impact on the public sphere: it was argued that Romanian elites played a key role in the 'nationalization' of European topics in the media, 'by engaging in a blame-avoidance game, by tacitly agreeing not to bring Europe forward on the public agenda' (Radu & Bârgăoanu, 2015, p. 163; see also Troncotă & Loy, 2018).

This first wave of disappointment connected to Romania's failed Schengen bid did not in fact affect citizens' trust in the EU in visible ways. A trend visible in the Eurobarometer data in Romania, as in other member states, is that levels of so-called 'Euro-enthusiasm' (or high trust in EU institutions) has been constantly decreasing since the country entered the EU in 2007. However, even with this visible decrease, Romanian citizens have continued to trust the EU more than EU average citizens do (with trust levels at 10–15 per cent above the EU28 average) (Troncotă & Loy, 2018). Scholars discuss these very high levels of trust in the EU as a sort of 'transfer of trust' in connection with very low trust in national institutions: the source of the Romanians' Euro-enthusiasm has national, rather than EU-related drivers (see more in Bankov & Ghergina, 2020). One of the most comprehensive studies on Romanian political elites' key narratives on Europeanization (Radu & Bârgăoanu, 2015) focuses on the 2014 European elections. This was the second round of European elections in which Romanian citizens had participated since the country's accession. One of the study's main conclusions is that 'Romanian elites – be them political, administrative, or media-related – declare themselves as euro-enthusiasts or euro-realists; at the same time, through a diversity of blame-avoiding games, they use the EU as a means of diffusing (national) responsibility for crisis-related hot topics, such as the implementation of austerity measures' (Radu & Bârgăoanu, 2015, p. 174). This is an element worth researching in the context of the current recent EU crises and events that have marked Romania–EU relations, to see if this trend is still present among Romanian political elites.

Another important study on the same topic based on Trenz's (2014) model of Europeanization narratives points to the fact that elite discourse in Romania between 2011 and 2015 underwent a gradual

transition from 'triumphant' to 'banal Europeanization' (Durach, 2016). This makes the case of Romania intriguing in terms of studying perceptions of elites, because support for the EU has consistently been high in Romania in the last decades. At the time of Romania's accession to the EU in 2007, there was broad societal consensus about the benefits of EU membership for the country. Despite the exceptionality of the CVM mechanism and the 'laggard' label, political elites consistently remained strong Europhiles and there were insignificant signs of Euroscepticism among the Romanian political class (Radu & Bârgăoanu, 2015; Durach, 2016). In the classification of Krouwel and Abts (2007), Romanian elites could be placed in the first category – that of Euro-confidence (see Table 3.2) – and this situation has persisted for almost a decade.

Since the 2011 Schengen rejection, there have been only rare moments when Romanian political representatives in executive positions (government or presidency) have outspokenly criticized or opposed the EU. Such situations most notably occurred in 2012, between 2017 and 2019, and, most recently, after the latest veto against Romania's accession to the Schengen zone in December 2022, when criticism of a member state's veto (Austria) morphed into criticism of the EU itself. As shown in previous studies, the Future of Europe debates between 2017 and 2019 showed a lack of consensus among the political elites on important questions about the EU's direction (Butnaru Troncotă & Ioniță, 2021). CEE countries were characterized by increasing challenges to the quality of democracy and by more critical voices against the European project. We have argued previously that Romania also had its anti-EU moment, when government figures clashed with EU representatives during the massive anti-corruption street protests between 2017 and 2019 – this being the only instance when Romania became closer to the group of EU 'Eastern discontents' particularly in the context of the Future of Europe debates and proposals for EU sanctions against backsliding member states (Butnaru Troncotă & Ioniță, 2022). In this tense context, other authors, such as Ciobanu et al. (2019), report that the proposal for the so-called 'Rule of law budget conditionality' had 'further widened the East–West divide in the EU family' (Ciobanu et al., 2019, p. 2; see also Volintiru et al., 2021, p. 100). Moreover, Martin-Russu (2022) draws attention to the problem of the reversal of anti-corruption reforms as providing sufficient evidence of a post-accession 'de-Europeanization' trajectory in the case of Romania. Making an in-depth assessment of Romania's

reform inconsistencies caused by self-serving behaviour on behalf of the political elites, Martin-Russu (2022) concludes that broader and stronger compliance-inducing mechanisms and the extended conditionality for Romania did not serve EU's initial intentions and was used by political elites to protect their own private interests.

There are signs that the lasting Euro-enthusiasm shared by Romanian elites and public opinion is decreasing. Looking at the most recent Eurobarometer data (European Parliament, 2023), we see that in 2014, 68 per cent of Romanians considered EU membership a good thing, a significant 14 per cent more compared with the EU average of 54 per cent at the same time. The same report shows that between 2015 and 2022, there was a significant drop in Romanians' trust in the EU (see Figure 3.1). By 2020, Romania was still within the European average, but a reverse phenomenon took place over the subsequent three years whereby we can observe a fall in trust in the EU in Romania, while trust was rising on average in other EU countries. Despite this recent shift in citizens' trust in the EU, growing Euroscepticism, a phenomenon visible in numerous other EU member states, including in CEE countries – was not present in Romania until 2019. Researchers have pointed to more frequent markers of Euroscepticism present in Romanian public debates over the last years (Şcheul, 2020; Mişcoiu,
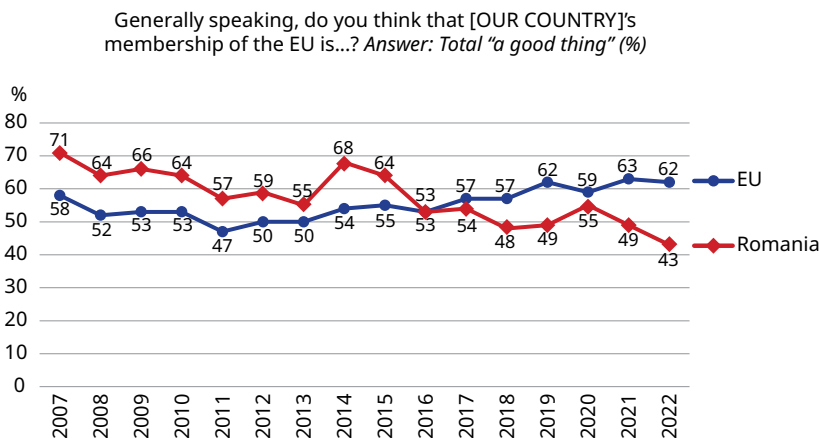

Generally speaking, do you think that [OUR COUNTRY]'s membership of the EU is…? *Answer: Total "a good thing" (%)*

Figure 3.1: Differences of opinion on EU membership between Romania and the EU average.
Data source: Eurobarometer Data Service.

2021; Toma & Damian, 2021). In this context, George Simion, leader of the far-right AUR, began to discuss more widely the hypothesis of 'Roexit' – the idea that Romania should exit the EU (Simion, 2023). In this context, we decided to focus on a more in-depth analysis of the disappointment around the Schengen topic in Romania not merely as a source of EU contestation or Euroscepticism in itself but as 'an indication of a growing political salience of EU affairs in the public sphere' (Bouza, 2013). The overall critical conceptualization of the EU's inner periphery will be discussed in this context, especially in relation to the fact that Croatia (which became a member more recently, in 2013) has joined the Schengen area while Romania and Bulgaria have not – a situation which may explain a 'centre–periphery' reading of European dynamics by Romanian political elites.

'Romania as the EU's Periphery' Narratives in Recent Public Debates

Ilie Şerbănescu's book *Romania: A colony at Europe's periphery* (2016) is relevant for the increasingly salient debate on the country's role and position in the EU. The author, an economist and former minister, intervened in a context of disappointment over how Romania changed after EU accession. Moreover, this argument has often been used in recent years in populist and Eurosceptic arguments to induce the idea that the West (and the EU) have treated Romania as a periphery in the past and will continue to do so in the future (in association with nationalist arguments of victimization). The feeling of frustration associated with this argument has been used by both right-wing and left-wing intellectuals, as we will illustrate further. Leonard Orbán, presidential EU affairs advisor and former EU Commissioner, has argued in the context of the Future of Europe debates that Romania opposes the idea of a two-speed Europe because it would position Romania as a 'less developed periphery' (Orbán, 2017); another former EU Commissioner and the current president of Renew Europe, Dacian Cioloş, presented a similar argument in a radio interview, mentioning that Romania suffers from a 'periphery complex' and that it needs to get rid of this by opposing a two-speed Europe scenario (Cioloş, 2017); and diplomat Andrei Ţărnea has argued in an opinionated essay that Romania needs to 'escape from the periphery' (Ţărnea, 2017) – a very similar argument to that presented by other liberal thinkers and analysts from

Romania or abroad (Popescu, 2013; Balasz, 2013). The narrative was relaunched in the public sphere in the context of the failed Schengen bid in 2022, when several intellectuals wrote essays associating this event with a confirmation that Romania lies in the EU's periphery (Comănescu, 2022) and that the idea that it can escape the periphery is an illusion (Codiță, 2022).

This type of over-simplifying argument that the EU treats Romania as a 'colony' was debunked by the European External Action Service fact-checking platform EUvsDisinfo in 2018 as a strategy of disinformation, in the context of the massive anti-corruption street protests at the time (EEAS, 2008). This narrative had been taken up by the leaders of the Socialist Democratic Party, who criticized the European Commission for abusively intervening in Romania's domestic affairs. The same type of argument was again branded disinformation by a Romanian fact-checking platform in 2022 in the context of the criticism around the failed attempt to join the Schengen area, when the EU was seen 'as an imperial power that treats Romania as its colony' (Veridica, 2022).

This narrative was also explicitly used in public statements by a Romanian MEP, Eugen Tomac (EPP, the People's Movement Party, PMP), who decided to open an action against the Council of the European Union, at the Court of Justice of the European Union, in relation to the failure of Romania's bid to become a member of the Schengen area at the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 8 December 2022. Tomac explicitly made an association between this political decision and the idea of the EU periphery: 'we cannot accept for a single state to defy the Treaties of the European Union and the Schengen legislation and blocks, at the periphery of the European Union, a nation of over 20 million European citizens' (Agerpres, 2022). As we can see, the argument that Romania is in EU's inner periphery was presented not only in academic discourse connected to the metaphor of 'EU accession laggards' but also in national intellectual discourse and public debates in connection with moments of tension in Romania–EU relations. Being in the EU periphery was presented in these intellectual narratives as a negative condition that the country needs to overcome, either by its own will and decisions or by convincing others not to 'keep us' in the periphery, as was the context of the Schengen veto from 2022. We believe these elements of overall intellectual context are important in setting the scene before we discuss the findings of our research interviews.

The Ambivalent 'Eurosceptics': The Mixed Perspectives of Romanian Political Elites after the Second Schengen Rejection

The period 2020–2022 represented a critical point of conjunction for the EU and for many individual member states, including Romania. We began our discussions with politicians by commenting on this eventful period, marked by profound crises that affected Romania–EU relations in ambivalent ways: starting with the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly its devastating economic consequences but also the gestures of intra-EU solidarity in terms of both economic support for recovery and fast access to vaccines; and the beginning of Russia's war in Ukraine, where Romania took a leading role together with Poland in the first months of the war by taking in Ukrainian refugees. The Romanian political elites, to the extent that the interviews provided insight into the meaning of the EU, seem to be 'ambivalent Europhiles'. There are several attitudes that the interviews highlight. The most poignant characteristic is the ambiguous attitude of the Romanian politicians themselves, some of them directly involved either in accession procedures or in current European politics. To a large degree, the EU was not contested directly and the possibility of leaving the EU was not even a matter of theoretical debate. The advantages of being part of the EU, especially in economic terms, are, as many respondents argued, difficult to deny. We identified in three interviewees' responses the 'pragmatic' perspective that associates the EU with cost–benefit calculations, and this became a source of 'pragmatic Euroscepticism' in light of Austria's veto in December 2022, interpreted not only in terms of unfairness but also in terms of the very high costs that Romania had to endure for not being admitted to the Schengen area.

This ambiguity was not lost on the respondents, who resorted to power politics, national interest, or geopolitical explanations of the situation. The same explanations were also the hallmark of projections about Romania's expected future development. The ambiguity is also illustrated by a rather common view among respondents: while the European project was not directly criticized, Romania was seen as punching below its weight, a rather subservient and not proactive member of the EU, incapable of living up to its own expectations. The periphery thus becomes more a political than a geographical one.

The peculiar position of Romanian elites on the nature and dynamics of European integration is, to a significant extent, a reflection of

its peculiar status within the EU: while a full-fledged member of the organization, Romania was until recently subjected to the impact of the CVM (European Commission, 2006) as well as being a candidate state for accession to the Schengen area and under the obligation imposed by the accession treaty to eventually adopt the euro (Official Journal of the European Union, 2005).

In the case of our study, several responses are relevant in demonstrating the paradoxical assumptions of the respondents. IN7, for example, argued that these conditions were discriminatory in relation to Romania, seen as 'almost a full member of the EU'. IN1 argued that 'for us, geography was an advantage and a disadvantage', remembering being taught in school that Romanians are 'a drop of Latinity in a Slavic Sea', whereas IN6 called the country an 'oasis of Latinism and peace'. The discrete geopolitical connotations remain therefore a part of political discourse – it is highly relevant that in this geopolitical framework, Balkan identity also features prominently: IN7, for example, sees Romania's post-accession failures as an expression of the incompatibility between the Balkan 'customs and influence' and the 'Western-type value system'.

Combating corruption therefore became not only an effort to devise policies and procedures meant to tackle the phenomenon. The elections of the 21st century, especially were dominated to a large extent by this issue, which became integral to the electoral divide between right-wing and left-wing political actors: the opponents of the SDP (Social Democratic Party), the main left-wing party, tried to portray it as the direct inheritor not only of the Romanian communist party but also of its corrupt practices and therefore inadequate to lead the fight against corruption. The fight against corruption became not only a matter of public policy but, symbolically, the expression of a self-performed ritual cleansing meant to ensure, in the end, full accession to the Western world, by joining NATO and the EU. The catchy title of a pop song captures the meaning of the process: 'We want a country like abroad'; IN5 argued, for example, that the Romanians of the 1980s were 'savages'. On the other hand, the opponents of several figures and measures associated with corruption-combating efforts, which remains on the public agenda and which resulted in the sentencing of several prominent politicians, argued that the heavy-handed effort, as well as the direct involvement in this process of the secret services, served only political interests and was directed against the most prominent voices of the

opposition. Consequently, the elimination of the CVM was not a matter of policy pertaining to accession, meant to be devised by political debate and compromise and enacted by a civil service. Combating corruption became a litmus test and an electoral slogan: successive presidential elections (2004, 2009, 2014, 2019) were won by the candidate expressing a strong anti-corruption message.

The other parties prominent on the Romanian political scene are the NLP (National Liberal Party), the SRU (Save Romania Union), the AUR, and the DAHR (the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania). The NLP has historically embraced a centre-right position, with increasingly prominent conservative accents, building its identity on the 19th- and early 20th-century importance of the party in Romanian history, trying to portray itself as a pro-market centre-right alternative to the SDP. The SRU originates within the NGO (non-governmental organization) environment and was intended to be a grassroots citizen initiative, replacing the dominant parties tainted by corruption. It has a strong anti-corruption and pro-EU message. The AUR represents, in a sense, the extreme of the political scene, embracing a populist, nationalist, and Eurosceptic discourse. It is the latest of a series of catch-all parties trying to operate on the fringes of the Romanian political scene. The DAHR, on the other hand, a centre-right party, carries less electoral weight but is an indispensable partner in coalition-forming in the fragmented and extremely competitive Romanian landscape (no prime minister has managed to serve two full terms in post-communist Romania).

The benefits of joining the EU in economic terms were clearly highlighted by the respondents. IN3, for example, believed that joining the EU had largely solved the problem of Romania's sluggish economic growth, as the level of income per capita has increased from 34 per cent to 75 per cent of the EU average. IN1 argued that the benefits are tangible – GDP has increased fourfold or fivefold, and Romanian citizens have benefited from the freedom of movement offered by the EU. IN1 concluded that the benefits of joining the EU are not a matter of perception. IN7 similarly argued that a cost–benefit analysis would reveal that Romania has gained because of joining the EU, an opinion shared by IN2.

There was also a perception that the Schengen accession, as well as the lifting of the CVM, was politicized by Western European states. Blocking Romania's accession to the Schengen area on account of the

migration problem or because of entrenched corrupt practices was seen as simply pandering to domestic audiences (IN7) or even as a Russian power play within the EU (IN8). The Romanian politicization of the issue was also present – with the inability to join the Schengen area or overcome the CVM seen as an expression of the low degree of professionalism resulting from cronyism and corruption (IN4), or of the lack of reform within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IN6).

It is also relevant to underline the tendency we observed in certain interviewers' answers to connect the contestation of EU decisions (as a generic form of Euroscepticism) with a healthy and constructive behaviour that 'would make our country's voice heard in the EU' (IN3). This in fact coincides with Krouwel and Abts' (2007) arguments that Euroscepticism is not necessarily a negative trait of the European public sphere but rather is a constructive element meant to keep citizens and elites engaged and connected to current topics on the EU's agenda. From this perspective, we observed that some respondents were not worried by the rise of Euroscepticism in Romania but would rather see it as a positive sign, implying that Romanian representatives being more 'demanding' in Brussels (as IN6 put it) is proof of the country assuming its position as a 'full EU member state'. Related to this, some interviewees underlined the fact that after 16 years of membership, Romania should use its veto power to block certain EU decisions in the Council and that being more critical of the EU would mean that 'we know how to defend our interests and to act as "mature" member states, not as EU puppets' (IN8). In this context, it is important to note that several respondents believe that Romania has failed to live up to its potential as a member of the EU. The puzzling fact is that this opinion seemed to be shared across the ideological or political divides in Romania. The explanations offered were varied but tended to concur with the idea that Romania has no clear strategy within the EU and fails to achieve the expected results. IN5, for example, argued that Romania's position in the EU was a 'timid one'. Another opinion was that Romania has missed out on opportunities because it has failed to understand that the EU members are in a competition for resources and to manage the evolution in the Berlin–Paris dynamic (IN7). On the other hand, at the Eurosceptic end of the spectrum, Romanian Euroscepticism was seen simply as an expression of Romania's inability to play a more assertive role, defending its interests, within the larger scheme of European politics (IN8), a point of view shared by

IN1 (again, this opinion seemed to be shared across different ideological positions, from centre-right to left-wing political actors). Some were very categoric in their assessment: IN2 argued that Romania's foreign policy since accession has lacked consistence and coherence; IN3 emphasized that the conditions imposed on Romania can be seen as a result of a lack in diplomatic and negotiating skills, whereas the difficulty in overcoming the CVM and joining the Schengen area can be seen as the result of a 'poorly administered state' (IN5). IN6 was of the opinion that the negotiators lacked 'uprightness'.

In connection with the war in Ukraine and how it has influenced Romania's position in the EU, it is difficult to ignore the geopolitical interpretation, with some respondents highlighting that the proximity of Russia and the willingness of several EU members to cooperate with the Kremlin only enhances Romania's sense of vulnerability (IN7).

Next, the analysis will try to place the views expressed throughout the interviews into the categories of Euroscepticism discussed earlier. It is difficult to argue, for the most part, that the respondents fully embrace a coherent strain of Euroscepticism. Nevertheless, the variety in the discourse of the same politician and of the same party is relevant to identifying some of the dominant strains in the political discourse of the Romanian political elites, a discourse which is intersubjectively connected to the wider social trends.

IN1's opinions included which fit within the instrumental Euroscepticism category: 'I believe that in life the world treats you as you sell yourself. If you know how to sell yourself at your true value, the world will treat you the same.' Their perception of double standards sometimes veered towards Euroscepticism, as in Kopecký and Mudde's definition: 'Romanians feel like second-rate citizens. And then any such gesture somehow reinforces their perception that they are second-class citizens, that they do not have the same rights, that they are not treated the same, and that's it, it's normal to rebel and take a stand.' IN1 also concluded that the financial benefits of membership are paramount, fitting within Krouwel and Abts' Eurosceptic category: 'first and foremost it is about the economic dividends, the European money that entered Romania'.

On the other hand, IN2 highlighted the negative trade-off that integration has brought – characteristic of instrumental Euroscepticism ('In my opinion, I don't think that our country had very big advantages after joining the European Union; this does not mean that I am against

it, but I am simply making an analysis as objectively as possible') and veering sometimes towards Euro-distrust ('The only plus that I could still bring up is the fact that, indeed, the Roma people, as citizens of this country, were somehow allowed to enter the European Union') or even Euro-cynicism ('How come Hungary and Poland know how to pursue their national interest in the relationship with the European Union while Romania is practically non-existent?'). Other responses also highlighted an attitude of Euro-rejection: 'I feel as if I belong to a country on the African continent, where I am practically under Dutch rule or a colony of France, where all kinds of minerals are extracted, all kinds of resources are exploited.'

IN3 highlighted the economic benefits of belonging to the EU, in a manner consistent with instrumental Euroscepticism: 'As far as Romania is concerned, the European Union was considered a miraculous formula for solving the problems related to falling behind in the last decades. From a certain point of view, mainly economic, this expectation, objectively speaking, is fulfilled.' They nonetheless concluded, in a Eurosceptic manner, that 'Romania and Bulgaria remained as a kind of buffer between an extended West with the Visegrad Group and the Soviet Union, respectively Russia later'. In relation to the third taxonomy, IN3's answers fell within the Eurosceptic category: he concluded, in a manner highlighting the relevance of liminality as an interpretive concept, that 'we still have the mentality of a country that wants to join the European Union, not of a member state of the European Union'.

There were instances where some form of Euroscepticism as highlighted by Kopecký and Mudde or by Krouwel and Abts coexisted with the most Euro-enthusiastic views: 'Unfortunately, according to the perception conveyed to me by representatives from many states, Romania tries not to have any kind of positioning, opting for the role of follower, that is, we are not dissonant, but initiatives are almost completely absent' (IN4). Even under these conditions, there is still room for Romania to act in a more transactional matter: 'Romania was in the big chorus, the correct position, but we did not monetize in a diplomatic sense this opportunity of geographical positioning that would have allowed us to have the role of the member states, of the Baltic states which are much more present in the subject.' IN5 shared the Euro-enthusiastic perspective of IN4: 'The biggest achievement of Romania in these 32 years of democracy is the accession to the European Union' – a point of view also shared by IN10: 'whoever speaks

ill of the EU does not do so based on evidence'. The evidence IN10 pointed to, however, consists largely of increasing economic indicators. IN5 also shared the views of IN4 regarding playing a more prominent role in the EU: 'I think we had a timid approach, let's not disturb, let's not upset. We had no strategy and no vision.'

Sometimes, Euroscepticism (as defined by the first and third taxonomies) accompanied Euro-enthusiasm and this was the major source of ambivalence that we observed in almost all interviews. IN6, for example, complained that 'this perverse game that Austria has played now, I don't know if on its own or in combination with someone else, has endangered European cohesion'. The implicit hint is that Austria's decision to vote against Romania's access to the Schengen area is a favour to Russian discourse in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. The development of the EU was nevertheless not a cause of excitement: 'Beyond Austria's arguments, there is already a reluctance regarding what was happening in Brussels because of these acute bureaucratization [sic] that the EU is registering.' IN6 pushed the transactional view to its logical extreme: 'beyond sitting with our hand outstretched to the EU, we must wait to play on an equal footing, because sitting at the boot of the Russian or at the hand of Brussels is not a correct attitude'.

IN7 also made clear a Eurosceptic perspective and instrumental Euroscepticism: 'Because the European Union … should have taught us two very clear things: the benefits are obvious and overall, the cost–benefit ratio we reached is an obvious plus; on the other hand, we should have been a bit more realistic, should have understood that the power games and the competition for development resources, also represent things that we weren't used to or that we wouldn't have thought of'. Ambivalence regarding the EU was made quite clear by IN7: 'the European Union is an elite club, but unfortunately, as we discovered, it is not necessarily a club of angels'. IN8 also highlighted that a more assertive perspective is needed: 'I think we've got used to this reactive way of ours, nothing proactive. Yes, reactive, if you look in general at the way in which we express ourselves, in general, on foreign policy, on discussions about the European Union … Romania also supported this, Romania also did this, Romania also supports what I support.'

IN9 articulated perhaps the solitary arguments of Euro-rejection and political Euroscepticism: 'There is a catastrophic Europe, there is a Europe of lights, and there is a Europe of material civilization that we see.' He added, in a Euro-cynical manner, that the future needs

'a Europe of nations, not of populations', concluding that 'the United Nations of Europe, this is how we will disappear. By will and conscience.'

Looking at Tables 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5, where we have positioned all interviewees in relation to the main three taxonomies of attitudes towards the EU as defined in the theoretical section, several conclusions can be drawn. While the picture painted by the interviews is a complex one, most respondents espoused either Euro-enthusiastic or Eurosceptic points of view, as per Kopecký and Mudde's taxonomy. Additionally, the transactional view of the EU of several respondents seems to fit better within the instrumental Euroscepticism category. It is also important to highlight that even though overall, the opinions expressed during the interviews covered quite a range in Krouwel and Abts' categorization of the brands of Euroscepticism, the Romanian voices were predominantly in a range stretching from Euro-confidence to Euro-cynicism.

Table 3.3: Taxonomy 1, based on Kopecký and Mudde's (2002) 'Typology of party positions on Europe'

Euro-enthusiasts	Eurosceptics	Euro-pragmatists	Euro-rejects
Support both the idea and practice of European integration	Support the idea but oppose the practice	Oppose the idea but support the practice	Oppose both the idea and the practice
IN4, IN5, IN6, IN8	IN1, IN3, IN4, IN6, IN8, IN10	–	IN2, IN9

Source: authors' construction based on Kopecký and Mudde (2002, pp. 302–303).

Table 3.4: Taxonomy 2, based on the categorization of Krouwel and Abts (2007)

Political Euroscepticism	Instrumental Euroscepticism
A preference for national over EU prerogatives in certain, if not all, key policy areas	Cost–benefit terms, with its adepts emphasizing the negative consequences of EU membership
IN1, IN4, IN5, IN9	IN2, IN3, IN6, IN7, IN8, IN10

Source: authors' construction based on Krouwel and Abts (2007).

Table 3.5: Taxonomy 3, based on Krouwel and Abts' (2007) 'Sliding scale of European discontent'

Euro-confidence	Euro-scepticism	Euro-distrust	Euro-cynicism	Euro-alienation
IN4, IN5	IN1, IN3, IN4, IN5, IN7, IN10	IN2, IN6,	IN2, IN9	IN9

Source: authors' construction based on Krouwel and Abts (2007, p. 261).

Inasmuch as the peripheral dimension is concerned (part of the last question in all interviews), the perspectives were mixed. During the interviews all respondents had strong reactions (mostly negative) to the concept of an 'EU periphery', and almost all of them asked for a definition of the term. Then they were asked to provide their own understanding of the term, and they all associated it with negative aspects of inferiority. Even for those who were very critical of Romania's own positions and problems, the associations of the term 'periphery' seemed to be something that created discomfort. When it came to Romania's role in the EU as connected with the perspective of the 'periphery', perceptions were mixed. On the one hand, pleading for a more proactive role, IN8 argued that 'Romanians have got accustomed to being treated as peripheral members of the EU', and in some way this position was 'normalized', meaning that 'we are a periphery, so we are treated as a periphery'. IN1 conceded that Romanians 'feel as second-rate citizens', whereas IN2 believed that Romania's position in the EU was marginal before entering EU and remained thus even after joining. The same opinion was voiced by IN4, who decried the fact that while Romania joins the 'right positions' within the EU, it tends to do this more as a reflex rather than as a matter of conviction. Alternatively, Romania lacks vision (IN5) or 'is not taken seriously' and 'doesn't play any cards at the moment' (IN6). More emphatically, IN6 argued that the country seems to confront a 'handicap that makes you keep your head down, makes you servile and lacking a backbone and dignity in international negotiations'.

On the other hand, the geopolitical discourse can be turned on its head, especially when connected to Romania's role during the war in Ukraine. It is precisely because there are so many geography-related challenges in the region that Romania cannot be peripheric (IN7),

especially not at NATO's eastern flank. IN7, IN6, and IN10 were all keen to say that Romania needs to live up to its potential of becoming 'a regional hub', especially in terms of providing security in the current context. Moreover, IN4 believed that Romania's geographical position needs to be 'monetized' in more visible ways, including in the EU, not only in NATO. Almost all respondents defined the periphery as a negative place, attached to it negative connotations, and argued that Romania needs to 'escape' that position. At the same time, most of them took an ambivalent position, criticizing the fact that others treat Romania as an 'EU periphery' and considering that this is unfair, but also criticizing Romanian representatives for 'acting' like the country is a periphery and not defending its interests in the EU.

Conclusions

The first 15 years of EU membership were marked by only a few clashes and striking disagreements between EU officials and Romanian authorities. With some exceptions, there were no conclusive signs of Euroscepticism, within wider public opinion or among the political elites. However, the most recent Eurobarometer data shows that starting in 2020, the first signs of Euroscepticism are visible in a striking decline of citizens' trust in the EU. The views of the political elites matter, because they reflect the shifts of public opinion in each member state. While EU topics are often portrayed as secondary or irrelevant to Romania's domestic politics, Eurobarometer data shows a 'diffuse discontent' with EU institutions and EU membership over the last three years (Krouwel & Abts 2007), the sources of which have not been investigated in scholarly debates. In this chapter we aimed to investigate whether we are witnessing more visible forms of Euroscepticism and contestation of the EU in Romania. We argue that Romania's failed Schengen bid in December 2022, together with the disillusionment stemming from previous EU crises and the more active presence of a populist far-right party (the AUR) starting in 2020, have created a favourable symbolic space for discursive representations that enforce Romania's image as one of the EU's inner peripheries. The analysis of the interviews highlights that the political, rather than geographical, peripherality of Romania has in recent years become a political issue, and it is connected to a 'diffuse discontent' with the EU that became

much more visible in the public sphere after the rejection of Romania's second attempt to join Schengen.

In the aftermath of this second failed attempt, and one year after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Romanian elites are far from the image of enthusiastic and open supporters of the EU and of further integration. Representatives from the major four political parties highlighted that perceptions of the EU among Romania's elites are fragmented and ambivalent. The picture painted by the interviews is representative of a more nuanced view of the EU and of the integration process than was present at the onset of Romania's path towards the EU or at the onset of EU accession. Further research is needed to deeper explore the sources of this disaffection with the EU and EU integration. The analysis highlights that the change is connected with the deception manifested in relation to the failures to pass the internal hurdles of the EU, such as accession to the Schengen area or the Eurozone. Furthermore, it is just as relevant that the political views of the interviewees do not form part of a consistent body of ideas and policies regarding these issues: it is not inconsequential that representatives of the same political party or even a single respondent can sometimes embrace two conflicting ideas. Moreover, it is noteworthy that a significant proportion of the respondents, across the political spectrum, adopt a highly transactional view of the EU and EU politics, seen as a competition for funding, visibility, respect, and influence, sometimes disparaging Romania's lack of success in pursuing a bolder course of action. The specific nature of the transactional course of action that Romania should take is far from clear from the interviews. Nonetheless, several of them call for a more assertive role to be played by the country, and by the elites as well. The tone and the specifics of the interventions is also noteworthy: while calling for a more national-oriented and smarter policy within the EU, many of the respondents blame political elites or systems in a manner strikingly like the media discourse, disregarding their own position of power and influence: elite discourse thus overlaps with the regular discourse on the EU. The Romanian elites have positioned themselves as legitimate representatives of a wider social trend which reflects not only the experience of EU membership but also the benefits and the disillusion associated with it. Responding to the major questions this book seeks to answer, it can be ascertained that the peripheral status of Romania and its implications are at the same time acknowledged and

contested – in a sense, their social consequences exist, and Romanian politicians want to overcome them.

The proximity of the 2024 elections, the shifting discourse on Romania's status in the EU, and the existence of a dedicated populist actor are aspects which require further research and investigation. It remains to be seen whether these dynamics will feed a downward spiral from a healthy dose of Euroscepticism to a more diffuse feeling of discontent akin to Euro-cynicism. Future research, if the Schengen veto persists, is needed in order to see whether these 'ambivalent Eurosceptic' attitudes in Romanian politics might become more extreme forms of contestation such as the Euro-alienation Krouwel and Abts (2007) discuss, and whether a 'Roexit' scenario, marked by a principled and ideological opposition to the European integration, becomes more than a new discursive theme.

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Appendix

Table A3.1: Interviews with Members of Selected Political Parties in Romania, organized by the Authors in Person in Bucharest

Interview code	Gender	Age bracket	Political party affiliation	Political ideology	Date
IN1	F	21–40	Socialist Democratic Party (PSD in Romanian); governing party	Left wing	01.02.2023
IN2	M	41–60	PSD; governing party; former member of the European Parliament	Left wing	02.02.2023
IN3	F	21–40	Save Romania Union (USR in Romanian); opposition party; former minister	Centre right	03.02.2023
IN4	M	41–60	USR; opposition party; former minister	Centre right	07.02.2023
IN5	M	41–60	National Liberal Party (PNL in Romanian); governing party	Centre right	07.02.2023
IN6	M	41–60	The Roma Party (Partida Romilor in Romanian)	representative of ethnic minority	07.02.2023
IN7	M	41–60	Socialist Democratic Party (PSD in Romanian); governing party; former minister	Left wing	07.02.2023
IN8	M	over 61	Former member of PSD; former minister; retired	Left wing	08.02.2023
IN9	M	21–40	PNL; governing party	Centre right	13.02.2023
IN10	M	over 61	Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR in Romanian); opposition party	Right wing (with elements of far right)	01.03.2023