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Euroscepticism – a sign of a Europe in distress

Abstract

Euroscepticism is explicitly or implicitly considered a product of the crisis, a result of Europe's recent difficult moments. The secondary data analysis of official Eurobarometer results between 2009 (EB71) and the end of 2013 (the latest data available – EB80) in 17 member states, grouped around the axis North – South – East, leads us to the conclusion that Euroscepticism has amplified during the years of economic crisis following a particular pattern. We witness the rise of inequalities in a Union of equals, with significant differences in terms of public opinion in the North and in the South. The great disappointment, the gloom mood of the citizens from Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Portugal and, surprisingly, France, in contrast with the self-confident attitude of Germans and the mild enthusiasm of Eastern European countries suggest that the EU did not emerge stronger as a whole. Multiple divergences have already started to occur between the rich and the poor member states, between competitive regions and regions that lag behind, between debtors and creditors, between the North and the South and, we dare to anticipate, between the West and the East. The game is changing and Euroscepticism is now the expression of confusion and fear, more than of righteous opposition against particular issues or concerns.

Keywords: Euroscepticism; Eurobarometers; public opinion; European Union; economic crisis.

1. Introduction

Due to high interest in this topic and its frequent occurrence in recent debates, Euroscepticism is explicitly or implicitly considered a product of the crisis, a result of Europe's recent difficult moments. This stance encourages a secondary, yet very important perception: there is deep pain, an illness which needs to be treated, cured and overcome once the crisis is over. From this perspective, Euroscepticism borrows some of the traits of the pervasive approach to crisis at European level: something that shouldn't have travelled to Europe (the dominant European perception at the outbreak of the crisis), but, once installed, would be of short duration and would finally be overcome. However, since 2008, it has become increasingly evident that this is a much more complex phenomenon, 'amassing' not just the excess and mistakes in the financial and banking system, but also the results of economic trends (for instance, delocalization or excessive interest in services over manufacturing) and costly delays

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in the Union's construction. To become truly efficient, the strategies for overcoming the crisis must address all of these causes.

The case of Euroscepticism is similar. It tends to become a self-propelling issue and a source of confusion; at the core of Euroscepticism is distrust¹, but this increasingly prevalent feeling cannot be overcome unless its causes are identified and adequately treated – which is true of the crisis as well. The fast approaching elections for the European Parliament, the fear that the wave of distrust sweeping across Europe will see this new perspective installed in the Parliament, the pressure resulting from this, all amount to transforming Euroscepticism in a sort of 'enemy'. Numerous debates and position taking encourage the idea that if we managed to diminish or even eradicate Euroscepticism, then Europe would recover its lost relevance. The purpose of this article is to show that the prevailing meaning of Euroscepticism favours a sort of unilateral approach, focuses analysis and interpretations exclusively towards the activity of European bodies and thus avoids or even blocks a more complex, rewarding analysis of Europe's situation and, implicitly, Euroscepticism's roots.

Important decisions, especially decisions that carry strategic significance, have their supporters and enemies. This is how things happened in various moments of European evolution. We could not see them when the EU was first born, because at the time the pragmatic, gradual steps that were taken had nothing of the spectacular quality accompanying great breakthroughs (and this is where one of the explanations for subsequent success can be found). UK's decision to join the EU generated heated debate in this country. This is how the first form of Euroscepticism was born – a contestation of the decision. For Eurosceptics of that time, it seemed that "the EU was not only a problem, but the problem" (Usherwood, 2014). It was in the UK that a strong movement against the single currency started. To this we can add the German specialists' protest against the imprecision of financial, banking and political steps that needed to be defined prior to the introduction of the single currency. We need to mention that such positions took the form of theoretical input which is still valid. This contestation in both UK and Germany, despite considerable differences, targeted either the project itself, or strategic decisions (the introduction of the Euro). With frontal opposition, critical positions are more clearly outlined and benefit from indisputable political and technocratic substance. Now is the time to say that such an ample construction as the EU needs to be surrounded by a type of doubt, prudence, and active critical thinking. This is a condition for the solidity of the construction, maintenance of real functionality, prevention of bureaucratic phenomena – easily installed in such constructions – and preservation of initial vitality. In other words, we can talk about a positive dimension of Euroscepticism, as long as it is maintained within certain limits and identifies and debates real problems of the European construction.

2. Eurosceptic Attitudes Shape Today's Union

European scepticism nowadays expresses dissatisfaction, disappointment or even distrust in what the future has in store. In this case, it is not the Union which is the problem, but its functioning. Not the euro, but the problems it generates and the partial, delayed solutions from bodies responsible for this aspect. This is a functional Euroscepticism, correlated both with the European construction, and with performance and expectations. Current Euroscepticism embodies disappointment with the way the Union responded to crisis. Crisis is, indeed, the corollary of a dysfunctional Union. This is where we can identify one of

Euroscepticism's main vulnerabilities: it correlates distrust with the functioning of European structures, and ignores other possible sources, such as the continent's problems or questionable decisions of various member states. A more detailed analysis could reveal the fact that Europe suffers from serious problems which would have come out irrespective of the crisis or the Union.

Let us take a look, for instance, at the continent's demographic evolution, probably Europe's most serious problem. Dominique Moïsi's recent position focuses on this problem in manifesto-like terms: "Europeans, open your eyes. You will make up no more than 6 per cent of the population of the world by 2050, when back at the start of the 18th century you represented 20 per cent of it. Taken all together, you are very small; taken as individual nations, you are tiny. Even Germany, the new economic and demographic giant of the union, has only 1 per cent of the world's population today, and tomorrow it will have even less. At the same time, the African continent has grown in population from 180 million in 1950 to more than 1 billion today, and probably to more than 2 billion within 35 years. Of course, demography is not everything: the influence of Singapore is not measured by the size of its population. But population is an important factor" (Moïsi, 2013).

Indeed, this is a very important factor in the development equation. The number of people, their quality, qualifications and discipline are essential factors in the development of any society, and this is especially true for knowledge society. The problem is that at European level not only has the percentage it represents in world population decreased dramatically, but also the birth rate decrease has triggered a long-lasting aging tendency. Within this already drastically shrinking population we can identify a growing segment of elderly people who consume, rather than add to the wealth. Europe's demographic situation will not improve soon. In the words of Guy Verhofstadt, in 2050 one in five inhabitants will be over 65 and one in 10, over 80 (Verhofstadt, 2012, pp. 194-195). Europe's demographic problems would be much worse if it weren't for the vigorous international migration towards Europe.

There is another very important aspect that deserves attention. *The Economist* (June 2013, p. 7) gives us significant information about Angela Merkel's vision on Europe. In all important meetings about the future of the continent, the Germany's chancellor carries an A4 sheet of paper with three numbers on it: 7%, 25% and 50%. Mrs Merkel never tires of saying that Europe has 7% of the world's population, 25% of its GDP and 50% of its social spending. She proceeds in much the same way that the late Margaret Thatcher used to pull passages from Friedman Hayek's "Road to Serfdom" from her handbag.

In the meantime, the figures have changed. Europe no longer has 7% of the world population, or 25% of its GDP. Yet it is the other relationship that is more surprising: 7% of the world population account for 50% of the world's social spending. This cannot go on. We live in an increasingly competitive international context. Under the circumstances, labour force costs become an essential indicator. The Economist was right to underline that if the region is to prosper in competition with the emerging countries, it cannot continue to be so generous (*The Economist*, June 2013, p. 7).

Dominique Reynie points to another possible perspective on the Union's critical situation. "La première décennie du nouveau siècle voit l'Europe accablée de critiques par ceux qui sont chargés de la conduire... Mais les nations européennes vont-elles mieux que l'Europe? Les États membres se portent mieux que l'Union? Faut-il rappeler que les pays du Vieux Continent sont confrontés aux plus grandes difficultés rencontrées depuis la Seconde Guerre mondiale?"²² (Reynie, 2013, p. 13). In short, if the European bodies were the true (or

the only) cause of Europe's problems, how could we account for the fact that various other nations, ruled by national governments, have faced the same difficulties? If the position of European bodies and the measures they have adopted represent the cause of Europe's difficult moments, how can we explain that results vary widely at national level? That the North has a different development strategy, mainly focused on maintaining manufacturing, while the south relies heavily on services? The North-South divide has at least two roots: the strategies embraced by national governments, correlated with the absence of a unitary strategy or a realistic coordination of EU economic evolution. Such correlations are probably not very evident for the public opinion at large, but the average citizen can see the result clearly: living standards are lower and the Union does not inspire optimism.

It is true that the crisis has caught the Union at a very delicate moment, when the European construction has no clear direction. The Union's low performance during the crisis stems from zigzagging towards either federal or national evolution. This century's first decade saw a growing interest in the federal Union. The crisis encouraged the opposite direction. The efforts to overcome the crisis took place mainly at national level. Is this the perverse effect of the crisis? We think we can equally speak about a perverse analysis, where the crisis is used to explain everything. Precipitated and developed by the crisis, such evolutions would have taken place nonetheless. The proof is in the fact that a gap in the member states' development levels appeared before last years' economic earthquake, when the south opted for services and the north, especially Germany, for maintaining and developing manufacturing. Another decisive moment was when several northern countries, Germany included, decreased labour force costs through national programs, which led to the increase in manufacturing competitiveness. The most evident example is that in the 90s France had lower labour force costs than Germany, while in this century's first decade, the situation was reversed.

The member states' competitiveness gap took the form of commercial deficit. Nowadays, the EU's main fracture is between the North and the South, the contributors and the debtors. Another gap, between Europe's Western and Eastern countries, is increasingly visible. Announced in various articles, this West-East divide will surely represent one of the major problems in Europe in future years. Competitiveness gaps, along with their necessary by-product, the increase in commercial deficits among EU member states, will cause an upheaval, undermine trust in the EU and feed the return to an overvalued national perspective at the expense of the European outlook.

In any case, we can speak about citizens' trust and distrust in European institutions, mediated by national performance. People look towards Bruxelles through a national lens. When a country's economic situation is problematic, citizens' perception on European bodies will be less forgiving. Citizens in prosperous countries which were less affected by the crisis will be more optimistic about the future of the European construction. In this case, Euroscepticism is associated with the 'injustice' of the Union's decision to transfer some of the results owed to the North's 'ants' towards the South's 'crickets'.

Being a halfway house, the EU could not have the reaction capabilities requested by the crisis. Because the European way did not work properly, the pressure of the crisis continued (continued, not inaugurated), even sanctioned the national way, which became the Union's main track. If we wanted to draw a 'map' of crisis impact on the EU, this map would mainly be correlated with national governments efforts and strategies, and not decisions of European institutions. These decisions came late, only to extinguish 'fires'. Practically, there was

a shift from European to national level during the crisis. The European bodies approve, rather than take decisions. The European Council has become a sort of ‘union of national interests’.

From the numerous examples we could give, let us select just one. Last summer, during the parliamentary elections in Germany, a moment of intense debate on Germany’s role in Europe, Wolfgang Schäuble, Germany’s Finance Minister, published an article called ‘We Germans Don’t Want a German Europe’ (Schäuble, 2013). The subheading is equally meaningful: “Germany has no taste for shaping others in its image – but we want a European Union that can compete”. The article’s main idea is the following: “The idea that Germans want to play a special role in Europe is a misunderstanding. We do not want a German Europe. We are not asking others to be like us... We want to put Germany at the service of the European community’s economic recovery – without weakening Germany itself. That would not be in anybody’s interests” (Schäuble, 2013).

Indeed, no one wishes to weaken Germany. The problem here is that Germany’s interest is transformed into a Supreme Court ruling on European problems. A German court (the Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe, for instance) cannot rule on the opportunity of a bailout. In reality, it does. It is right to rule on the constitutionality of German financial contribution to that bailout. Because the German contribution is important, the German Constitutional Court’s decision on the bailout is decisive. Can you notice the paradox? Germany does not want to rule Europe, but it does, in fact. And the weakened Europe wishes, even asks Germany to be active (in other words, to rule). The same thing is signaled by Beck and Cronin: “Its extraordinary potential does not stem from the logic of war but... from the threat of economic collapse. The strategy of refusal not doing something, not investing, not making credit and money available – this multipurpose “no” is the central lever of German power in the Europe of financial risk. The key to power today is a country’s standing on the world market and no longer necessarily military strength. Its tempting offer is: better a German euro than no euro” (Beck & Cronin, 2012, p. 650).

In our opinion, the silent shift of decision-making from European to national level is not the most serious problem, although this is also a shift in the development pattern. The worse thing is that this move is not acknowledged. The longer Europe’s difficulties last, the more confusion grows. Who is the real decision-maker? The European or the national bodies? More importantly, who carries the responsibility for the consequences? This is Europe’s key issue nowadays. Euroskeptics look towards European institutions. Some of their arguments hold (bureaucracy, lack of transparency, distancing from citizens and so on). The question is: does Bruxelles carry the responsibility, if strategic decisions are not taken at this level?

The great problem is that the Union does not have a clear evolution. And against this background a fright of important, strategic decisions is all the more evident. If Euroskepticism can be associated with anything, we can say that it expresses an already rooted dissatisfaction towards this paralysis of strategic decision, which no longer creates realistic expectations and severs the real resources for optimism. Slowly, Europe becomes synonymous to indecision and procrastination. For years there have been discussions in Europe about the necessity to design a common strategy in the field of energy. No definite steps have been taken in this respect. There are national, not European solutions to the energy problem. The only significant world power nowadays without a strategy in the vital field of energy is Europe. The pay-check has not been late in arriving. The Ukrainian crisis has started, highlighting a visible truth: the Union’s official positions are undoubtedly influenced by its vulnerability in

the field of energy, its dependence on the Russian resources. Here are the political costs of delay and procrastination.

Things are similar with the establishment of a true banking Union, which would mean similar loan costs. At present, the cost is variable, depending on the area's degree of risk. To give an example, Madrid works with more expensive money. Consequently, its chances to close the competitiveness gap with Berlin are drastically lowered. As long as there are visible gaps in competitiveness, Europe's fractures will be maintained, if not deepened. And this runs counter to the initial solidarity model of the Union.

It comes as a surprise to us that an elementary thing is overlooked: the rise of the European power postwar is directly connected to the promoted development model; today, the problems in the model, the absence of a clear development track, directly influence the prestige and the significance of this power. There is a visible slow-down of Europe, compared to other world powers. This is not just a relative decrease in the weight of European economy in world economy, but a reevaluation of Europe's importance by its traditional partners. In this respect, we find the dialogue between George Soros and Gregor Peter Schmitz, published in a recent article (Soros & Schmitz, 2014, p. 122), to be quite significant:

Schmitz: *Do you think that the Obama administration is right in pivoting from Europe to Asia?*

Soros: *Well, Europe is just now entering a long period of stagnation that Japan is determined to break out of.*

Schmitz: *So you are basically saying that it is something that the Europeans have to come to terms with, that they are not as important to the Americans as they were in the past?*

Soros: *That is the reality.*

In this context, the analysis of the public opinion towards the European Union represents not only a viable indicator of the rise of Euroscepticism, but also a proof of rising inequalities between member states. The results presented below are disturbing because they underline serious lines of fracture.

3. Research Objectives and Methodology

The study that we have conducted consists of a secondary data analysis of official Eurobarometer results. Our analysis is both cross-country and multi-annual. We find this approach very useful for the investigation of Euroscepticism as a mass phenomenon, because it allows us to accurately identify trends over time and to make comparisons between states and/or groups of states.

The selected timeframe is between 2009 (EB71) and the end of 2013 (the latest data available – EB80). These five years have been a genuine turmoil for the European Union, marked by prolonged economic and financial crisis, the Euro crisis, social unrest, multiple bailouts and an overall gloom mood of the European citizens. The data collected will lead us to the conclusion that Euroscepticism has amplified during the years of raging economic crisis following a particular pattern.

The main objective of our research is to define the particularities of recent Euroscepticism in old vs. newer member states, with an emphasis on the duo between Northern and Southern member states. Other distinctions can be made between Eurozone members and non-

members and between debtors and creditors inside the European Union. We expect the following assertions to be true:

1. We expect a rise in Eurosceptic feelings across Europe, but also an increase in optimism for the future, at least in the more prosperous member states.
2. We expect North-Western member states to show disappointment with the direction the EU is going; also, negative feelings should be strikingly higher in debtor countries that form the financial periphery of the Union.
3. Overall, trust in the EU (and other indirect indicators of Euroscepticism) ought to have hit a record-low levels in the last five years, but with a tendency to stabilize in 2013. Nevertheless, in what economic aspects and the future of the EU are concerned, we believe the public is more optimistic in the present than in the previous years.
4. Finally, we anticipate significant differences between Northern and Southern countries, as a manifestation of obvious economical and social inequalities.

In order to investigate these suppositions, we selected a group of 17 member states, grouped around the axis North – South – East, respectively: United Kingdom (UK), France (FR), Germany (DE), Italy (IT), Portugal (PT), Greece (EL), Spain (ES), Republic of Cyprus (CY), Ireland (IE), Hungary (HU), Czech Republic (CZ), Slovenia (SI), Slovakia (SK), Croatia (HR), Romania (RO), Bulgaria (BG), Poland (PL).

From a chronological point of view, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, United Kingdom, Greece, Spain, Portugal (with accession dates ranging from 1951 to 1995) are largely referred to as “old” member states (with accession dates ranging from 1951 to 1995), while Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary, Cyprus, Czech Republic (part of the 2004 accession wave), Romania, Bulgaria (members from 2007) and Croatia (the new comer in 2013) are the “new” members of the EU.

Our study focuses on eight particular issues, each relevant for investigating Euroscepticism: trust in the EU, trust in the national institutions, estimation on the direction things are going in the EU, support for the monetary union and its single currency, the euro, optimism regarding the future of the EU, most effective actors in dealing with the economic crisis, the estimation of the national economic situation and the situation of the European economy. Every issue on the lists represents a different question in the Eurobarometer survey and reveals a different side of the phenomenon and its manifestations.

4. Where We Stand- the Public Opinion in 2013

The analysis of the latest Eurobarometer data reveals some interesting conclusions on the state of the Union in terms of public image. Eurobarometer 80 was carried out between 2 and 17 November 2013 in 34 countries or territories: the 28 European Union Member States, the five candidate countries (the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Iceland, Montenegro and Serbia), and the Turkish Cypriot Community in the part of the country that is not controlled by the government of the Republic of Cyprus (European Commission, 2013).

Overall, average results suggest that while national political institutions continue to lose ground in terms of trust (23%, -2 percentage points since spring 2013 for national governments, 25%, -1 for national parliaments), trust in the European Union is at a relatively higher level and remains unchanged (31%). In the same time, the number of respondents who do not trust the Eu-

ropean Union has fallen since spring 2013- EB79 (58%, -2). More than half of Europeans are optimistic about the future of the EU (51%, +2 percentage points since spring 2013). Eight percentage points now separate optimists and pessimists, which represents the largest difference since spring 2011 (EB75). The most optimistic for the future are Denmark (75%, +3), Ireland (67%, +9), Malta (67%, +4), Poland (66%, +3), Estonia (66%, +2) and Lithuania (66%, +2) – these are countries in which more than two thirds of the population is optimistic for the future. It is worth mentioning the steep increase in optimism in a member state drastically affected by the economic crisis: Spain, where 48% count on a better future for the EU (an increase of 8 percentage points since spring 2013). With the notable exception of Greece, all the other Southern states dominate the pessimistic group: Greece, Cyprus, Portugal, France, Italy, and, in addition: Hungary, the UK and Czech Republic.

In the first part of this paper, we emphasized the importance of economic issues when assessing the performance of the European Union. The Eurobarometer results indicate that unemployment remains the most striking and worrying consequence of the economic turbulences, at least at the national level. Unemployment remains the main concern of Europeans at *national level*: almost half of Europeans cite this item (49%, -2), far ahead of the economic situation (33%, unchanged), rising prices (20%, unchanged), and government debt (14%, -1). When it comes to the most important concern *at the European level*, the economic situation steals the lights (45%, -3), followed by unemployment and the state of the public finances.

Nevertheless, a shift in concern from the economic to the social sphere can be seen. This is an encouraging fact, because economic issues prevail in times of economic crisis, whereas social and societal issues are clearly more significant in periods of (relative) economic prosperity, as for example before the summer of 2007 (Robert Schuman Foundation, 2013). This shift can be interpreted as a sign of recovery.

Positive evolutions can also be seen in perceptions of the economic situation at national level ('good' +5 percentage points, 'bad' -4), and to a greater extent at European level (+7, 'bad' -7). While more Europeans perceive the situation of their national economy as 'good' compared with spring 2013, the gap between the different Member States has widened: 83 percentage points now separate Sweden, where 85% of respondents think that the economic situation in their country is good, and Greece, where just 2% of the population share this view. This shows that economic inequalities lead to striking differences in terms of public opinion. As we will show later in this article, the analysis in time of several indicators make apparent some significant lines of fraction between the North and the South of Europe, or between debtor and creditor countries.

In respect to the effects of the euro crisis on the public opinion, the latter seems to support the official positions that the euro must be saved at all costs. The support of Europeans for the economic and monetary union with a single currency, the euro, has remained almost stable, with more than half of Europeans in favor (52%, +1 since spring 2013), and 41% opposed (-1). In 21 Member States, an absolute majority of respondents are in favor of the euro, with the highest levels recorded in Luxembourg (79%), Slovenia (78%), Slovakia (78%), Estonia (76%), and Finland (75%). At the other end of the scale, opposition is strongest in Denmark (65%), the Czech Republic (70%), Sweden (74%) and the UK (74%). Cyprus is the only member of the euro area where a majority of the population is against the euro (52% vs. 44% in favor).

Europeans think that the worst has come and gone, as the feeling that the impact of the crisis on jobs has "already reached its peak" has become more widespread (40%, +4). Once

again, the Southern and Eastern countries are overwhelmed by their slow (or inexistent) economic recovery: The feeling that “the worst is still to come” is the majority view in 16 Member States, led by Cyprus (87%), Greece (71%), Portugal (67%), France (66%) and Slovenia (65%). Overall, a relative majority of European citizens consider that the European Union is going “in the right direction” to emerge from the crisis and face the new world challenges (43%), and this proportion has registered a slight increase since spring 2013 (+1). Apart from the “hard” economic issues, there are also some “soft” issues, related to the notion of “European citizenship” that must be taken into account. These aspects are more relevant than ever in 2014, the year of the EP elections when, for the first time in the history the main political groups are to appoint, prior to the vote, a candidate for President of the European Commission. Citizens from all Member States will therefore be – indirectly – taking part in the election of the President of the Commission in the event of victory of their preferred political group. When asked about this a majority of Europeans supported the idea; an absolute majority even said that this would give them greater encouragement to vote than they feel at the present; 55% against 36% who believed the contrary (Robert Schuman Foundation, 2013). It is encouraging that almost six in ten Europeans (59%) feel that they are citizens of the EU.

Despite all efforts to make the European institutions more transparent and to engage citizens in the decision-making process through public debates, use of online platforms/portals and the increased role of the European Parliament, two-thirds of Europeans consider that their voice does not count in the EU (66%, -1 percentage point since spring 2013). The proportion of Europeans considering that their voice counts in the EU still represents less than three Europeans in ten (29%). Inequalities between equal members strike us, as citizens from Western and Northern states feel they are taken more into consideration. Respondents in Denmark stand out from the rest of Europeans: an absolute majority of them believe that their voice counts in the EU (57% vs. 41%). 40% or more of respondents also share this view in Belgium (47%), Sweden (47%), Malta (46%), Croatia (42%), Luxembourg (42%), Germany (41%) and Netherlands (40%). On the other hand, the public is very disillusioned in Southern and Eastern countries that now form, in a new sense, the periphery of the continent.

To conclude, we must admit that, for 2013, almost all indicators remain relatively stable and the view of the future, slightly optimistic. At the same time, differences in public opinion in the Northern and southern countries are very visible. These discrepancies are the consequence of the very different and painful experiences the South, Central and Eastern part of the EU went through during the economic (and the euro) crisis. Citizens in these countries are discouraged and disillusioned in a new sense: they feel abandoned and betrayed by the Union they are part of.

5. We’ve Come a Long Way: Public Opinion in the European Union (2009-2013)

Mass media and scholars alike link the concept of Euroscepticism to one particular question in the Eurobarometer survey: trust in the European Union and its institutions. It is a very frequent misconception that this complex and fluid phenomenon can be reduced to feelings of opposition or disagreement with the EU, its institutions or policies. As shown earlier in this paper, the problem goes far beyond what lays in plain sight – Euroscepticism is not a malaise that needs to be removed with surgical precision, but the tip of the iceberg, hiding deep and

old structural imbalances of the EU. This is why the constant decline in levels of trust in the EU is not the disease itself, but merely a symptom. Nevertheless, we must admit that trust in the EU has hit a record low in the year 2013, dropping to only 31% at the European level. It is a constant erosion from the beginning of the crisis in 2009 (-16 percentage points). There are some interesting evolutions in what this indicator is concerned. Before the crisis, the UK had been the living definition of Euroscepticism, but now faces strong competition from the Southern European countries. Economic hardships caused a serious drop in the levels of trust in countries such as Spain, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus (which has the lowest levels of trust in the present) or Italy. The aforementioned countries dropped from trust levels around (or above) the average in 2009 to less de 25% in 2013. What is more puzzling is that Germany and France, the founders of the EU, experience themselves a crisis of support for the EU (with only 29% and 28% of respondents trusting the EU), albeit for different reasons. Germany is tired of supporting the bailout costs for member states that lacked, in its opinion, fiscal discipline, whereas France's social and economic climate brings it closer to the Southern group.

Fig. 1. Trust in the EU.

Not only European institutions have fallen victims to the crisis, but also the national ones. Citizens are very sceptical towards their own governments' and parliaments' capacity to address the situation in an appropriate manner. Trust in national institutions has fallen from 32% in 2009 (EB71) to 25% (national parliament) and 23% (national government). There are only few states in which the national institutions are highly supported by the masses. Germany is the most obvious example for that: trust in the national government, for example, remained relatively stable during the five years of our analysis, varying from 45 to 32 percent, but remaining more trustworthy than the EU (29% in 2013). At the opposite side of the scale, the Southern block is more disillusioned with the national institutions than with the EU. It is not surprising that poor domestic economic performance and rising inequalities reflect mainly upon national actors.

The chart below indicates the evolution of trust in the national institutions and the EU respectively, over time (average results). The declining trend seems to have stabilized in 2013, with trust in EU remaining above the levels of support for the national institutions.

Fig. 2. Trust in the EU and the national institutions (EU average).

These results correlate with the answers to another question in the survey, about who the most capable actor to deal with the crisis is (Fig 3). In 2009, the EU was nominated as the most efficient in dealing with the crisis (21%), as opposed to the national government (12%). Nevertheless, the gap between the two narrowed down in time, and in autumn 2013 respondents believed that both actors were as capable and efficient in dealing with the crisis. These results suggest the revival of nationalism, and a new mentality that dwells in Europe in the aftermath of the crisis: the idea that the EU lacks the efficient weapons to tackle the crisis. The situation is the consequence of EU’s slow response to the crisis and also its hesitant strategic measures. Overall, the solution for the economic crisis is expected to come from the EU, but not exclusively: to local problems, local solutions.

Fig 3. The most capable actor to deal with the crisis (EU average).

In terms of public perceptions on the national and European economy, there are serious gaps between member states. Germans, for example, are increasingly more satisfied with the state of the national economy (82% good in 2013) (Fig. 4). Germany is also the only member state in which the economic situation was perceived as improving in the 5 years of cri-

sis. Other content citizens can be found in the UK (38%), Poland (35%), Hungary (22%). Once again, the South falls far behind these results and also behind the EU average of 31%. It is the case of Greece (2%), Portugal (3%), Spain (4%), Cyprus (3%).

Fig 4. Perceptions on the state of the national economy in 2013.

In time, these member states became increasingly pessimistic about the economic evolutions, under the pressure of the austerity measures and rising unemployment. Nevertheless, average European results indicate that the trend is increasing from 20% “good” in 2009 to 31% in 2013. This evolution suggests that Europeans believe the crisis has already reached its peak and are expecting the first signs of recovery.

When asked to assess the economic situation in the EU, respondents showed more pessimism: only 28% believed the European economy is in a good place. Wealthy member states tend to be more pessimistic with the economic situation in the EU than with their own – it is the situation of Germany (37% vs. 82%) and UK (22% vs. 38%). For all other member states, the results are reversed. Respondents from Central Europe and Eastern states are more prone to believe that the economic situation in the EU is good (Romanians, Bulgarians, Polish and Hungarians being notably optimistic) (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Trend over time: state of EU economy vs. state of the national economy (EU average results).

When it comes to attitudes toward the future, gaps between member states reduce. Europeans are fairly optimistic about the future of the EU, although positive projections for the future followed a declining trend since 2009. Now 51% of Europeans believe a better future awaits ahead (from 64% in 2009). It is worth mentioning that even the member states which suffered badly during the times of crisis show fair amounts of optimism- the reluctant Greeks and Cypriots included (29%). Germany, the “reluctant hegemon”, is among the most optimistic for the future (60%). These results are in line with the idea that the worst moments of the crisis have passed.

Unfortunately, the path that needs to be taken in order to reach this better future remains unclear, as the majority of the Europeans believe that EU is heading in the wrong direction (47%-wrong vs. 29% good). Since the beginning of the crisis, the number of respondents who believed the EU is heading in the right direction decreased constantly, making room for the sceptics and the dissatisfied. The only region of the EU where the majority is convinced things are going in the right direction is the Central and Eastern part (Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary). These are relatively new members of the EU that are known for their Euroenthusiasm and levels of support for the EU that are frequently above the average, so the results are in line with this particularity. In the same time, an overwhelming majority of respondents in the South express their strong belief that EU is heading the wrong way. More balanced views can be found in old member states from Western Europe, where the relatively stable economic situation and long history as EU members make room for less intense feelings.

6. Discussion

The data presented above confirm our expectations. A increase of Euro-scepticism is a visible trend in the recent years. Overall, trust in the EU (and other indirect indicators of Euro-scepticism) hit record-low levels in the last five years, but with a tendency to stabilize in 2013. Nevertheless, in what economic aspects and the future of the EU are concerned, we believe the public is more optimistic in the present than in the previous years.

Mass Euro-scepticism equals with a strong disappointment with the activities of European institutions and reflects the consequences of the poor economic performance of the EU and of the nation state. From this point of view, economic improvement, creating growth and reducing unemployment (the most important concern for Europeans at the moment) would necessary bring an increase in support for the EU. This scenario will probably happen, but it has its limits. Euro-scepticism is not a disease in itself; it is a state of mind that now dominates the continent. The permanent character of negative feelings, such as disappointment, mistrust, disagreement, opposition, pessimism encourages us to think that the EU has much more than economic difficulties.

For the first time in history, European integration lost its direction; apparently, the leaders of the European construct lack the strength, vision and ambition to insufflate new life into the project. The EU suffers serious symbolic losses. The general public, overwhelmed by his own fight for survival in a fierce economic jungle is becoming less preoccupied with the abstract values the EU promotes and more concerned with hard aspects, such as the cost of integration, inequalities and lack of direction. This situation is very visible in the Southern states, where disappointment with the present is visible in what the following indicators are

concerned: trust in the EU, assessment of the direction things are going, trust in European institutions, optimism for the future.

Although Euroscepticism is the mindset of the general public, some results suggest that, in fact, the radicals that are ready to abandon the European project are actually very few compared to the majority who wants a change *inside* the Union. Overall, the public opinion is optimistic for the future and has high levels of support for the single currency, which embodies the notion of European integration itself. The stabilization of what was a downward trend in trust and support, coupled with a slight increase in optimism for the future, and the greater preoccupation with societal issues, suggest that the European economy is on a slow path to recovery. Unfortunately, this is only one side of the coin. The old structural imbalances of the EU wait just around the corner. The greatest risk for the EU is to experience a new crisis after *The Crisis*, marked by the lack of reaction, the incapacity to identify and correct the inherent flaws that the economic crisis brought to light. The EU is losing ground on the global stage; in this context, paralysis equals death.

These are times that call for strong leadership, and all eyes are on Germany. The problem is that the Germans, who, as main creditors, believe they have to pay the highest price from all member states, grew aloof from the rest of the Union. Germany is one of the few states where nationalism, in the sense of self confidence, remains very strong. There, trust in the national institutions remains stronger than in European ones and the national government is seen as more capable in fighting the economic crisis. These results are the expression of the German confidence in the austerity policy and the highly performing economic strategies. The sad paradox is that the state which reluctantly became the leader of the EU hates its destiny and is actually very skeptical when it comes to the system under its guidance.

The analysis of Eurobarometer results for the period 2009-2013 made apparent another disturbing pattern: the rise of inequalities in a Union of equals. From this point of view, we can see some significant differences in terms of public opinion in the North and in the South. More precisely, the great disappointment, the gloom mood of the citizens from Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Portugal and, surprisingly, France, suggest that the EU *did not* emerge stronger *as a whole*. The economic crisis, as well as the process of economic integration, gave birth to winners and losers. As one would expect, the winners tend to be more supportive of the EU and more positive in attitudes towards the future, whereas the losers seem to know exactly who to blame for this injustice. Furthermore, the countries stealing the headlines in terms of economic stability, efficiency and competitively feel burdened by the cohesion policy and the high costs of the bailout, thus becoming more Eurosceptic, too.

It is a vicious circle of negative feelings, fuelled by a diversity of reasons, hence, very hard to deal with. The dark scenario for the future is that inequalities will continue to deepen and the cracks in the EU foundation as a will increase in numbers and depth.

Multiple divergences have already started to occur between the rich and the poor member states, between competitive regions and regions that lag behind, between debtors and creditors, between the North and the South and, we dare to anticipate, between the West and the East. The game is changing and Euroscepticism is now the expression of confusion and fear, more than of righteous opposition against particular issues or concerns. Europeans stand divided, for now, and are being very vulnerable in front of the global challenges. It is difficult to predict the outcome, but the signs are not favorable.

7. Conclusions

In our opinion, Euroscepticism cannot be correlated to one single factor. The disappointment at the core of Euroscepticism has several viable explanations, although Eurosceptics might not distinguish among the various layers of this conglomerate. One layer is given by the continent's fundamental problems, such as demography, which we mentioned earlier. Another set of explanations is associated with what we might call the Union's permanently delayed reaction to various challenges (the most recent example is the reaction to the crisis and the delay in finding solutions to the euro crisis until the last moment). The European institutions have not been strengthened by the crisis. This has instituted a long-lasting oscillation between the European and the national decision levels. In the absence of a strategic decision, which would solely offer a perspective to Europe, Euroscepticism will prevail over the development model which gave rise to Europe and could have been a guide to many other regions of the world. If in specific fields – energy, banking and so on – the Union does not adopt clarifying decisions, how can we imagine it will initiate an industrial policy for the continent, in whose absence Europe cannot fight the competitiveness assault of emerging states? Jacques Attali expresses this truth in simple words: “Europe needs to get hold of budgetary resources and develop an industrial policy” (Attali, 2010).

Notes

¹ The imprecision in defining the term has often been signalled and criticised. Eurosceptics' favorite arguments are that European institutions gather too much power of decision, that they lack transparency, that the supranational body represented by the EU has dramatically alienated the citizens, that the EU supports unpopular policies, promotes an 'orthodoxy of austerity', that national state's sovereignty is threatened, that EU regulations, criteria and standards are not adequate to CEE economies and so on.

² The first decade of the new century found Europe overwhelmed by criticism coming from those in charge of leading it... But are the European nations doing better than Europe? It should be reminded that the countries of the Old Continent are currently facing the biggest challenges since the WWII (our translation).

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