

THE CHALLENGES OF THE EUROPEAN PROJECT: EUROSCEPTICISM AND NATIONALISM. CAUSES AND PERSPECTIVES

*Laurențiu PETRILA**
*Mircea BRIE***

Abstract. *The last few years have been marked by a series of challenges for the entire Western world. It is about a succession of crises, among which we recall the institutional, economic, political, social and sanitary ones that have befallen Europe. The pandemic and the conflict at the border of the European Union represent only recent crises with a strong impact on the European construct. In this context, the nationalist discourse legitimized itself as revenge and alternative at the same time. Thus, almost naturally, the phenomenon of Euroscepticism fueled by the effervescence of nationalism also began to grow. Through the present study, we aim to understand to what extent the growth of the nationalist-Eurosceptic phenomenon within the European Union represents an imminent danger or an opportunity for the consolidation of the European project. In the first part we will make a brief presentation of the causes and problems that led to the growth of nationalism. Then, our study will present the evolution of Euroscepticism and the emergence of the populist vote within the EU – a vote that was most often associated with EXIT-type projects. The last part aims to present a perspective through which we can evaluate whether the recent crises are not actually opportunities to combat destabilizing phenomena.*

Keywords: *European Union, scepticism, nationalism, crisis, identity.*

Introduction

Regarding the European project as a whole, perhaps we often forget the original logic of the European construction, namely the immediate material benefits. It is true that after this stage important efforts were made for a more comprehensive European integration, but nevertheless the challenges related to community cohesion still remain the most complex challenge in the European integration process (Petrla, 2014:107).

In this sense, we consider it appropriate to sustainably identify the resources in the social and cultural structures that contribute to a deep integration and with few gaps and differences between the member states. A reflection on the socio-political phenomena inside the European Union (EU) but also from the border of the community space can offer us the prospects of a serious understanding of the recent

* PhD lecturer, Agora University of Oradea & University of Oradea, e-mail: lauren.petrila@gmail.com.

** PhD professor in the Department of International Relations and European Studies, University of Oradea, email: mbrie@uoradea.ro.

challenges, ongoing or those that are even expected by different opinion leaders or analysts of international politics.

Through the present study, we propose a socio-political incursion in order to have a more realistic overview of the current moment that the EU is going through. The analysis also takes into account the perspectives emerging in relation to the elections for the future European Parliament (EP) which will take place in 2024. In some countries there have already been national elections, and in others it follows after the round of European elections for the EP.

The hypothesis from which this analysis starts is that the numerous crises in the EU area produced a rematch of national and regional identity to the detriment of the European one, and the visible effect through the prism of the electoral options expressed by voting marked the development of Euroscepticism, nationalist sovereignty and populism.

The research questions are: 1. Are the development of Euroscepticism, nationalist sovereigntism and populism cyclical phenomena generated by the institutional crisis or EU values? 2. Can the identity crisis structurally affect the process of European construction?

The last two decades in Europe have been characterized by political phenomena with important implications for the European Union. There are researchers who claim that these socio-political phenomena are of a populist nature and others consider them to be of a nationalist-Eurosceptic nature (Mișcoiu-Pantea-Petrila, 2023:195). There are also situations in which European integration is associated with the destruction, dilution of national identity or sovereignty, a fact that also leads to the consolidation of the Eurosceptic and populist phenomenon. Even if terms like Euroscepticism or populism are not synonymous, we will refer to them somewhat in tandem because in terms of their political expression they end up containing roughly the same type of discourse.

The context of successive crises and identity rematch. The return to national

In the contemporary period we are witnessing an effervescence of the national, this despite the progress made at the European level in terms of strengthening the European identity. The process of European construction was accompanied by a certain blurring of the national, at least at the expression level of nationalist-extremist movements. European identity appears as a superior identity that reduces the forms of expression of national and regional identities. That's at least in theory. On the other hand, in the current context, we are justified in believing that the European identity has acquired a form of manifestation parallel to the national or regional levels, without being in a very close relationship with them. That is, the reduction or amplification of forms of manifestation at a certain level does not lead to a counterbalance at another level (Brie, 2018: 237).

Diachronically, stimulated by the phenomenon of globalization, by the success of the EU, especially by the European expansion to the east and the disappearance of the "Iron Curtain", the European identity experienced an exaltation both at the level of public discourse and at the everyday level. In our opinion, the phenomenon also has another facet: the identity revenge of the current period. As an effect of the crises that have become systemic at the EU level (economic, financial, social, institutional or

legitimacy), of the new geopolitical realities in the proximity space (e.g. the situation in Ukraine, the Near East, North Africa), but also as an effect of migration massive, we find a return to local, regional or national identities (See for further details Brie and Blaga, 2015: 255-273).

Without proposing on this occasion to make an analysis of political realities, respectively of the speech of political leaders, in the European space, but not only, we are witnessing in this period, more than in other stages of the history of the last hundred years, a radicalization of the speech with an emphasis on the national. Political movements take on more and more national, ethno-cultural and identity nuances. Not only populism is gaining ground, but also the xenophobic, tribal debate of fear and danger painted in the image of the other (Brie, 2018: 238).

The European Union, Russia, globalization, the immigrant, multinationals, national minorities, but also others who are not part of the beleaguered national community, are real scapegoats that the political leaders in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, for example, use to generate emotion and to capitalize on the increasingly populist and nationalist expressions present in these countries.

When analyzing the international scene, we notice the fact that nation states are and will remain for a significant future period the main form of state construction. States base themselves and ensure their survival from a very strong national and ethnic surplus (Poenaru, 2012; Brie, 2021a: 132-134). The concepts of national and ethnicity not only do not become obsolete, but we note the fact that there is an "almost obsessive direction of the contemporary world towards ethnicity, towards national specificity" (David and Florea, 2007: 645).

Put in relation to the somewhat systemic crises of the European Union, we might be tempted to think that it is a zero-sum game between the tendencies to assume the European identity and those of the national identity. The preservation of national identity is the fundamental mission of the European peoples, which they tried to put in a global context of European integration. In crisis situations, states do nothing but appeal to the essence and foundation of existence and survival: nationality, ethnicity. In this context, the current trend of European peoples can only be the preservation of cultural/national identity (Brie, 2021a: 133).

It would be fundamentally wrong to attribute this trend to ineffective management on the part of the European Union. Let's just think about what happened in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. The tendency was a strong return to the national, to the consolidation of the state based on the logic of the nation-state. Where states did not exist, all energies were focused on the formation of the nation-type state. Dozens of new national states appeared in the European political landscape. Then, in most of the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe in the 90s, nationalism played an essential role on the political scene. Let's just think about the role that the nationalist parties played in Romania until around the year 2000. These tendencies were somewhat blurred under the effect of the European integration process, so that in recent years we have witnessed the emergence of extremist groups and manifestations in most European states. Without reducing everything to the theory of the classic struggle for resources, we cannot fail to notice the divergent positions and the repositioning of states on national criteria in relation to the economic problems faced by European states, the European Union as a whole. In the context of the crises of the last 15 years, cooperation and dialogue have often given way to suspicion and

competition. Many political leaders built their public discourse on the fault of the other European partners and hence the radicalization observed in the space of public opinion (Brie, 2019: 371-391).

At the conceptual level, identity constructions appear, apparently placed on the same level of analysis, which can have different connotations. Identity, regardless of the level of reporting (European, national, or regional/local), is found as a form of expression in the public space despite the universalist currents, globalization or standardization of community values, characteristics or expressions. The elements of ethno-religious identity can be found in the global public space, including in multiplied forms through the channels of global propagation. Therefore, not only the global multiplies, but also the particular, the specific. The latter, often taking the form of extremism, nationalism, populism or ethno-religious violence, see themselves multiplied by gaining followers thousands of kilometers away. Then, the national and ethnic state, associated with the national territory, managed not only to survive the pressures of the "global society", but demonstrated an even greater capacity for affiliation (Brie, 2021b: 322-340). Identity globalization has been shown to be stronger in urban and industrialized societies, and where there are consistent rural areas, a rich cultural heritage and tradition, a resistance to globalization has developed (Poenaru, 2012). Thus, the local, national-cultural identity is more strongly preserved in the rural-agrarian environment and in the reference proximity area of cultural sites. Such a reality does not exclude the possibility of parallel development and consolidation of a supranational European identity. Conceptually, this seemingly antagonistic relationship emerges: European identity versus national/local identity (Brie, 2016: 360).

Conceptually, the entire identity edifice has at least two elements of specificity since its construction (Brie, 2016):

- national identity born from ethnicity
- national identity born from civic/citizenship

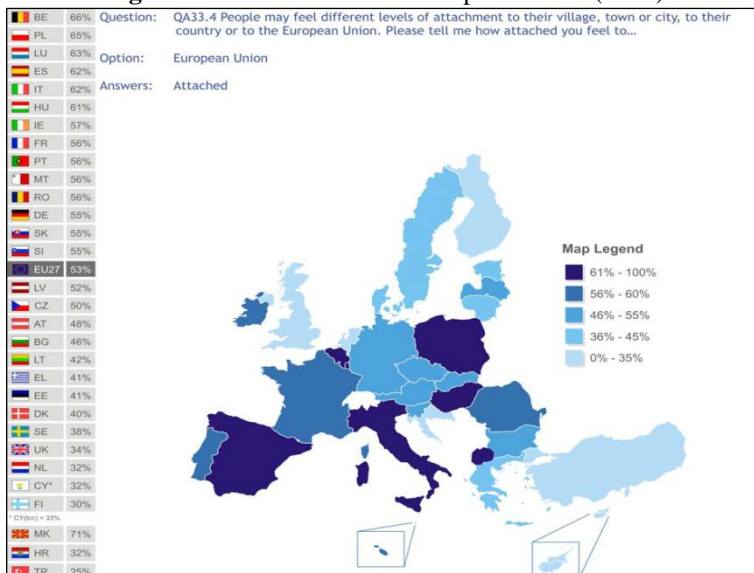
In the first case, national identity serves a certain ethnic group often in competition with other ethnic groups (most often present in the same reference space). The perspective gives rise to expressions of a nationalist-tribal nature that may involve the exclusion of representatives of other ethnic groups.

In the second situation, the civic dimension serves the state, most often leading to patriotism (the perspective is rather positive compared to the first situation when we are dealing with a perspective with negative connotations!).

The analysis of the two dimensions has led some analysts to identify the main differences in the conceptual debate regarding identity in Central-Eastern Europe versus the United States of America. The essential difference is that the European national identity answers the question of who is Romanian, Hungarian, Slovak, etc. (so what makes us different from each other), and the American one seeks to identify those elements that citizens have in common (what makes different citizens in many ethno-cultural situations American?) (Bujalos, 2011: 79-91). This conceptual dispute between European and American national identity/nation can also be extrapolated to the level of European space. The idea of nationality is perceived differently in Western and Central-Eastern Europe. In most Western countries, national identity has been built mainly around the identity of citizen, and status territory has consequently become the fundamental term of reference for "national territory" – the civic dimension of national identity. Eastern Europe had a different path of development, where ethnicity, ethnic

membership played a fundamental role in building national identity – the ethnic dimension of national identity (Gabor, 2011: 116). Thus, the Western model of the nation emphasizes the centrality of the nation's national territory or homeland, while the Eastern model is concerned with ethnic origin and cultural ties. A fundamental characteristic of the state constructions of the nation-state type in Eastern Europe is their permanent lack of legitimacy or, rather, their incomplete legitimacy. By identifying the state with a single national identity, the other national communities inevitably found themselves outside of this legitimation process, which constituted a fundamental source of inter-ethnic tension. This reality led to the sacralization of state territory considered national territory (Gabor, 2011: 118-128) (the rightful property of a single nation/nationality!), and the cultural-historical philosophy is to delegitimize as much as possible the contribution of other national communities (Brie and Blaga, 2015: 255-273).

Figure 1. Attachment to the European Union (2007)



Source: Eurobarometer 67, 2007: 85

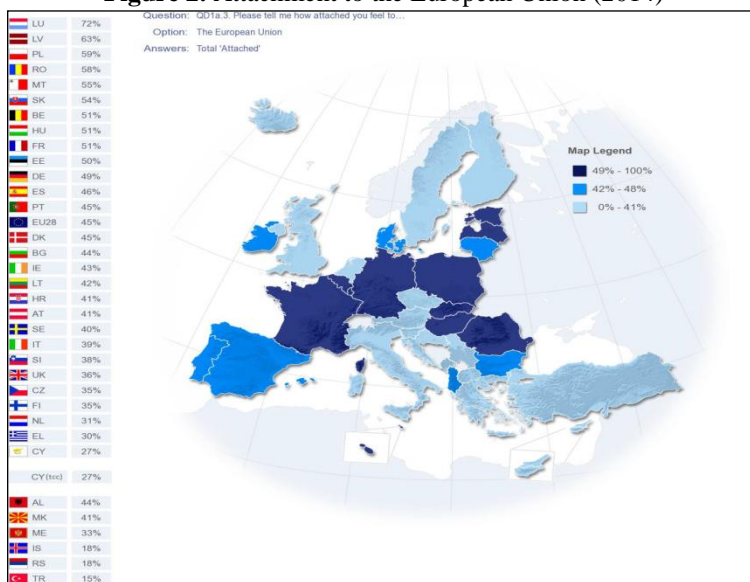
Reported at the European level of analysis on the concept of identity, the legitimate question is to what extent we are talking about a common European identity or, in contrast, about the presence of identity borders in the European space. A certain identity cleavage can be observed between Western and Eastern Europe. This reality is given by the historical, cultural, religious and political heritage.

Whether it is internal or external causes, that the case is political, institutional-administrative, socio-economic or cultural-religious, the European identity has weakened during the crisis after 2008 in relation to the national or regional-local identity. We reached this conclusion by reference to the attachment that the European citizens feel towards the European Union in relation to their own states or settlements where they live. Methodologically, we studied the information that we have available from the Eurobarometer. We picked for review two years, 2007 and 2014 respectively,

to see if the crisis significantly influenced the Europeans' options (See for this comparative analysis Brie and Blaga, 2015).

If in 2007 the average commitment of European citizens towards the EU was 53%, in 2014 it dropped to 45%. With few exceptions (including Poland and Romania - two countries in the East, one in which there has not been economic recession during the crisis and another, Romania, where its citizens have got to have more confidence in Brussels to tackle corruption and poverty only its own state institutions), in European countries the proportion of those who feel attached to the EU declined. It is interesting to note, however, how this decline has occurred in some states. In 2007 we have a high level of adherence to the EU for citizens of countries like Italy, Spain, Belgium, Hungary and Poland. By 2014, the citizens of this state attachment evolved very differently. Poland is the only country where the EU attachment is on the increase slope. Hungary and Belgium are two states which show similarities because although knowing a significant decline in the level of attachment to the EU, they do not seem to be cases concerned to transfer that attachment to their countries or places of residence (see comparative fig. 1-4). Of these five countries, Spain and Italy constitute a special group. In these countries, which have benefited greatly from membership of the European Union, there is a very strong local and regional identity, but also with significant immigrant communities. The drop in devotion to the EU is very steep in Italy (from 62% - 2007 39% - 2014) and Spain (from 62% - 2007 46% - 2014). In these countries, hit hard by the recession, with serious problems of over-indebtedness, where large communities of immigrants accept jobs poorly paid, with high levels of unemployment among natives, attachment citizens are not transferred even to own countries (the attachment in one's country is among the lowest in the EU) but in places of residence, at local or regional level. The strong local or regional identity captures the citizens' attachment to these countries (see Fig. 4).

Figure 2. Attachment to the European Union (2014)

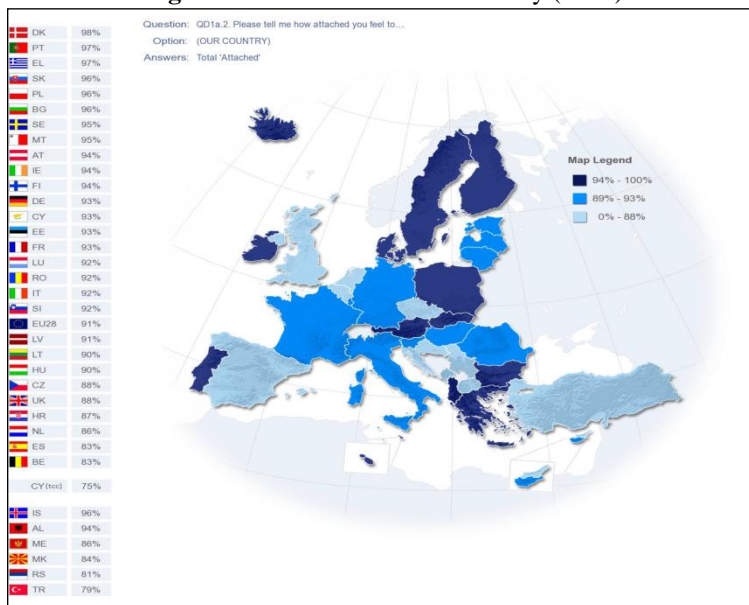


Source: Eurobarometer 82, 2014: 10

By comparing the two times (2007 and 2014) we found that the attachment to the European Union moves to two categories of states: states in a geographically central axis and to Eastern states. This group of states includes France, Belgium and Germany (central states in the process of European construction), to which, in the same central axis, we would place also Poland, accompanied from the eastern axis by Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and the Baltic States. The logic compels us to accept that in crisis situations, countries such as Germany, France and Belgium and their citizens understand the meaning, role and importance of the European Union. In this equation of confidence in the Union we can place the newly entered EU member states from the east. We wonder, is this the same in the case of identity? The essence and the future support of Europe lies in the New Europe?

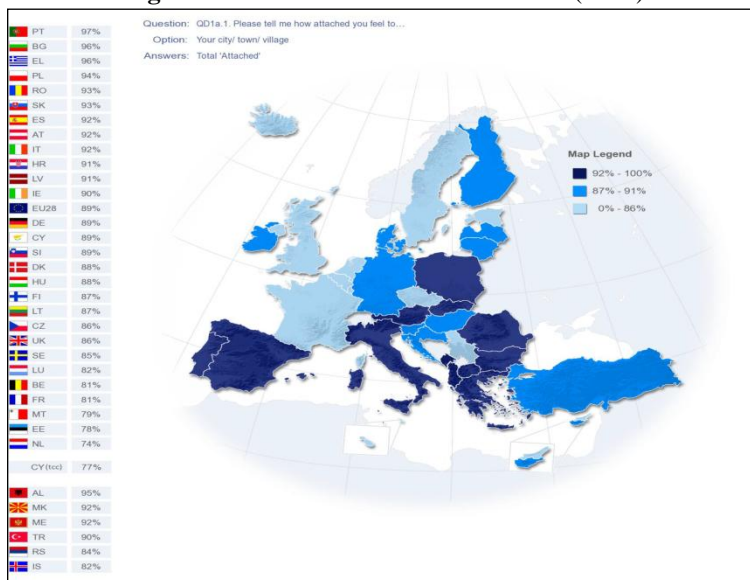
By comparison with the attachment to the European Union, the attachment to their own country reveals a different behavior of citizens of European states. Note that this attachment is high in all European countries, the EU average being 91% in 2014. In the group of countries with a higher share of the population who feel attached to their country except for Austria, the other countries are geographically positioned at the EU's periphery, in the west, north, south and east. We note the geographical distribution of these countries compared to the somewhat compact middle position of countries where the population feels attached to the European Union (2014).

Figure 3. Attachment to own country (2014)



Source: *Eurobarometer 82*, 2014: 7

A strong attachment to home settlements, to local or regional area, is obvious in the countries of southern and eastern flanks. Together with Portugal, Poland, Austria, Slovakia and Greece, whose populations are proving to be very attached to their country, the group of countries with the population attached to the local factor lie countries like Italy, Bulgaria and Romania. These latter countries are found to be related to the local community also because of the failure of national policy.

Figure 4. Attachment to home settlement (2014)

Source: Eurobarometer 82, 2014: 6

In the current geopolitical and socio-economic context, the sense of belonging is changing towards the national-regional space. The EU's lack of response to the problems of European citizens, the European systemic and institutional crises are eroding the European identity. Under these conditions, the state remains the citizen's "refuge" in crisis situations. Moreover, ethno-cultural claims increase in the context of the "conflict" for resources and access to power. Last but not least, national identity is increasingly present in the public space through association with nationalist-extremist groups and populist-sovereignist currents (Brie, 2021: 142).

Eurosceptics and the evolution of the populist vote in the EU: the emergence of the EXIT phenomenon

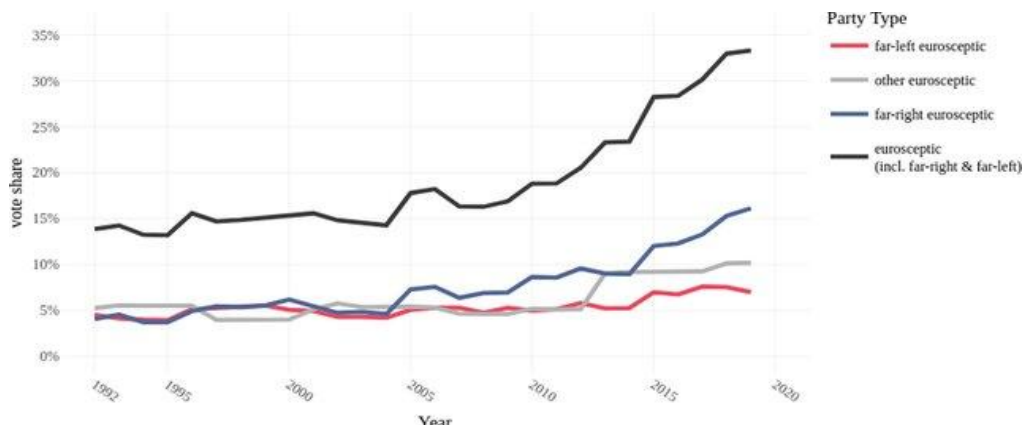
It is true that there are certain reservations and it is quite complicated to define the term populism without showing its nuances and the evolution of the term over time. A very laborious exploration of the definitions, classifications and theorizations of populism from the general to the particular can be found in the work *Populist parties and personalities in post-communist Romania* (Gherghina, Mișcoiu: 2010). Perhaps one of the most relevant definitions of populism is: "in short, populism is an expression of persecution and resentment, an ideology of rescue and reparation, which is supposed to offer an immediate remedy and which mobilizes individuals and groups who, rightly or wrongly, they perceive themselves as losers of democratic transformation and liberal-procedural democracy" (Tismăneanu: 2010). We therefore observe that a source of populism is represented by the difficulties that society feels at a given moment in the midst of challenges of modernization, democratization or towards a solid economic development.

And in terms of defining Euroscepticism there was the challenge of nuances because the Eurosceptic phenomenon and discourse does not always start from the

same issues and contexts. One of the definitions we consider appropriate is: "European political doctrine that advocates disengagement from the European Union. Political parties that espouse a Euroskeptical viewpoint tend to be broadly populist and generally support tighter immigration controls in addition to the dismantling or streamlining of the EU bureaucratic structure" (Britannica: 2023).

We can say that the expression of populists in matters of foreign policy and interstate cooperation is related to the spread and cultivation of Eurosceptic sentiment. The graph below shows a certain constancy of Euroscepticism until 2005. We cannot say that this increase in Euroscepticism is due to the enlargement waves of 2004 (the largest in the history of the EU), 2007 or 2013, but the possible correlation is worth noting. It is important to remember this possibility of interpreting developments, especially since this year the EU gave an extremely clear signal by starting EU accession negotiations with Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Bosnia Herzegovina (European Parliament News: 2023). Ukraine is the first country at war with which the EU begins accession negotiations, and the Republic of Moldova is in an extremely vulnerable geopolitical situation and even with a serious challenge inside the country: the problem of Transnistria.

Figure 5. Share of Eurosceptic, far-right and far-left parties votes weighted by population size

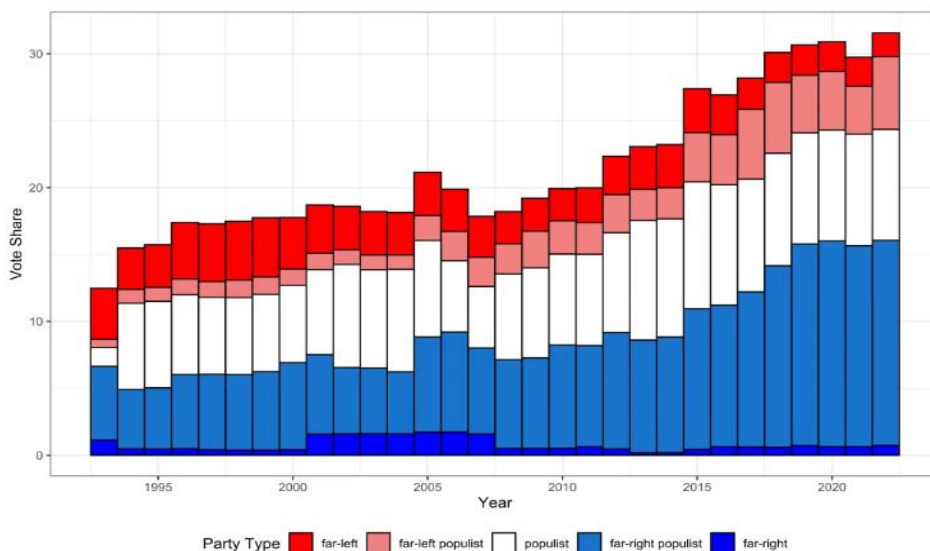


Source: Fortunato-Pecoraro, 2022: 1

The literature speaks of certain stages regarding the emergence and consolidation of populism in the EU elections. So between 1979-1989 we are talking about the first period of populist support when at the European level we had only six populist parties, and the most relevant example is PASOK in Greece which obtained over 40% in 1984 and then it decreased but not significantly. The second period also represented the period of expansion of populism and took place between 1994-1999. The most important results are found in: France (10.5% in 1994), Greece (37.6% in 1994), Austria (23.4% in 1999), Belgium (10.8% in 1994; 10.9% in 1999), and Italy (37.2% in 1994; 29.7% in 1999). The third period took place between 2004 and 2009 and was characterized by a wide spread of populism in Europe. And finally, the last period analyzed by us is the period between 2014-2019 when far-right populism was consolidated. If in 2014 we were talking about 16 countries where they achieved results

of over 10%, in 2019 we have 22 countries that exceeded that result (Zulianello-Larsen: 2021).

Figure 6. Votes shares for populist parties 1995-2020



Vote shares of (1) far-left, (2) far-left populist, (3) populist, (4) far-right populist, and (5) far-right parties in 31 European countries, weighted by population size.

Source: PopuList, 2023: 1

The emergence of Brexit, beyond the challenges of the process itself, has opened many possibilities of vulnerability at the level of European construction. Immediately after the creation of this precedent, in any political, social or economic crisis, we were immediately met with a series of Eurosceptic speeches. Headlines such as: Nexit, Frexit or Grexit? The countries that could follow Britain out of the EU (CNBC: 2017), were increasingly on the front page of the most important news portals. Brexit is the clearest and most concrete manifestation of Euroscepticism to date. In fact, Great Britain is the one that created the framework of Eurosceptic discourse since 1988 when Margaret Thatcher in a lecture at the College of Europe in Bruges expressed her opposition to the possibility that British sovereignty would be suppressed by that of the EU (Thatcher Foundation: 2023).

The recent elections in the Netherlands tell us that the experience of Brexit was not a lesson but that it can be repeated. The far-right party led by Wilders came first in the autumn 2023 elections in the Netherlands. Among the promises made in the campaign are: closing the borders to migrants, banning the Koran and starting the procedures for Nexit (BBC: 2023). The victory of the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands is much more important to analyze because compared to the previous elections where it had 10.8% of the votes, this year it obtained 23.6%, i.e. more than double (Politico:2023). Other extremist leaders from Europe jumped in his support, and Marine Le Pen declared that the Dutch people can decide their European future as the British did (Euractiv:2023).

The most recent national elections were held in Slovakia, and the winner of these elections was the former Prime Minister Robert Fico who had a tough speech regarding the issue of migration but also a promise to stop aid to Ukraine (Reuters: 2023). Talks of ending military aid to Ukraine and limiting certain facilities and privileges for war refugees from Ukraine are more recent items on the populist agenda in Europe, perhaps as a sign that the Western world is feeling a certain fatigue regarding this military conflict.

In the last five years, an extremely extensive study coordinated by the University of Amsterdam has been carried out. The project was called The PopuList and had in mind the detailed analysis of the populist phenomenon in Europe. Beyond the many results and elements of nuance, the main result of the study shows that almost a third (32%) of Europeans vote with populist or extremist parties (Rooduijn, Pirro, Halikiopoulou, et al: 2023). Political scientist Cas Mudde believes that the problem of populism and implicitly the Eurosceptic phenomenon is also due to the fact that some tolerance has been created towards extreme parties (Mudde, 2016: 297).

It is important to remember what the specialist literature has already pointed out, namely that such groups or parties appear especially in times of crisis (Stoica: 2021). After the economic crisis at the end of 2008, the EU has always been engaged in various efforts of an economic, social, political and health nature. Moreover, throughout Europe, populist parties and sympathizers of Euroscepticism have latched onto the health crisis, believing that certain global corrupt forces want to destroy the dignity of honest citizens. The different measures taken by member states in the context of crises (be it the economic one, the migrant crisis and the recent health crisis) instead of increasing the idea among citizens that each state responds to crises through national governments have shaped the idea that certain Europeans are more European than others – in the sense that they would have more rights and privileges.

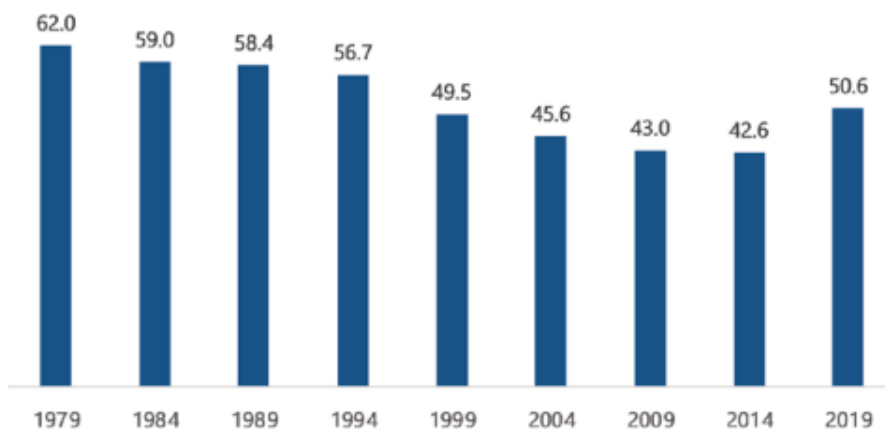
One of the reasons for the increase in populism and implicitly the questions about the meaning of European integration was represented by the acute phenomenon of migration (Petrița, 2019: 75). Also, populism and implicitly Eurosceptics gained momentum due to the multitude of political and economic problems. Faced with these problems, the leaders in Brussels often looked for solutions, but they either proved to be inappropriate or were poorly implemented in the territory. Problems related to minimum social needs, but also the fact that intolerance towards immigrants began to grow, ultimately represented the most important areas that built the discourse of populist parties in Europe before the elections for the European Parliament in 2014. One of the most important results in 2014 were registered by the National Front in France, which obtained almost a quarter of the total votes ahead of the popular movement party which obtained five percent less and in other states the populists managed to pass 10%, as followed by: 19.7% in Austria, 14.6% in Hungary, 13.2% in the Netherlands, 12.9% in Finland and 11% in Poland. Similarly, the left-wing populists won seats in ten states, and the most important result was obtained by SYRIZA in Greece, which together with the Communist Party obtained almost a third of the votes. The choices of European citizens reflect not only a certain populist trend but also the fact that European values and policies regarding solidarity and the desire to overcome socio-economic challenges together are not so well outlined in the collective mind. So the success of the contesting parties of the left-wing power was greater in Europe - 15%, by condemning the anti-austerity measures in Greece: Podemos

obtained over 17%, 6.3% in France, 9.6% in the Netherlands, while right-wing populist parties succeeded and obtained the majority of votes in the Nordic states and Austria. It is important to remember that the last European elections, namely the elections for the European Parliament in May 2019, did not lead to such an important rise of populism in Europe that many feared. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of Euroscepticism remains a significant force to be taken into account in the development of national and EU public policies ((Mișcoiu-Pantea-Petrila, 2023:198; Popa, 2017:5).

Even before the last European elections in 2019 there was some concern about a possible success of the Eurosceptics. The European populist movements can also represent an alarm signal for the European Union, because although they are most often incoherent and lack viable or concrete proposals, they still emphasize the important fracture lines within the European construction, thus preventing the realization of realistic, sustainable strategies and above all long-term (EURACTIV: 2017).

The results of the 2019 European elections show that somewhere over 20% of those elected do not come from pro-European parties or movements (EU affairs: 2019). As a short summary of the 2019 results, we can say that the big surprise of the elections was the significant turnout at the polls. More than half of European citizens with the right to vote were present at the polls. It is also the largest turnout at the polls after four rounds of European elections with a continuously decreasing turnout.

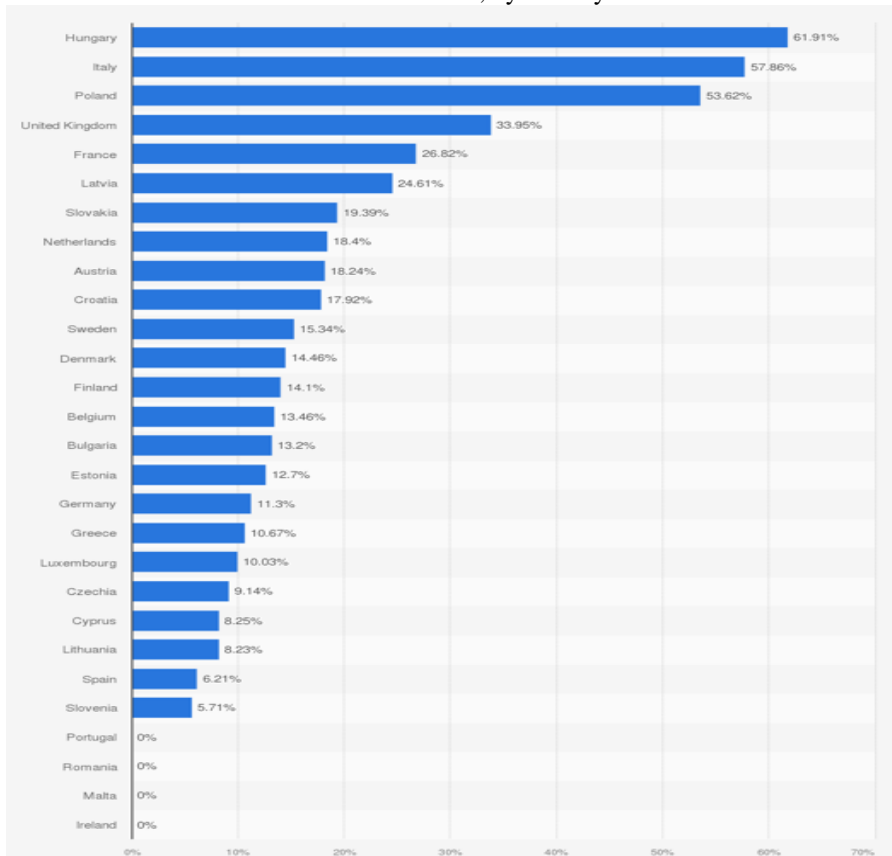
Figure 7. Prezența la alegerile europarlamentare 1979-2019



Source: Statista, 2023:1

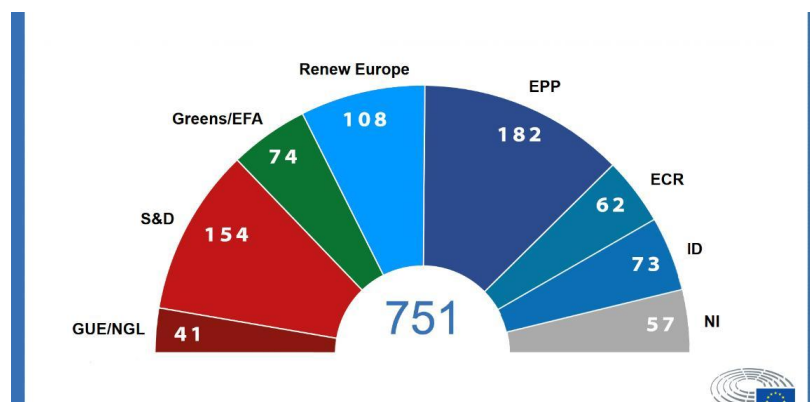
It is considered that among the causes or explanations of this important score of electoral attendance we can include protests against environmental policy, strikes and the desire to counter Eurosceptic and right-wing populist parties. The result showed that the right-wing populists improved their result, but overall we can say that we were dealing with a trend in which the big (mainstream) parties lost their weight, so the European Parliament became much more diversified and with complications in achieving majorities (Riegert - DW: 2019). The following tables show the dynamics and trend of political formations within the EU.

Figure 8. Share of votes for populist and nationalist parties in the European Parliamentary Elections of 2019, by country



Source: Statista, 2023:1

Even though in terms of turnout, the 2019 European elections proved to be a good exercise for European democracy, but after the distribution of the vote for populist parties, the 2019 elections give a signal for Europe. Corroboration of the European elections in 2024 with the national ones will clarify much more clearly the perspectives regarding European construction and consolidation. With the exception of Spain and Germany, all major EU countries have populist party representatives in the European Parliament. Until 2014, the European Parliament mainly had representatives of the mainstream parties, but for several years the flanks on the left and the right have begun to increase and even consolidate their percentages. These political realities will become extremely important if the mainstream loses weight in future political grouping equations.

Figure 9. Distribuția pe grupuri politice în PE 2019

Source: European Parliament, 2023:1

The COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical instabilities: opportunities to counter Euroscepticism

In 2010 when the Europe 2030 strategy was adopted: Project for Europe 2030. Challenges and opportunities, no one thought about the series of crises and challenges that would come over the entire Western world. The points in the Europe 2030 strategy regarding economic governance, investments in human capital, policies regarding work, energy and immigration still remained the main challenges of the European construct (Bărbulescu, 2015:591).

Immediately after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a series of complaints about the EU considering the delayed reactions, but especially the lack of a unitary response to this health crisis. In this context, the populist parties directed their activities more through blocking actions (actions against vaccination campaigns but also other actions against certain preventive measures). This is how the speech of the populist parties was no longer directed only against EU policies, but the speech began to be directed against national governments (Statista: 2023).

We need a Europe that is more solidary and that is a much more visible global actor (Luzarraga-Llorente, 2011:66). In fact, since the middle of the Covid - 19 pandemic, EU leaders have taken unprecedented measures: the recovery and resilience plan - a project that makes available to all EU countries the largest allocation of funds in the history of the EU. This plan is intended to repair the damage caused by the health crisis, but at the same time to speed up the modernization of the EU, especially through projects related to green energy, climate and digitalization (European Commission: 2020).

The health crisis seemed to have exhausted all recent challenges, but in February 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine so that from that moment the EU also has a security crisis with a war on the border in a region marked by many tensions and geopolitical complexities. The invasion of Russia represents the most powerful attack on a European country since World War II. The United States of America and the European Union have shown their solidarity and support for the Ukrainian people even though these things have come with a series of problems especially for Europe. EU sanctions against Russia have led to some tensions in the energy markets. So the countries that were linked to Russian gas began to identify solutions regarding energy

independence (Free Europe: 2022). In parallel with these new realities, the indirect role that the war in Ukraine has in strengthening the European project and implicitly to reduce the populist phenomenon in European countries and to understand more deeply the importance of belonging to NATO and the EU is being discussed more and more (Center for European Policy Studies: 2022).

We can say that starting with the crises of 2020, the European Union has proven that it is capable of reacting promptly, and thus we can talk about a revival of European integration. The pandemic crisis proved to be the opportunity for recovery and resilience for the entire European project. The new realities caused by this crisis make possible the emergence of a public opinion at the European level through which citizens believe that it is much better to act at the European level and not only at the national level (Kahn: 2021).

Beyond the expected, normal and quick reactions that the EU had after the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, there are other less optimistic perspectives regarding the European elections in 2024 and the long-term implications for the EU.

Far-right political forces propagating ideas of European disintegration had their biggest victory with Brexit and expect further victories in other countries where Euroscepticism is fueled. As we stated above and as we could see from the distribution of the populist vote in 2019, Hungary, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Poland, Latvia and even Austria are countries where we have increased risks. If the European elections had been immediately after the pandemic I think we would have had a serious problem considering the enormous suffering endured during this health crisis and the social and economic tragedy that seemed to await us.

Immediately after the start of the pandemic, there was a lot of pessimism and scapegoating. The dean of the school of governance in Brussels Luc Soete then took a public position of assumption and call for joint action: The time has come for a new European patriotism. New, because it must necessarily be rooted both in national communities remobilized on the theme of solidarity, and in transnational networks. The millions of employed citizens, volunteers, health workers and voluntary associations of civil society, active in the fields of work essential to the survival of our society, come together as one: this is the solid human basis for a new phase of the idea of Europe, this is the way to link Europe's core values with technical and political capacity in an innovative way, this is how we offer the world a message of hope and strength against this unprecedented crisis (Soete: 2020).

Since the pandemic, there has been talk of the possibility that a crisis of this magnitude could threaten the very existence of the EU, deepening divisions and multiplying the seeds of anti-European sentiment. Beyond the risks hovering over Europe at that time, many saw in this crisis the opportunity for the EU to address some of the fundamental deficiencies that exist in the architecture of the euro zone, for example. The response to the pandemic is a chance for Europe to reboot, focusing on a range of mechanisms at hand, including state aid, taxation, reallocation of labor and migration repositioning among others. The EU should not lose sight of wider societal goals such as climate neutrality and digitisation, but rather prioritize them. Finally, if leaders in Brussels manage things maturely, the pandemic may hold within it the potential to bring the EU together like no other event since its founding (Bénassy-Quéré, 2020: 204).

The hundreds of billions of euros put at stake for the recovery of Europe might not be enough if the moral inaction of the pro-European elites continues. The situation in the EU has never been more threatening, and political decisions can push millions of citizens towards Euroscepticism and nationalism with unpredictable consequences (Soete: 2020).

Conclusions

Since the dawn of the European Union project, nationalism has been a great challenge beyond the guarantees of the actors involved in the six founding states. It took many years for European citizens (EU or non-EU members) to understand that EU membership does not mean giving up national sovereignty and identity.

Along with the provocation of the nationalist phenomenon, Euroscepticism was also always present when a crisis engulfed Europe or when discussions regarding institutional reconfiguration, new treaties or discussions regarding the accession of other states to the EU were added to the EU agenda.

On a closer look, considering the graphs and arguments presented (except for the classic examples: Great Britain and the Netherlands), we can identify an identity divide regarding European culture and belonging between Western and Eastern Europe. This reality is also given by the historical, cultural, religious and political heritage on the one hand, but also by unfulfilled expectations on the other. The immediate period after accession came with a number of expectations from citizens. In Central and Eastern Europe, the post-accession period also overlapped with the post-communist transition period so that the expectations of the new member citizens were limitless. It can be seen that failure in national politics is associated with lack of attachment to Europe.

It is very likely that the emergence of these phenomena regarding Euroscepticism and populism also have a natural cyclical character, but they are also indirectly helped or generated by the EU's lack of reaction to certain acute problems.

The question that remains is: can these crises structurally affect the process of European construction? Including through the present analysis we recognize that there are certain implications, but we cannot say that we are dealing with certain consequences that could ultimately affect the European project. We will be able to have a more comprehensive answer after the elections for the European Parliament in June 2024. Then we will be able to observe whether the last European and national elections were the symptoms of certain trends or were the results of certain contexts and conjunctures. The crises of the last period have given rise to a revival for the European idea.

The European integration project emerged after the Second World War, a war that devastated the continent due to extreme nationalism. Let's hope that not too much has passed since then and that the memory of those sad times will prove the lucidity and maturity of Europeans so that Europe becomes even stronger beyond all the crises and challenges it faces.

REFERENCES

- Bărbulescu, Iordan Gheorghe (2015), *Noua Europă. Identitate și model European*, Polirom, Iași.
- BBC (2023), *Dutch election: Anti-Islam populist Geert Wilders wins dramatic victory*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67504272>, accessed on 15. 12. 2023.
- Bénassy-Quéré, Agnès; Weder di Mauro, (2020), *European Pandemic Recovery: An Opportunity to Reboot*, *Intereconomics: Review of European Economic Policy*, Vol. 55, No. 4, DOI: 10.1007/s10272-020-0901-5.
- Brie, Mircea (2016), *Identity as Frontier in Central and Eastern Europe. The Case of the Republic of Moldova*, în Mircea Brie, Alina Stoica, Florentina Chirodea (coord.), *The European Space Borders and Issues. In Honorem Professor Ioan Horga*, Editura Universității din Oradea/Debrecen University Press, Oradea/Debrecen, p. 359-381
- Brie, Mircea (2018), *Identity Revolution and Minority Emancipation: A Cause of the European Concert's Crash. Contemporary Analogues*, in Ioan Horga, Alina Stoica (coordonatori), *Europe a Century after the End of the First World War (1918-2018)*, București, Editura Academiei Române, p. 245-248
- Brie, Mircea (2019), *National minorities: levels of educational analysis*, in Karla Melinda Barth, Mircea Brie, Dragoș Dărăbăneanu, István Polgár, *The Role of Intercultural Communication in Adapting Ethnic Groups to the European Union Social Space*, Lambert Academic Publishing, p. 371-391
- Brie, Mircea (2021a), *Perspective de analiză interdisciplinară privind învățarea despre minoritățile etno-naționale*, în Mircea Brie, Karla Barth, Dragoș Dărăbăneanu, Istvan Polgar (coord.), *Integrarea europeană și reformarea educației românești. Comunicarea interculturală și dialogul multiethnic*, Debrecen University Press, p. 97-160
- Brie, Mircea (2021b), *Frontiere identitare în Republica Moldova. Abordări conceptuale și elemente comparative*, în Gabriel Moisa, Ioan Goman, Sorin Șipoș (coord.), *Vocație și devotament profesional Studii în onoarea lui Aurel Chiriac la 70 de ani*, Supliment nr. 1, *Crisia*, vol. LI, p. 322-340
- Brie, Mircea and Blaga, Daniela (2015), *Identity rematch in the European space*, în Alina Stoica, Ioan Horga, Mircea Brie, *Cultural Diplomacy at the Eastern and Western Borders of the European Union*, Editura Universității din Oradea, p. 255-273
- Britannica (2023), *Euroskepticism*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Euroskepticism>, accessed on 15. 12. 2023.
- Bujalos, István (2011), *Identitatea personală și națională în filosofia americană*, în Balogh Brigitta, Bernáth Krisztina, Bujalos István, Adrian Hatos, Murányi István (coord.), *Identitate europeană, națională și regional. Teorie și practică*, Editura Partium, Oradea, p. 79-91.
- Centre for European Policy Studies (2022), *Will Putin's war in Ukraine make the EU stronger?*, <https://www.ceps.eu/will-putins-war-in-ukraine-make-the-eu-stronger/>, accessed on 15. 12. 2023.
- David, Doina; Florea, Călin (2007), *Archetipul cultural și conceptul de tradiție*, in *The Proceedings of the European Integration-Between Tradition and Modernity Congress 2nd Edition*, Editura Universității „Petru Maior”, Târgu Mureș.

- Euractiv (2023), *Le Pen says Dutch can decide their EU future as 'Brits did'*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/le-pen-says-dutch-can-decide-their-eu-future-as-brits-did/>, accessed on 15. 12. 2023.
- Eurobarometer 67. *Public opinion in the European Union*, April - May 2007, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb67/eb67_en.pdf, accessed on 23.11.2023
- Eurobarometer 82. *European Citizenship*, Autumn 2014, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_citizen_en.pdf, accessed on 23.11.2023
- Europa Liberă (2022), *Ce alternative are România la gazul rusesc. Cele patru propuneri ale miniștrilor Energiei din UE*, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/alternative-la-gaz-rusesc/32026140.html>, accessed on 16. 12. 2023.
- European Commission (2020), *Recovery plan for Europe*, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/recovery-plan-europe_en, accessed on 16. 12. 2023.
- European Parliament (2019), *The 2019 Post-Electoral Survey have European Elections Entered a new Dimension?*, *Eurobarometer Survey 91.5 of the European Parliament A Public Opinion Monitoring Study* <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019/post-election-survey-2019-complete-results/report/en-post-election-survey-2019-report.pdf>, accessed on 05.12.2023
- European Parliament News (2023), *MEPs: Open accession talks with Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20231208IPR15784/meps-open-accession-talks-with-ukraine-moldova-and-bosnia-and-herzegovina>, accessed on 13. 12. 2023.
- European Parliament (2023), *Elections 2019: highest turnout in 20 years*, Final results (as of 2 July 2019). NI represents non-attached MEPs, the rest the different political groups., <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/eu-affairs/20190523STO52402/elections-2019-highest-turnout-in-20-years>, accessed 12. 11. 2023.
- Florin Poenaru (2012), *Republica Moldova: complexul de superioritate al României*, <http://www.criticatac.ro/18342/republica-moldova-ca-sindrom/>, accessed on 05.12.2023.
- formations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies. London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 295–307.
- formations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Fortunato, P., Pecoraro, M. (2022), *Social media, education, and the rise of populist Euroscepticism*. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 9, 301, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01317-y>.
- Gábor Flóra (2011), *Identitate și ideologie națională: o perspectivă socio-istorică*, in Balogh Brigitta, Bernáth Krisztina, Bujalos István, Adrian Hatos, Murányi István (coord.), *Identitate europeană, națională și regional. Teorie și practică*, Editura Partium, Oradea.
- Gherghina, Sergiu; Mișcoiu, Sergiu; eds., (2010), *Partide și personalități populiste în România postcomunistă*, Institutul European, Iași.
- Luzarraga, Francisco Aledcoea; Llorente Mercedes Guinea (2011), *Europa viitorului – Tratatul de la Lisabona*, Polirom, Iași.

- Margaret Thatcher Foundation: *Speech to the College of Europe ("The Bruges Speech")*, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107332>, accessed on 14. 12. 2023.
- Mișcoiu, Sergiu; Pantea, Ana Gabriela; Petrila, Laurențiu; (2023) *Who do We Trust? Blurry Perceptions on Authority of the Voters of the Romanian Radical Right-wing Populist Party Alliance for the Union of Romanians*, Political parties and civil society: a central and Eastern European perspective Radu Carp, István Péter Németh, Cristina Matiuța, Orsolya Falus, Zoltan Zakota (Eds.), Civil Szemle, Special Issue V, pp. 191-212.
- Mudde, C. (2016): *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe Today*" London Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Trends p. 295 – 307.
- Nexit, Frexit or Grexit? (2017): *The countries that could follow Britain out of the EU*. <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/02/13/nexit-frexit-or-grexit-the-countries-that-could-follow-britain-out-of-the-eu>. Html, accessed on 14. 12. 2023.
- Petrila, Laurențiu (2014): *A new beginning for Europe through rediscovering and prioritizing the european identity and values*, On-line Journal Modelling the New Europe, Issue no. 13/2014, pp. 106-121.
- Petrila, Laurențiu (2019), *Criza valorilor europene în contextual globalizării. Perspective identitare asupra Europei*, Eikon, București.
- Politico (2023), *Netherlands — 2023 general election*, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/netherlands/>, accessed on 14. 12. 2023.
- Popa, M. (2017): *Ascensiunea populismului*. POLIS, 4., (18.), Iași: Institutul European Report from European Parliament: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019/post-election-survey-2019-complete-results/report/en-post-election-survey-2019-report.pdf>.
- Reuters (2023), *Fico's win in Slovakia shows war fatigue in CEE but no major policy turn*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ficos-win-slovakia-shows-war-fatigue-cee-no-major-policy-turn-2023-10-02/>, accessed on 15. 12. 2023.
- Rooduijn M, Pirro ALP, Halikiopoulou D, et al. (2023), *The PopuList: A Database of Populist, Far-Left, and Far-Right Parties Using Expert-Informed Qualitative Comparative Classification (EiQCC)*. *British Journal of Political Science*, 1-10. doi:10.1017/S0007123423000431.
- Soete, Luc (2020), *Coronavirus: Without a new European patriotism, the decline of the EU is inevitable*, <https://www.merit.unu.edu/coronavirus-without-a-new-european-patriotism-the-decline-of-the-eu-is-inevitable/>, accessed on 17. 12. 2023.
- Statista (2023), *Share of respondents indicating a positive, neutral, or negative image of the European Union in EU member states from 2006 to 2022*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1360333/euroscepticism-european-union-public-image/>, accessed on 16. 12. 2023.
- Statista (2023), *Voter turnout in the European Parliament Elections in the European Union (EU) from 1979 to 2019*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/300427/eu-parliament-turnout-for-the-european-elections/>, accessed on 16. 12. 2023.
- Statista (2023), *Share of votes for populist and nationalist parties in the European Parliamentary Elections of 2019, by country*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1027735/populist-vote-share-in-eu-elections/>, accessed on 16. 12. 2023.

- Stoica, Mihnea (2021), Populist political advertising in times of pandemic: framing elites as antireligious. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 20., (60.).
- Sylvain Kahn (2021), *The Covid-19 pandemic, what lessons for the European Union?* <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0617-the-covid-19-pandemic-what-lessons-for-the-european-union>, accessed on 14. 12. 2023.
- The PopuList (2023) – the survey is available: <https://popu-list.org/>, accessed on 12.12.2023.
- Tismăneanu, Vladimir (2010), *Hypotheses on Populism: the Politics of Charismatic Protest, East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 15, nr 10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325401015001002>
- Zulianello, Mattia; Larsen, Erik Gahner; (2021), *Populist parties in European Parliament elections: A new dataset on left, right and valence populism from 1979 to 2019*, *Electoral Studies*, Volume 71, 102312, ISSN 0261-3794, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102312>.

