

# THE RAPIDLY GROWING EUROSCEPTICISM - A RESULT OF THE INTERNAL POLITICAL PROCESSES IN THE MEMBER STATES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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## **Abstract:**

*The report „The rapidly growing Euroscepticism - a result of the internal political processes in the member states of the European Union“ presents the realities and challenges facing the European Union in recent years, namely one of them is the growing Euroscepticism towards the project for a united Europe. The European values that have been fundamental to the construction of the European project, uniting for more than several decades free, democratic and peace-loving countries, are being tested given the desire of more and more EU citizens to strengthen the influence of the national states represented in the European structures, and the institutions of the Union to have less and less influence over the decisions in the legislative process of the individual member states, giving the prerogative of national law over European laws.*

*Euroscepticism even takes an extreme form with some European parties represented in the political system of the countries, agitating for their departure and disintegration of the Community.*

*The scientific report also presents and analyzes in detail the reasons and factors influencing public opinion in the EU, which led to the alienation of people from the political system of the Union, strengthening the desire for national separatism from the European institutional structures. Euroscepticism is becoming increasingly influential, both in the member states that laid the foundation for the creation of the EU after the end of the Second World War, and in the more recently joined former totalitarian states that have been democracies since 1989, a period associated with the end of the Cold War.*

**Key words:** European Union, Euroscepticism, Political system, National states, European institutions.

**JEL:** F

In recent decades, the world on a global scale has faced a number of challenges. Dealing with the growing number of armed conflicts, shortages of raw materials and vital livelihood resources in some of the poorest regions, leading to civil discontent with political elites, are only a small part of the problems facing the international community.

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The European Union, in particular, is no exception, and although not directly, it is indirectly subject to the upheavals that are plaguing the rest of the world. Being one of the most powerful international organizations in the world, built on the basis of peace, political understanding and economic prosperity, we can say that it is a peaceful place to live, ensuring to its millions of European citizens the right of free choice in a democratic environment. Despite these facts in the years of transformation and its increasing influence over the prerogatives of the individual nation states part of the Community, the EU seems to have lost some of its direct contact with European citizens, who essentially empower it by choosing one of the most important its structures, namely the European Parliament. Essentially, the lack of communication and an insufficient awareness campaign often lead to a misunderstanding on the part of EU citizens as to why a given policy should be implemented. This is one of the factors that lead to the tendency for the Euroscepticism to grow within the Union. I would point out and single out two main reasons, *political* and *economic*, for the emergence of persistent Euroscepticism in the member states.

- **Political reasons – European and national**

I classify the political reasons for the strengthening of Euroscepticism among the citizens of the Community into two categories, such as European and national. The first ones are related to how the influence of the institutions in Brussels directly affects people's sustainable dissatisfaction with the institutional model imposed in the EU in recent decades. The latter are generated by national states and, in particular, by national parties that are part of their political systems.

We could note that it is not equally spread in all the countries of the Community, as there are more pro-European societies and those that protect more the independence of their national states and do not agree at the supranational level that the EU imposes through the common European law its legislative initiative, to adopt and amend laws in given areas under its jurisdiction and to strengthen its influence over national and local legislation.

We can also mention that in some member states Euroscepticism is also encouraged by the local political system and in particular by individual national parties and not only by parliamentary groups with an overtly anti-European attitude. Very often, before important local or national elections, the topic of the existence and influence of the EU vis-à-vis the particular member state is used to mobilize the electoral potential of a given party, sometimes forgetting the common European values and policies, and betting populist on promises that will appeal to local voters. One could present many examples from recent years, how parties from EU member states skillfully maneuver between Brussels and their national parliamentary systems to achieve their own political benefit.

- **Economic reasons**

Another very important factor for strengthening Euroscepticism within the Union is the economic one. In recent decades, EU countries faced and experienced

more than one economic crisis, as an example we can point to the bankruptcy of the Greek economy in 2010. The uncertainty in the banking system (an example is a bank in Bulgaria that went bankrupt in 2014), relatively high unemployment (reaching values of 11.5% in Spain, *see Table 1*, which illustrates unemployment rates in the EU by member states), the uncertainty of the labor market and the fear of job loss are among the main factors that influence the constant strengthening of Euroscepticism in the Member States. The European Union, which has influence in more and more sectors concerning the economic development of national states, imposes, through the European community legislation, a regulatory policy towards a given member state that does not meet a specific criterion, which in turn sometimes negatively affects the well-being of certain layers of European society. As we all know, the member states are different in size of the territory, number of population, some are old democracies while others are former socialist republics with a lack of market economy before 1989 and their adaptability to the high criteria of the EU is a real challenge (for example the requirement to reduce carbon emissions in the atmosphere, which would in turn impose regulations on the use of internal combustion engine cars and phase out coal-fired power plants (CHP) from the energy system of member states; the ban on the import of Russian oil and natural gas imposed throughout the EU after the start of the war in Ukraine). For them, the Union applies a special derogation allowing them not to implement and postpone the given measure for a certain period of time. These measures are often associated with a worsening of the economic situation in a given sector and with an increase in the prices of certain goods and services, as well as job losses, with the European Union being attributed the negative effects of the restructuring of the given sector.

- **Euroscepticism in EU Member States from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)**

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe, namely the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the EU in two waves, in 2004 and 2007, have their own different historical development compared to the Western European ones. From the end of World War II until 1989, they were ruled by repressive totalitarian regimes that did not maintain deep political and economic ties with their ideological opponents, including the EU and the US. The so-called Cold War distanced them not only economically from the democratic Western world built on a functioning competitive environment and market economy, but also socially from the opportunity to maintain a high standard of living, to have access to the development of high technologies, to travel abroad and much more, etc.

Thus, a few decades ago, when the Iron Curtain fell and the World opened up to these countries, their citizens were enthusiastic about joining the prosperous European Union. Many hopes were attributed to him mainly in economic terms after the transition to a market economy, the transfer of ownership from state to private

hands through the realization of privatization and the entry of large Western companies to operate in the leading economic sectors and industries. Of course, after joining the EU, the CEE countries have developed tremendously in recent years, with their gross domestic product (GDP) per capita rising, foreign investment increasing, the business environment improving, etc., but many of their citizens were disappointed on a personal level by the lack of security or even the loss of the job, the increasing inflation leading to the increase in the prices of basic necessities, etc.

All these facts have led to a sustained increase in Euroscepticism as the EU no longer being credited with superpowers or seen as a panacea to solve Europeans' everyday problems and the initial enthusiasm and drive to join the EU and uphold its European values, has been replaced by a desire to return the greater neutrality of national member states to determine their own policies towards existential issues affecting people independently of Brussels. *Table 2* shows the desire of European citizens whether their country should continue to be part of the EU.

- **Euroscepticism towards the extension of the Schengen Agreement**

The Schengen Agreement, signed in 1985 in the Luxembourg village of the same name, represents one of the main achievements of the European integration process in the member states. In practice, they have removed border controls between themselves and thus facilitate the movement of people and goods within the EU. At the moment, all the countries in the Community enjoy this privilege except for Bulgaria and Romania, which since 2011, according to EC data, are ready to join the Schengen area, but some Eurosceptic governments refuse to admit them, as new members. Cyprus is also outside Schengen, but currently does not meet part of the membership criteria.

Given the escalation of multiple military conflicts in recent decades, namely the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, as well as the more recent ones in Ukraine and the Middle East between Israel and Palestine, increased the flow of immigrants to the EU. In several larger waves, in 2015 and 2022, an immigration crisis took shape in the EU as millions of people seeking political asylum headed to the Union's borders. To them we can add immigration caused by economic reasons and the aspiration of refugees for a better life and permanent establishment of a better place within the European Union.

Given the above-mentioned facts, Euroscepticism in many European societies, such as the Dutch, Austrian, etc., has increased tremendously and they have decided to encapsulate their political systems by not accepting the continued and unceasing development of the EU towards an open and globalizing system. Countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, which are not admitted to the Schengen Agreement, suffer from this fact and become hostages of the internal political interests and dependencies developing in Eurosceptic Western European societies.

We can mention that Euroscepticism is also two-sided, i.e. works both ways. On the one hand, it is represented and reinforced by the influence of external fac-

tors, such as high immigration in rich European societies and by the increase in the potential of organized crime in the Community, deterring their political determination to upgrade in the EU institutional model and continued development at the supranational level. On the other hand, it is also developed in the societies themselves and catch-up political systems of the member states (for example in Bulgaria and Romania regarding Schengen and in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary for joining the Eurozone).

- **Euroscepticism towards the Eurozone**

The Eurozone was created in 1999, with the member states committing to adopt and introduce into circulation in their national economic systems a common payment currency – the Euro. The European Central Bank (ECB) is created, which receives the status of one of the European institutions, and the national banks of the countries that have adopted the euro become dependent on its decisions. This is another example of the development and functioning of the EU as a supranational system.

The Euroscepticism manifested among European citizens, in relation to the Eurozone, is mainly aimed at the fear of a decrease in their purchasing power and an increase in the prices of goods and services. Thus, for years, some countries of the Community, although they are obliged to accept the euro in view of the one ratified by them (TFEU of Lisbon), do not decide to take action at the political level, declaring their official desire to join the European currency mechanism (ERM 2), through which the fulfillment of the criteria of whether a given member state is financially and economically ready to enter the Eurozone is monitored. Here is another example of the presence of Euroscepticism, both among European citizens and in their national governing structures and political elites representing them at a supranational level before the EU and its institutions. The support of EU citizens for the introduction of the euro as a national currency is presented in *Table 2*.

- **Europe of nation states against the creation of united European states (confederation / federation)**

In the EU, Euroscepticism is growing in strength and size, and its supporters have remained a constant quantity over recent decades. The idea of a united Europe dating from almost a century ago has changed in recent decades, as the European Union is no longer just an organization facilitating trade between the countries that created it in the past (an example is the abolition of customs duties), but has become a structure-determining force for its member states. The EU is involved in almost all sectors defining the foundations of the functioning of an internationally recognized state. By means of the Treaties on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU - the last in force is the Lisbon Treaty), it has the right, through its legislative initiative (directive), to implement laws at the national level in the member states, which in turn develop into regulations. A trend in the development of the Union since it was created is that each subsequently adopted

Treaty on Functioning (TFEU) deepens European integration and the EU acquires ever greater powers (competencies) over the functioning of national states.

In 2004, a European constitution was developed, signed and the process of ratifying by national states started and it would be universally valid for all the member states of the Community. This act would push the member states towards a confederative or even federal government in the not too distant future. Then the Republic of Ireland rejected the constitutional treaty in a referendum and the project was suspended indefinitely. Essentially, to date, EU intervention vis-à-vis its national member states is defined within three competences, namely *exclusive*, *shared* and *complementary*.

In the first case, at a supranational level, the EU itself determines the rules and imposes regulations in the Community countries, in the second case, this right is shared between it and the specific national government, while in the third case EU level has a consultative role.

EU sphere of influence vis-à-vis individual member states affected by its three competences extends into the following categories [European Commission. (2023). Areas of EU action]:

- *exclusive* - customs union; competition rules; monetary policy; trade; marine plants and animals;
- *shared* – single market; employment and social affairs; economic, social and territorial cohesion; Agriculture; fisheries; Environment; consumer protection; transportation; trans-European networks; energy; justice and fundamental rights; migration and home affairs; public health (Article 168 of the TFEU); scientific research and space; development cooperation and humanitarian aid;
- *complementary* – public health; industry; culture; tourism; education and training, youth and sport; Civil Protection; administrative cooperation;

As I mentioned above in the report, the trend in the development of the EU is to transfer more and more of the national powers of the member states to it, and this could be a prerequisite for revising the basic treaty, concluded between the governments and pushing its development towards a confederative or even federative form of government. To some extent, this would mean closing the existence of nation-states, at least as far as their current form of government is concerned, and the creation of a European United States on the example of the United States of America (USA). An example of a European country built on a federal principle is Switzerland, where different cultural communities speaking different mother tongues, namely Italian, French and German, form three separate cantons that have their independence from each other and from the central government, adopting and implementing own rules and laws, even regarding fiscal ones (tax rates are differentiated). Historically, there have been federations such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bosnia and Herzegovina, etc., as well as the former one between Serbia and Montenegro.



Essentially, the difference between a confederative and a federative mode of government is determined by the following:

A confederative union is between sovereign states or other types of organizations with common bodies, retaining their greater independence compared to the federal one. Local governments are more independent than national governments under confederation. The government is responsible for foreign policy and trade, defense and the common currency.

This process has not gone unnoticed by European citizens, and the Eurosceptic part of them is trying in every possible way to prevent the progressively globalizing Union, created initially as an economic agreement to ease the trade in coal and steel after the end of the Second World War, and subsequently growing into an economic agreement for free duty-free trade in goods, services and capital or the so-called single market between the founding nation-states. Every citizen of the EU can realize how much and in what direction the Union between the nation states has developed during its almost century-long history. Schengen, the Eurozone, the international connectivity between its member states culturally, hi-tech, scientifically, etc. level, have deepened to such a level that, to this day, giving them up seems unthinkable. However, Brexit and Britain's exit from the Community is a recent example of how Euroscepticism can overtake European integration and regress and fragment its integrity. On *Table 3* we can see the attitude of European citizens towards the EU and whether they imagine the future of their country outside of it.

## **Conclusion**

Although they are heterogeneous in terms of the size of the territory, the number of the population, economic and historical development, we can note that Euroscepticism is represented at the national level in all EU member states. Historically, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have joined the Community in recent decades, but both in them and in the older founding members of the Union, persistent and growing levels of Euroscepticism are noticeable.

The EU and the institutions that represent it are credited with many misfortunes, some of which serve at the national level to resolve the internal political struggles at the governmental and parliamentary level in the member states of the Union. Individual parties and parliamentary groups use the topic of the EU and a united Europe in order to mobilize their electoral potential before national and local elections, agitating from the realization of extreme Euroscepticism, through the disintegration of the EU and the departure of individual countries from the Community (an example is Brexit in Great Britain ) to limit its powers and sphere of influence in individual policies and competences, which are the exclusive prerogative of national governments.

<sup>2</sup>Table 1

EU member state		Unemployment rate in the EU for August 2023
1	Czech	2.5
2	Malta	2.7
3	Poland	2.8
4	Germany	3
5	Slovenia	3.5
6	Netherlands	3.6
7	Hungary	4
8	Ireland	4.1
9	Denmark	4.4
10	Bulgaria	4.5
11	Luxembourg	5.3
12	Austria	5.3
13	Romania	5.4
14	Belgium	5.5
15	Slovakia	5.8
16	Lithuania	6.1
17	Portugal	6.2
18	Latvia	6.6
19	Cyprus	6.6
20	Croatia	6.9
21	Finland	7.2
22	France	7.3
23	Italy	7.3
24	Estonia	7.6
25	Sweden	7.6
26	Greece	10.9
27	Spain	11.5

[Statista. (2023). Unemployment rate in member states of the European Union in August 2023].

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<sup>2</sup> Countries are listed in descending order. The results of the study are presented in percentages.



<sup>3</sup>Table 2

EU Member States from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)		In a referendum, will you vote to leave the EU		You are for or against the introduction of the Euro		
		Negative	Positive	2021	2022	2023
1	Slovakia	64	28	Eurozone member		
2	Bulgaria	71	23	54	34	49
3	Czech	75	21	33	44	45
4	Latvia	79	12	Eurozone member		
5	Poland	80	12	56	60	55
6	Hungary	83	11	69	70	72
7	Lithuania	84	7	Eurozone member		
8	Romania	86	13	75	77	71

[Statista. (2023). Imagine that the following weekend there will be a referendum in your country on its membership in the EU. How would you vote - for you country to stay in the EU or leave the EU?].

[Statista. (2023). Are you personally more in favor or against the idea of introducing the euro?].

<sup>3</sup> Countries are listed in descending order. The results of the study are presented in percentages.

<sup>4</sup>Table 3

EU member state		Do you want the country to leave the EU?					What is your attitude towards the EU?					
		Totally agree	Tend to agree	Don't Know	Tend to disagree	Totally disagree	Very positive	Fairly positive	Neutral	No opinion	Fairly negative	Very negative
1	Austria	15	20	8	33	24	10	29	38	1	13	9
2	Belgium	9	17	3	33	38	5	38	37	1	14	5
3	Bulgaria	12	20	17	23	28	13	36	32	1	13	5
4	Croatia	12	28	9	34	17	6	40	44	0	7	3
5	Cyprus	12	20	7	28	33	9	33	39	0	11	8
6	Czech	12	17	8	30	33	7	33	37	1	14	8
7	Denmark	6	11	2	30	51	14	49	28	1	6	2
8	Estonia	5	15	10	33	37	3	42	44	1	7	3
9	Finland	7	12	4	35	42	7	45	39	1	6	2
10	France	10	21	12	29	28	4	39	37	1	11	8
11	Germany	7	11	7	24	51	4	45	37	0	10	4
12	Greece	10	14	7	37	32	3	31	37	0	21	8
13	Hungary	10	25	6	28	31	5	40	40	0	13	2
14	Ireland	6	11	7	29	47	21	49	25	1	3	1
15	Italy	10	26	7	31	26	4	38	39	0	15	4
16	Latvia	9	15	7	31	38	6	44	40	2	5	3
17	Lithuania	7	12	3	32	46	7	50	37	0	5	1

<sup>4</sup> Countries are listed alphabetically. The results of the study are presented in percentages.

18	Luxembourg	7	21	7	25	40		6	61	25	0	6	2
19	Malta	14	11	4	23	48		31	33	29	1	5	1
20	Netherlands	8	11	2	26	53		7	49	30	1	10	3
21	Poland	12	25	4	26	33		14	39	41	0	4	2
22	Portugal	4	15	6	39	36		4	61	28	1	6	0
23	Romania	12	25	10	35	18		5	41	39	3	10	2
24	Slovakia	8	17	7	30	38		3	32	39	1	19	6
25	Slovenia	15	27	3	31	24		4	39	45	1	8	3
26	Spain	5	13	6	24	52		6	37	46	0	8	3
27	Sweden	8	22	0	35	35		9	54	27	0	8	2

[Statista. (2022). Share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing that their country could face the future better outside of the European Union in 2022].

[Statista. (2022). Share of respondents indicating they have a positive, negative, or neutral feelings towards the European Union in 2022, by EU member stat

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