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Euroscepticism and the concept of European interests[1]

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Abstract

The discourse about European integration currently prevailing in EU Member States does not evince a fitting place for the concept of European interests. Such neglect may be one of the most important factors responsible for the rise of Euroscepticism, which appears to be more destructive for the social cohesion of Member States than for European integration. In examining the most important cognitive factors behind Eurosceptic arguments, the author points out that their effectiveness relies on beliefs that supplant discursive knowledge. The most astonishing fact is that global challenges that can be better tackled by the Union than by individual states are absent from European discourse. However, the success of Eurosceptic parties in the 2014 election to the European Parliament seems to have altered the general perception of the European and world situation and, unexpectedly, to have turned into a factor favorable for European integration. Moreover, transnational reaction to Euroscepticism opens the way for the development of the European public sphere.

Key words: Euroscepticism, European Elections, European interests, national interests

The Meaning of Euroscepticism

"Euroscepticism" belongs to those handy concepts that at first glance seem to express a clear, simple idea. However, even preliminary reflection allows us to discern that its complexity inevitably leads to a variety of confusions. For example, Eurosceptic *attitudes* may refer to European integration or to the EU. More often, however, this concept refers to *views* or *statements* – again, either on European integration or on the EU – that are sometimes included in the programs of political parties. As we know, statements do not necessarily reflect real views since they may serve a variety of purposes, especially in politics. It is important to note that Eurosceptic attitudes toward the EU do not necessarily equate with negative attitudes toward European integration. Moreover, also surprising is that unfavourable attitudes toward European integration do not always entail a rejection of the European Union. In some cases such attitudes merely reflect a negative stance toward further enlargement of the EU. John McCormick aptly describes the complexity of the presence of Euroscepticism in the public

sphere in the following words: "We find the discussion about Europe mired in a toxic stew of pessimism, denial, hesitancy, myth and scepticism" (McCormick, 2013: 7). The situation regarding real views is even more complex since declared opinions may serve as political instruments and can be easily adjusted to changing political and social contexts. This was the case in December 2013 at Kiev's Euromaidan when a politician from a neighbouring EU state known in his home country for his notoriously Eurosceptic comments declared support for the European aspirations of Ukrainians and stressed the importance of European integration.

Analysis of the meaning of the concept of Euroscepticism can easily turn into a book, and this is exactly what happened to Cecile Leconte, the author of probably the best book on this subject (Leconte, 2010). Therefore, in order to go beyond this kind of study, one has to use a categorization that focuses only on certain features of this phenomenon. In fact, the work of Cecile Leconte offers a number of possibilities. One of them is Taggart's widely adopted distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' Euroscepticism, in which 'hard Eurosceptics' are "parties or actors who oppose EU membership as a principle" (Leconte, 2010: 8, Taggart, 1998). The UK Independence Party and the Polish Congress of the New Right could serve here as examples. 'Soft Eurosceptics' remain critical of the EU or European integration but in most cases their intention is to push for reforms. Some authors, however, try to distinguish differing levels of Euroscepticism, as demonstrated by the wide variety of attitudes toward European integration shown by the relevant parties in the Member States (Vasilopoulou, 2009). Another approach is to distinguish different positions within 'hard' and 'soft' types of Euroscepticism, pointing also to the differing motives: tactical or ideological. In this way we can see ideologically motivated 'committed Eurosceptics' or 'opportunistic Eurosceptics' who adopt a given position for reason of their tactical goals among hard Eurosceptics. Among those who are closer to the soft versions, we find a distinction between ideologically motivated 'critical Eurosceptics' and 'constructive Eurosceptics' whose motives are tactical (Statham, Koopmans, Tresh and Firmstone, 2010: 262–263).

Although awareness of the various meanings of the concept is essential in any argument on the matter, in many instances the aim of analysis and related research questions allow for some kind of semantic generalization. However, it seems more important to note that practical demonstrations of Euroscepticism of any kind may be quite independent from their political functions. For example, the impact of Eurosceptic political declarations on the electorate may be independent from the details of the given political party's anti-European objections since the decisive factors may relate to the level of trust enjoyed by the leaders of such a party. In general, domestic politics play an important role in forming people's attitudes toward the EU

and European integration. After all, in democratic systems the struggle of political parties for public support forms an important part of political life. Success in pursuing power depends on the politicians' skill of convincing the majority that their program is the best way to respond to public expectations. This means that political parties need public attention and exposure to political controversies (Koopmans, Erbe and Meyer, 2010: 94), both of which require public debate, mostly in the media. Domestic problems usually prevail in such debates so European matters are very often used instrumentally as issues controversial enough to bring down competitors on the domestic scene. The cases of Marie Le Pen in France and Farage in the UK well illustrate this kind of situation. From this perspective Euroscepticism appears as a byproduct of domestic politics.

Currently, in the second decade of the 21st century, we have the overwhelming impression that Euroscepticism is rising all over Europe. The success of 'hard' Eurosceptics in the 2014 elections to the European Parliament has confirmed this impression in a very convincing way, although the presence of Eurosceptic parliamentarians in the European Parliament had been noted earlier (Brack and Costa, 2009). In the numerous attempts to explain this phenomenon, many politicians tend to blame a variety of EU decisions, with enlargement to the East at the top of the list. This argument appears even in societies generally sympathetic to European integration (Rabiger, 2011: 219; Serricchio, 2012). Furthermore, at a time of global economic and financial crisis (something that should encourage Europeans to move closer together and demonstrate European solidarity), nationalistic and xenophobic ideas have gained substantial support within populations in a number of EU states, including founding Member States. For many observers this seems to prove that both the EU and the whole process of European integration are in trouble. However, here too one may notice a telltale selectiveness: while the forecasts, publicized at the peak of the fiscal crisis, that the Eurozone might break down have dominated the media, much less attention has been paid to the measures that did manage to get the fiscal crisis in the Euro area under control and thereby made further deepening of integration a real prospect.

In the present analysis, I attempt to concentrate not so much on the nuances of Eurosceptic attitudes, views, or declarations but on the possible effects of any phenomena that fits into the broad category of Euroscepticism. Moreover, I look for effects that, contrary to the substance of such phenomena, serve as a stimulus rather than as a barrier to the process of European integration. This essay will also show how views or attitudes identified as Eurosceptic can bring about positive effects regarding European integration.

My discussion from here will highlight the following mechanisms:

Clarification of the political positions of various political groups in the face of the destructive ideas of some Eurosceptic movements. Since some of these movements happened to be quite successful in the 2014 elections to the European Parliament, their presence in that institution initiated a consolidation of the pro-Europe parliamentarians across party lines, and this is likely to facilitate pro-Europe decisions.

The more visible Eurosceptic points of view in public discourse could be predicted to mobilize politicians, economic leaders and media interested in the progress of integration to put their arguments forward. In effect, as knowledge about the EU increases, the public should be better informed about the process. As suggested earlier, in the EU's Member States, European matters have increasingly become the subject of domestic debates orchestrated by political parties in their struggle for power (Sitter, 2002). In these debates nationalistic sentiments are usually used against European integration. Another area of debate concerns the economy, which is supposedly threatened by increased migration. In confrontations around these issues, politicians using Eurosceptic arguments usually count on the lack of basic knowledge about the principles of governance in the EU and about the real effects of the free movement of people for a host country's economy.

What is most striking in the public debate devoted to European integration is the absence of reflection about the current global challenges, which can be hardly be successfully dealt with by any single European state on its own.

The rise of Eurosceptic attitudes will force at least part of the public to look more closely at the possible alternatives to European integration and therefore to get a sense of current global tendencies. The broadening of the public perception of economic and political factors that are rapidly changing the geopolitical context of European integration may radically alter popular views on the current and future role of the EU in favor of further integration. Also, searches for alternatives to the current form of the EU governance have yielded a number of ideas that are aimed at improving the functioning of the Union. John FitzGibbon has presented a whole list of such "Euro-alternatives" (FitzGibbon, 2013: 9)

In order to foster the positive effects of Euroscepticism, the EU needs to redefine its information policy and its strategies on communication with citizens. There is a need, it seems, to develop public discourse to include the idea of European interests and allow

Europeans to see the direct link between European interests and the wellbeing of Member States.

The Absence of 'European Interests' in European Discourse

The rise of Euroscepticism, which followed the outbreak of the EU's economic and financial crisis and which was demonstrated in a spectacular way during elections to the European Parliament in 2014, has once again made answering several basic questions regarding European integration an urgent issue. What is the justification for replacing an important part of the sovereignty of nation-states with the collective sovereignty of the European Union? How can such a community accommodate the differing interests of the Member States? And, most important of all, what are the links between the interests of this new political system and the interests of its constituent parts; i.e., its nation-states?

The problem begins with the very discourse about European integration, which has somehow managed to function without the concept of EU interests. Of course, 'European interests' do appear sometimes, but this category is far being an organizing theme of European discourse. When we read about various interests within the European Union, the problem in most cases concerns either 'national interests' or the representation of various interest groups in the EU (Greenwood, 2007). Let me then start with a question that is more basic still: What is meant by 'European interests? And how do European interests relate to the 'national interests' of the Member States?

The recent experience of Eurosceptic arguments against the European Union reveals that the concept of 'national interests,' which can be found in the background of most Eurosceptic political programs, has been placed in a new framework. 'National interests,' which are supposedly threatened by European integration and must be 'defended,' have become one of the organizing themes of Eurosceptic discourse. It should not therefore surprise anyone that this concept is rarely confronted with the idea of 'European interests.' Moreover, no one seems to be bothered by the absence of this idea. After all, in most settings the European Union was long perceived as a club of nation-states negotiating in terms of their national interests when there were common projects and institutions on the agenda. Such a perception of the EU is reflected in the essential characteristics of its institutional architecture, which is dominated by intergovernmentalism and cedes the prevailing role to the European Council. Although it is obvious that in many areas EU Member States must have common interests

when confronting the external world, the idea of EU interests (usually only implied) has remained in the background. It may even sound silly to ask for justifications for the very existence of the Union, especially when the most important one in the Schuman Declaration – maintaining peace in Europe – seems to have but historical meaning given the Soviet Union's collapse. (However, Russia's recent aggressive behavior has returned peace as one of the major objectives of European integration.) It is also apparent that talking about 'European interests' may be not the right expression when the object of the debate is just the EU. Therefore, it should be clear that the use of the phrase 'European interests' in reference to the EU is conventional.

On the other hand, such shorthand does indicate something. Namely, it demonstrates certain aspirations regarding the EU – for instance, the aspiration to be the best organized part of Europe and represent Europe at its best. Of course, such aspirations may be questioned by certain European states that are outside the EU as well as by Eurosceptics within the EU. Nevertheless, in EU discourse it is quite common to say 'European' when talking about the European Union. In fact, such practice was already common many years ago when the European Community consisted of just six states. Let me then write about 'European interests' with the interests of the EU in mind. The first question we need to answer is why should we talk about European interests at all?

In every complex social or political entity, its parts may have distinct needs and divergent visions for development that can be spelled out as different 'interests.' This is true in the case of the various districts of any city or the distinct regions within the same country, and it is certainly true for the different states of the European Union. At the same time, however, in all these cases, there is a number of common strategic issues, many of which have found expression in the divisions of competences between the EU and its Member States. However, the current crisis, including the fiscal problems of the Eurozone and the security threats from the EU's Eastern neighbours, has made it clear that the constitutional solutions present in existing treaties leave many common interests without adequate protection.

In its Executive Summary of the "Europe 2020 Strategy," the European Commission offered a smart way for European and national interests to meet. In that document we read: "To ensure that each Member State tailors the Europe 2020 strategy to its particular situation, the Commission proposes that EU goals are translated into national targets and trajectories" (p.3). It is probably deliberate that the concept of interests – whether European or national – does not appear in the text. Instead we read about 'EU goals' and 'national targets and trajectories.' This is a good example of the choice of a communication practice operating

within the scope of actions – like goals, targets or trajectories – rather than within the emotionally loaded category of interests usually present in national discourse. Although in such a formulation one can detect the hope that European interests can be taken care of in a national context, the resignation from its explicit expression may be debatable. The presence of 'European interests' in public discourse in the Member States would create a direct reference to the broader context that all states have to accommodate. There is no better way to expose the common interests in the European Union than by confronting the variety of 'national interests' with the common challenges. To do this we need a discourse that openly addresses both European and national interests. At present these conceptual categories have been seized by the Eurosceptics.

In the current analysis I inquire whether the avoidance of conceptual categories, the discussion of which is common in the national discourse of Member States, in the EU's official language is proper. It seems that the only way to combat nationalistic Euroscepticism is to confront its arguments with the same conceptual instruments, while extending their time span and general perspective from the few years between parliamentary elections to the long-term perspective required by strategic thinking. Such a communication strategy also offers the chance of overcoming some of the differences between the European states' domestic politics, which at present makes Europeans blind to both common threats and common opportunities. Strategic thinking requires much a further horizon than 2020 and needs new instruments of communication capable of reaching the wide multinational European public.

There is a need to develop an awareness of European interests that does not compete with the national interests of the Member States but rather gives them – especially in the long run – a greater chance to find their place in the global environment. On the other hand, the national interests of each country should become the subject of pan-European debate in order to make them rational within a political construction aimed at the wellbeing of every Member State and their future in the Union. The question is whether such transnationalization of national perspective is possible. Of course, a lot depends on the communication strategy but constitutionalists suggest that there is a possibility, and even a necessity, of building the European Union's legal integrity by including in its normative framework a variety of solutions that can be identified in the constitutions of the Member States. Such a "national rescue of the European Union" would need to refer to "the collective of national democratic constitutions" (Augustin Jose Menendez, 2013: 525). Although this issue seems to be separate from my current discussion about European interests, there is a clear link between the

construction of a normative dimension of European integration and the perception of both national and European interests.

In order to cope with national aspirations that at a certain point have turned against European integration or the European Union, we needed to look at the meaning of Euroscepticism. In general, one may speculate that the phenomenon of Euroscepticism, at least in some of its forms, may be an outcome of the absence of 'European interests' in European discourse. In fact, over the six decades of European integration, the interests of individual partners in this process have been stressed over the interests of the community.

What Does the Consolidation of Pro-European Groups Mean?

Coming back to the first of the three arguments mentioned earlier, it is important to stress that the consolidation of pro-European parties across party lines in the 2014 European Parliament, especially the "grand coalition" of the Peoples Party and the Socialists, indicates that political life in the EU and the attitudes of Europeans towards the integration process are polarizing. This phenomenon may have serious implications for the future of the EU. It will certainly affect the difficult process of social integration in the Union, mostly by a kind of institutionalization of both the social divisions in Member States and the differences in attitudes toward the EU and/or European integration. Such divisions illustrate views that are directly opposed to each other, like those in Britain who want the UK to remain in the EU and those who opt for withdrawal from the Union. In most countries such differences have been wrapped up in special programs offered by political parties. Thus, many authors talk about a "party-based Euroscepticism" (Sydov, 2013: 26). I want to stress that it is not Euroscepticism itself which is so disturbing but the fact that its institutionalization by political parties may lead to a more dangerous effect. This would work against the social unity of Member States in the most sensitive areas, ones that decide about such important social dimensions as collective identity, evaluation of national heritage, and attitudes toward immigrants. In effect, Euroscepticism may prove more destructive for the societies of some Member States than for the European Union.

Such institutionalized divisions are deepening the conflict between pro- and anti-European groups and are creating a favourable environment for anti-European politicians to press their case further. We should not belittle the differences in views and attitudes regarding European integration and should try to identify the precise basis of social division they indicate in order to discover why differences in the perception of European integration and its evaluation are so

persistent. There are many reasons for these differences; some are simply linked to differing interests but substantial ones seem to have a cognitive nature – especially as far as the stable electorate of some of the Eurosceptic parties is concerned. The problem is more serious than just the level of knowledge about the EU, which of course should not be underestimated either for it may indeed be the "root cause" as McCormick suggests: "If there is a single root cause, it is the knowledge deficit, or the gap between what the EU does and what most Europeans know and understand about its work" (McCormick, 2013: 8). However, while the knowledge deficit can be eliminated with a more intense and better organized program of public education, there are other cognitive factors that are more difficult to deal with.

The polarization of public attitudes regarding European integration draws our attention to two background factors behind political behaviour that belong to different cognitive categories and thus can hardly be explained within the same discourse – the one is discursive knowledge and the other emotionally loaded beliefs. While knowledge tends to operate within logical thinking and refers mostly to facts, beliefs can be rooted in traditions and refer to values that often, usually unconsciously, draw their power from mythical thinking. While building up systematized knowledge requires laborious, organized teaching effort, beliefs can be established by primary socialization, which is a process of strong formative power and takes place – first of all – in the family. Since the main institution of secondary socialization is the school, the importance of the process of formal education cannot be overestimated. Unfortunately, this is exactly the area that remains within the Member States' jurisdiction, and moreover – to a great extent in its social and humanistic aspects – is also dependent on public sentiments. These sentiments influence the process of education through the involvement of a variety of institutions like churches and sundry organizations that are part of civil society. Also, they can be found most often at the core of an ethnic group's cultural heritage, including national literature and mythology.

As we know, beliefs can not only substitute knowledge but also successfully neutralize the potential of logical thinking by imposing a selective view on knowledge and facts so they support the desired picture of reality. This is why in many political struggles conflicting attitudes leave little space for compromise. Since beliefs are an inescapable part of our consciousness and play an important role in creating and maintaining our attitudes, it seems necessary to inquire whether we could possibly reach and modify beliefs so that knowledge could become the operating factor in forming views on European integration, views free from unfounded presuppositions. Everyday observations of the most common communication practices lead to conclusions that are not very optimistic. After all, it is exactly this disparity

between knowledge and beliefs that can be found at the root of all kinds of prejudices leading, for example, to nationalism or anti-Semitism. Therefore, the polarization of societies around pro- and anti-European ideas – even if the current Eurosceptics play only a marginal role – is a very disturbing phenomenon, mostly because it has the potential to revive ghosts from the past, starting with forms of nationalism that are damaging to the idea of European integration. Still, consolidation of the pro-European groups promises further institutional steps toward a more integrated Europe, for such consolidation may be instrumental for endeavours, for example, in education and culture, which would create better conditions for coping with anti-European beliefs and Eurosceptic institutional alternatives. This may open the way for a more successful pro-European socialization of new generations of Europeans. The most important element of such a task is broadening people's horizons so they reach much further than their own country – and even further than Europe.

Including the Global Context into Our Thinking About European Integration

The rise of Euroscepticism can be met with more intense and more effective argumentation by pointing to external and, especially, global challenges. There is no doubt that larger political units are in a better position to cope with such challenges. In fact, taking into consideration the current problems at both the EU's borders and globally, the negative attitudes of some Europeans toward European integration cannot be easily explained. Of course, in the case of some politicians it might be just cynicism but such attitudes indicate a kind of blindness to facts that for the majority (fortunately) make a strong case in favor of integration. However, it seems that the average member of any society rarely draws conclusions relevant to political life from general information about the world's political and economic situation. Moreover, this problem of mental isolation has not been sufficiently studied. Russell Neuman, who was puzzled by the "paradox of mass politics," posed a question which leads us to the very heart of this issue: "Do the masses and elites process political information in distinctly different ways?" (Neumann, 1986:3). This question inevitably leads to the problem of public opinion and the processes that determine which way the public votes. The paradox pointed out by Neuman consists of the dramatic disparity between the low level of political knowledge of the public and the great impact of the masses on the political process in a democratic system. Its explanation refers to the role of opinion leaders, who are most likely part of the elite. However, the situation of the 'European public' is quite different than the American society

studied by Neuman. While problems linked to Euroscepticism have a transnational dimension, the active opinion leaders and the framework of debate are most often national. For those leaders, debating local issues would always serve their political goals better than their statements on global problems would. Also, it is easier to exploit beliefs of a local origin than arguments that reach further. Therefore, in order to cope with the blindness of the public to the global challenges, reaching the masses needs to become the prime objective of pro-European opinion leaders. Mobilization of political leaders and the media around an intense teaching effort, addressed to the electorate of the Eurosceptic parties, seems the most logical response to this situation. McCormick cites J. Monnet, who in his memoirs formulated quite an obvious rule – "People only accept change when they are faced with necessity, and only recognize necessity when a crisis is upon them" (McCormick 2013: 12). The global situation in the second decade of the 21st century is not short of crises. To name only some: the financial and economic crisis that has only been mitigated by the very problematic moves of the US and EU central banks – and it is still brewing; the Middle East continues to burn due to the advances of radical Islamists; and Russia is demonstrating its complete disregard for the international norms that until now have been thought of as unbreakable. In general, the global situation seems to be getting out of hand.

European integration had often been perceived as a way of grasping control, at least within a range which is manageable – that is, within the regional European dimension (Niżnik, 1999). Today, reaching the European public with this knowledge is imperative. However, knowledge needs to transplant beliefs that are mostly based on the long process of nationally oriented socialization.

Taking into consideration the current global context, the Eurosceptic campaign of some political groups and their media appears as a kind of disinformation activity that urgently needs a response. Bringing global awareness to the minds of average citizens truly requires the unified efforts of responsible political and economic leaders, as well as a new information strategy on the part of the media, which must realize the disparity between the old and new discourses. The old one is still built up around the Westphalian vision of Europe's political architecture, with major categories like 'sovereignty' not greatly serving technical or legal purposes, but even more so – apart from the current political reality – the role of fundamental, unquestioned values.

Although the new discourse (its beginning could be dated to the 1950 Schuman Declaration) allowed the spectacular progress of European integration, it is still clashing with the old. This is a deliberate ploy by some politicians who count on political success by

nourishing old beliefs that are still present in the deep consciousness of some of their constituents. Some researchers suggest that Euroscepticism itself is a peculiar discursive formation that is affecting the identity of certain groups with the help of their cultural heritage (Trenz and de Wilde, 2009: 11). Still, the coordinated efforts of Europeans sympathetic to the idea of integration may enable a successful teaching process, leading to a more balanced perception of the current world situation. Broad public awareness of global challenges seems the necessary condition for turning Member-State societies into a European society. Only then will we be able to take advantage of European potential and possibly tackle the most dramatic global threats.

The Eurosceptic campaign of some political parties in the largest EU Member States, like the UK, France, Germany, and Poland, will probably internationalize the language of political debate in those countries as well as the whole of Europe. Moreover, such a transformation – against the intentions of Eurosceptics – can make the European public sphere a real possibility. There is a chance that the current rise of Euroscepticism will bring quite unexpected effects, and ones that work in favour of European integration. The beginning of this process was observed during the internal organization of political groups in the European Parliament in 2014. As it happened, attempts to unite Eurosceptic groups around common objectives brought very limited success, in contrast to the pro-European parties, which managed to avoid conflicting choices. But the most promising effect was the transnational debate initiated by the rise of Eurosceptic political parties in different EU states. This debate went beyond usual parliamentary negotiations and reached the public. In effect, there are good reasons to expect that what seemed to threaten European integration, due to the revival of thinking in terms of national interests, will create conditions for thinking in terms of European interests.

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