**Euroscepticism in Romania: Nonexistent or Slowly Starting?**

Master Thesis International Relations

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List of Contents

[List of Abbreviations 3](#_Toc79933335)

[Abstract 4](#_Toc79933336)

[Introduction 5](#_Toc79933337)

[Chapter 1: 2007: A New Beginning 13](#_Toc79933338)

[The General Sense among the Romanian Public 14](#_Toc79933339)

[Why Were the Romanians Optimistic? 16](#_Toc79933340)

[Was There Any Skepticism? 20](#_Toc79933341)

[Was National Identity a Problem? 20](#_Toc79933342)

[Were There Any Salient Topics in Romanian Newspapers That Could Cause Tension? 21](#_Toc79933343)

[Eurobarometer Data Shows a High Level of Trust 22](#_Toc79933344)

[Conclusion 23](#_Toc79933345)

[Chapter 2: 2012-2014: A Turbulent Period 25](#_Toc79933346)

[The 2012 Impeachment Referendum: The Bomb 25](#_Toc79933347)

[The 2012 Impeachment Referendum: The Fallout 28](#_Toc79933348)

[The 2012 Impeachment Referendum: The Reporting 31](#_Toc79933349)

[The 2014 Presidential Elections 34](#_Toc79933350)

[Effects on Public Opinion and Eurobarometer Data 37](#_Toc79933351)

[Conclusion 42](#_Toc79933352)

[Chapter 3: 2020: A Global Lockdown 44](#_Toc79933353)

[The Coronavirus Pandemic 44](#_Toc79933354)

[The Emergence of AUR 47](#_Toc79933355)

[The Birth of USR PLUS 49](#_Toc79933356)

[The 2020 Legislative Elections 50](#_Toc79933357)

[Eurobarometer 94: Winter 2020-2021 53](#_Toc79933358)

[Conclusion 56](#_Toc79933359)

[Conclusion 58](#_Toc79933360)

[Bibliography 61](#_Toc79933361)

# List of Abbreviations

AUR Alliance for the Union of Romanians

CCR Constitutional Court of Romania

Eb Eurobarometer

EC European Commission

EU European Union

PDL Democratic Liberal Party (Romania)

PLUS Freedom, Unity, and Solidarity Party (Romania)

PNL National Liberal Party (Romania)

PSD Social Democratic Party (Romania)

RO Romania

SIE Foreign Intelligence Service (Romania)

USL Social Liberal Union (Romania)

USR Save Romania Union (Romania)

# Abstract

European integration has seen better days. Following the European debt crisis, Brexit, and the coronavirus pandemic, EU member states are becoming increasingly Eurosceptic. These crises have lead to the radicalization of some Eastern European countries like Poland and Hungary. Within this debate, little attention has been given to the more inconspicuous (Eastern) member states, such as Romania. This thesis aims to contribute to the growing area of research surrounding European integration by exploring the case of Romania. Specifically, it will show a short, contemporary history of Euroscepticism in Romania.

This thesis examines Eurobarometer data and notable domestic events in Romanian history since its accession to the EU by applying these to the theory of postfunctionalism. It suggests that the presence of Eurosceptic parties in the domestic political landscape of a nation is crucial for the spread of Euroscepticism. Until the most recent elections, no Eurosceptic party was able to get into parliament. Through the coronavirus pandemic, Romanians became increasingly disillusioned by the EU and voted Eurosceptic right-wing populist parties into parliament. Such parties use nationalist sentiment to promote an exclusive identity, critize the EU in its current form, and validate Eurosceptic thought throughout the nation. On this basis, the coronavirus pandemic seemed like the catalyst for Euroscepticism to be present in Romania.

*Keywords*: Euroscepticism, Romania, European Union, European integration, postfunctionalism, public opinion, national identity, populism.

# Introduction

“There is a historic battle going on now across the West, in Europe, America, and elsewhere. It is globalism against populism. And you may loathe populism, but I tell you a funny thing, it is becoming quite popular.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This was Nigel Farage’s last speech in the European Parliament on the evening of Brexit, and his words hold true to this day. In short, there currently is an ideological clash in the western world, which has direct consequences on the European Union (EU).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Today populism, globalism, and more importantly, Euroscepticism are striving for dominance across Europe.[[3]](#footnote-3) Though Euroscepticism was not explicitly mentioned, it is intrinsically linked to the kind of populism Farage speaks of regarding Brexit.[[4]](#footnote-4) The past twenty years have seen increasingly rapid advances in Euroscepticism.[[5]](#footnote-5) The EU can do little more than accept its member states leaving the union as a result, as has been the case with Brexit. Euroscepticism is fundamental to the process of European integration and, therefore, the future of the EU itself. There is increasing concern that Euroscepticism could further debilitate the process of European integration. Euroscepticism has received considerable critical attention from scholars, who argue the various influences on Euroscepticism and how it manifests itself.

To understand the situation in Europe, a basic understanding of Eurosceptic thought is critical, and thereby the academic debate surrounding it. Euroscepticism can broadly be defined as skepticism surrounding the EU or European integration in general.[[6]](#footnote-6) It was not until the 1960s in France, under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle, that historians considered Euroscepticism worthy of scholarly attention.[[7]](#footnote-7) The academic literature on Euroscepticism has revealed the emergence of several important themes. What follows is an account of various notable studies regarding Euroscepticism.

One prominent study regarding Euroscepticism has been conducted by political scientist duo Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks. Hooghe and Marks have carried out several studies in the realm of International Relations. In one well-known publication, the duo developed the theory of postfunctionalism as an answer to developments occurring in international politics. Postfunctionalism argues that three distinguished concepts helped shape attitudes over Europe about the EU. These concepts include public opinion, economic interests, and, lastly, national identities.[[8]](#footnote-8) Each of these concepts has the potential to halt further European integration.[[9]](#footnote-9) Hooghe and Marks try to explain the sources of Euroscepticism, how it spread across Europe, and its varieties. They want to accomplish this by looking at set sources of information about various EU member states to establish a common variable or a “red line.” These sources of information include but are not limited to national public opinion surveys, European election surveys, expert data on party positioning, media content data, and Eurobarometer surveys.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Another notable study about the politicization of European integration was published by Thomas Winzen in 2020. Winzen used the postfunctionalist theory in his research and emphasized the importance of the domestic political terrain within nations. According to him, Euroscepticism becomes a more significant threat when it is more present in national governments.[[11]](#footnote-11) Winzen claims indirect influences, such as pressure from Eurosceptic opposition parties, are insufficient pressure. Lest such parties find themselves in a coalition, their effects would not be long-lasting.[[12]](#footnote-12) Winzen ends his research by stating that there are several conditions that are prerequisites for Euroscepticism to grow. Examples of these are referendums, high opposition, and public parliamentary processes. The less entrenched the government policy is along the delegation chain, the easier it is for Eurosceptics to politicize topics and influence the masses. In this regard, public opinion along with the arrangement of the national parliament are the most important factors when measuring Euroscepticism within a country.

Two more studies on Euroscepticism single out national identity as a key component. Lauren McLaren and Sean Carey have conducted their own unique research on Euroscepticism. McLaren’s examination of public support for EU policies during the early 2000s found that the root motivation of Euroscepticism lay heavily in national identity.[[13]](#footnote-13) She concluded her research by distinguishing three key factors that turned people into Eurosceptics: exclusive national identities, disadvantages caused by the EU, and distrust of EU institutions.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Likewise, Carey’s results are similar to those reported by McLaren. His research was solely focused on national identity. Carey concluded his research by stating that the effects of national identity go together with other utilitarian explanations of Euroscepticism, such as income, education, and political interest.[[15]](#footnote-15) This means that many variables can influence the population’s opinion of the EU. It is important to note that these publications are nearly two decades old. Nonetheless, they continuously act as referrable sources to present-day research and are therefore relevant in the current debate.[[16]](#footnote-16)

However, Euroscepticism does not only exist through differences in identity. According to a study by De Vries, Euroscepticism rises through the politicization of topics and interdependence.[[17]](#footnote-17) While national identities lay the foundation for the difference between groups of people, politicization and interdependence exacerbate these problems.[[18]](#footnote-18) De Vries uses the term politicization to refer to the polarization of opinions and the extent to which they limit policy formulation within the EU.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Overall, there seems to be some evidence to indicate that postfunctionalist theory is most applicable when researching Euroscepticism. Hooghe and Marks lay the groundwork in what is most important with their theory of postfunctionalism: public opinion, national identity, and economic interests. Winzen adds to this by highlighting the relevance of the domestic government office, and whether Eurosceptic parties are present in national parliaments.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Nevertheless, through all these publications and theories, several questions remain unanswered. Going back to Farage’s speech, he mentioned a battle raging in the West. But what about the East? Eastern Europe has seen countries become increasingly authoritarian. If not for Belarus, which is not an EU member state, countries like Hungary and Poland sure have made questionable steps in regard to abortion and gay rights. Despite the upward trend in the rest of (Eastern) Europe, Romania on the other hand, seems unaffected by Euroscepticism.[[21]](#footnote-21) It could be fruitful to investigate the case of Romania, as it could add context in the future when discussing the trend of Eurosceptic thought in the EU.

To date, Euroscepticism in Romania has received scant attention in the literature. Previously published studies are limited to small-scale articles with little reach, one of the most prominent studies being only a couple of pages long.[[22]](#footnote-22) Studies with a narrow timeframe such as these do not necessarily show subtle changes over time. This thesis, therefore, sets out to fill the gap in the existing debate. The purpose of this study is to illustrate a short, contemporary history of Euroscepticism in Romania since its admission to the EU.

This leads to the central research question of this thesis: How did Euroscepticism develop in Romania since its accession to the EU in 2007? To answer the central research question, this thesis will comprise three chapters. These are concerned with three different periods with three distinct questions. During each period, Eurobarometer surveys will be analyzed to show public opinion towards certain topics.

With this said, chapter one will look at 2007. This was Romania’s first year as an EU member state and will be the baseline from which the country could either learn to trust the EU more or sway towards Euroscepticism. It will answer the first sub-question: What was the Romanian sentiment towards the EU in 2007?

The second chapter will focus on 2012 and 2014, Romania’s more salient election years and referendum. This chapter will first look at 2012. It is the year the prevalent center-left Social Democratic Party (PSD) merged with the center-right National Liberal Party (PNL) in an attempt to impeach former President Traian Băsescu through a referendum. As Winzen argued, referendums were means through which the domestic political terrain could become vulnerable to Euroscepticism. The chapter will also look at the 2014 presidential elections. This year is interesting because it had widespread protests against the disenfranchised Romanian population living in Europe and beyond. National political parties could take on Eurosceptic positions during this turmoil. Thus this chapter will answer the second sub-question: Did the politically turbulent period between 2012 and 2014 change the attitude of the Romanian people towards the EU?

Chapter three will examine 2020, the year Europe went on lockdown following the announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic. 2020 coincidentally happened to be an election year featuring the prominence of newly formed right-wing populist parties, such as the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR). It will answer the last sub-question: What was the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and emergence of new right-wing populist parties during the 2020 elections on the way Romanians viewed the EU?

A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches will be used in the data analysis. While most of this thesis will focus on the “how” and “why” of circumstances, a sizable portion will rely on quantitative tools through Eurobarometer data. While the first chapter will mostly focus on Eurobarometer data, chapters two and three will look at important developments to see if these changed the way the public perceived the EU. In turn, this could potentially steer public opinion towards Euroscepticism. Concretely, the Eurobarometer will show whether specific developments had altered public opinion. Considering Eurobarometer data has a reliable history of being used in past researches, this should prove to be a credible source of information.[[23]](#footnote-23) Furthermore, research articles on Euroscepticism seem to generally agree with postfunctionalist theory’s claim that the main drive behind any political movement is the mass public. This is exactly where the Eurobarometer gets its strength; it was designed to be a measuring tool for public opinion. However, because these chapters will look at other aspects that affect public opinion, they will by default explain “how” and “why” Romanians were either supportive or skeptical of the EU.

The findings of this thesis should make an important contribution to the field of Euroscepticism. Due to practical constraints, this study cannot comprehensively review every aspect within the given years. This thesis also does not engage with years not mentioned before, limiting the scope by a significant margin.

The main source through which this thesis will conduct its research is the Eurobarometer, which has been used before in comparable research.[[24]](#footnote-24) One such example is Kuhn’s multilevel analysis of 79 pooled Eurobarometer surveys spanning across 12 countries, which concluded by stating income inequality boosts Euroscepticism.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Because Eurobarometer data will be used throughout this thesis, it is important to explain how it functions and from where it originates. The Eurobarometer is a series of opinion polls executed by the European Commission (EC) to measure public opinion across EU member states since 1973. It consists out of two lines of questioning. The first asks about people’s personal lives, the second asks about the process of European integration. Questions regarding the second category are usually formed to spark a more tangible response than the more abstract structure of the first category.[[26]](#footnote-26) The Eurobarometer is split into four specific types of surveys. The principal way in which the Eurobarometer presents itself is through its monthly Plenary Insight. This aims at providing opinions on key topics of the current plenary agenda. The second type is the Parlemeter, which asks for EU citizens’ opinion on the EU and their membership. Thirdly, the European Elections surveys pertain to EU citizens’ thoughts regarding the European Elections. Lastly, the European Commission can initiate a Eurobarometer survey for Specific Surveys, examples being thoughts on the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Eurobarometer has four more subdivisions in which it catalogs itself: standard, special, flash, and qualitative surveys. The standard Eurobarometer is released twice a year, as opposed to the remaining three types, which are released sporadically. Considering the standard EB (Eurobarometer) is the most consistent version; it is also the most reliable. Its standardized form of measuring will allow for a continuous, flowing source on which to base this thesis. While the remaining three forms of the EB have their own merits, many would be irrelevant. That being said, if a valuable special, flash, or qualitative EB presents itself, it would be a waste not to incorporate it into the analysis of this thesis.

While it is true that the Eurobarometer acts as an oasis of information in a desert, it is important to pay heed and not fall victim to a mirage. For all its efforts and value, the Eurobarometer does not provide the necessary context to surveyees’ answers. For example, the Eurobarometer could show a distinct Romanian hate towards blue cheese. Granted, there would be an answer provided to the question, but there would be no explanation of the underlying structures and contingencies that drove public opinion to said answer. Perhaps the old Francophile Romanians were still upset at the lack of French aid during World War II. Or maybe the Romanians were big fans of Dutch Gouda cheese instead. This is an unconventional example, but it does drive home the point that researchers must provide context to the Eurobarometer data, this thesis included.

Acknowledging this, sources are required to provide the necessary context behind the data provided by the Eurobarometer. Public discourse has, in research prior to this one, been a reliable source to measure this. Newspapers display a modicum of arguments and opinions regarding topics of national value and have been used in other relevant published articles regarding Euroscepticism.[[27]](#footnote-27) This is intrinsically linked to people’s self-identity to their home nation, which is where national identity finds its beginning. Two nation-wide, Bucharest-based, Romanian newspapers stand out when considering the formerly mentioned qualities: *Adevărul*, a broadly read newspaper with a slight alignment towards the center-left, and *România Liberă*, which is aligned more towards conservatism. The goal is to use these structurally; throughout this thesis, articles from these newspapers will be utilized to contextualize developments.

Lastly, three other forms of sources will be used throughout this thesis. Firstly, newspapers from other countries can provide new perspectives, especially during periods like 2012 and 2014, when Romania witnessed heavy domestic turmoil. An outsider’s point of view could yield valuable insights during this period. Secondly, debates, interviews, and speeches on television from political figures will show how the political elite in Romania plead their case to the public. Such speeches or debates are often ingrained by party values and could give further information to how the political elite felt towards the EU. And as Winzen argued, it is important to monitor the way the domestic political terrain evolved. If the political elite were to become Eurosceptic, this should, in theory, influence the population. Lastly, NGO reports or reports from various foundations can also give important context to the findings. Lastly, programs from national political parties will also be included. These are but a few more examples of primary sources, which, together with quality press, will provide the necessary background required to understand Eurobarometer data. It should be noted that, prior to starting this research, several attempts were made to come in contact with the PSD, PNL, and the UDMR to receive old election manifesto’s or party programs. Every phone call made was denied and every mail sent was left unanswered. This means I could sadly not attain election programs or party manifestos from previous elections.

# Chapter 1: 2007: A New Beginning

As explained in the introduction, the next chapter describes the situation in Romania from when it first joined the EU in 2007. Concretely, it shall attempt to show an account of sentiments towards the EU ranging from the political elite to the mass public during this period. Firstly, the political elite’s views will be presented before analyzing public opinion.

The section below describes how the political elite in Romania looked towards the EU. Prior to its accession in 2007, many debates between politicians were televised on its national networks. A prominent 2004 debate between the former prime minister, Emil Boc, and PSD member, Viorel Hrebenciuc, showed the political elite’s alignment towards the EU.[[28]](#footnote-28) At the time, Romania was still a candidate to join the EU. The debate was held concerning a report sent by the European Commission (EC). This report warned that if Romania did not make significant progress in improving its governing institutions, the EU would cease further negotiations.

Hrebenciuc stated this report was the roughest message that the EC had ever sent to a candidate member and expressed his concerns for Romania’s future in Europe. His argument revolved around blaming the coalition for not having made enough progress with improving Romania’s judicial system, freedom of speech, and high levels of corruption. Meanwhile, Boc contended that things were not as bad as they seemed and that Romania was already undergoing positive changes; it had even established the *National Anticorruption Office* to combat the exact things the EC had criticized in their report. Because of the high levels of corruption, parliamentary processes were likely to not be transparent and open to the public. Considering the theoretical framework, a secluded and untransparent parliamentary process meant that it would be less vulnerable to Euroscepticism.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Regardless of the political discourse, this debate showed the two former largest parties, which together had racked up over 65% of the votes, agree that Romania’s accession to the EU was of great importance. Moreover, it shows that accession was a salient topic in national politics; the debate’s broadcasting proved it to be of similar importance to the mass public. Another event that proved this was when the Romanian National Parliament voted on the Treaty of Accession of 2005. This treaty, a formal agreement that arranged the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU, was unanimously voted for in parliament (434 in favor, 0 against, 0 abstentions).[[30]](#footnote-30)

A third example of the relevance of Romania’s accession within the political spectrum could be extracted from former President Traian Băsescu’s speech on New Year’s Eve 2007. During his speech, Băsescu reflected on promises he had made during his election run in 2004. He had promised the Romanian people that they would not lose their adherence to the EU and was proud to have delivered on his word. Băsescu went on to emphasize the shared responsibility Romanians now had to contribute towards the EU and show Europe they could rely on their new ally. Most importantly, he noted that Romania would undergo dramatic changes in three to four years’ time because of its membership in the EU.[[31]](#footnote-31)

These examples point towards an entrenched domestic political elite in Romania. It also shows that the presence of political parties who advocated against EU accession was absent. According to Winzen and postfunctionalist theory, this could allude to a low rate of Euroscepticism in Romania at the time.

Having discussed the attitude of national political parties towards the EU, the next section will focus on the public spectrum: namely the media and the mass public. How did the press present the EU to the public, and how did regular citizens feel towards the EU?

## The General Sense among the Romanian Public

To establish how Romanian public opinion steered towards the EU, a general overview of how Romanians felt is needed before examining the details. A good place to start this overview is by looking at the data of the first Eurobarometer after Romania’s accession to the EU.

Surveyees were asked specific questions that tie in neatly with the previous statement. Generally speaking, 67% of Romanians thought their country’s membership in the EU was a good thing, compared to the EU27 average of 57%.[[32]](#footnote-32) When asked specifically what image the EU conjures up, another 67% of Romanians answered with positive. After Ireland, with a 68% positive image, Romania had the highest positive view of the EU among its member states. The EU27 average for this question was 52%.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Furthermore, when Romanians were asked about their expectations for the next twelve months regarding their lives in general, 43% expected to see an improvement. This percentage lies much higher than the EU27 average of 37%.[[34]](#footnote-34) Moreover, it also shows a stark contrast between Romania and its neighbor Bulgaria, which became an EU member state the same year. When asked this same question, only 22% of Bulgarians expected their lives to become better, nearly half the amount of Romania.[[35]](#footnote-35)

These initial results support the hypothesis that Romania, at the very least, started out as an optimistic member state of the EU. It also dispels any notion that Romania’s positivity was because it had just joined the EU; citizens from neighboring Bulgaria seemed, at best, indifferent to their newly acquired membership. Postfunctionalist theory argues that as long as the mass public in Romania remained positive and topics surrounding the EU were not politized, they would not oppose further European integration in their country.[[36]](#footnote-36)

## Why Were the Romanians Optimistic?

However, even though Romanians generally seemed positive about the EU, the question remains what exactly caused this optimism. Specifically, was this optimism caused solely or in part by its accession to the EU? We already established the next step would be uncovering the specific reasons people give on why they expect an improvement in their lives.

A possible answer could be construed when looking at people’s expectations of their financial position and their personal job situation. 39% of Romanians expected their financial situation to improve in the next twelve months, a significantly higher number than the 27% average of the EU27.[[37]](#footnote-37) Considering 44% of Romanians believed their economic situation to be one of the most important issues in their country at the time, the expected improvement of their economic status could explain their positive outlook.

This would fit in the same narrative presented earlier by the political elites in debates and speeches that were held in the years prior to Romania’s accession. Indeed, Romanians overwhelmingly regarded their country’s economic position as a salient topic. Together with Latvia, they had the highest hopes for economic improvement across the EU in their first year as a member state. Concretely, econimc interests are one of the driving forces behind Eurosceptic thought. Romanians saw the EU as something beneficial to their economic position. Because it was in their economic interest to be a part of the EU, Eurosceptic thought would, in this regard, be severely limited.

Having talked about the attitudes Romanians had towards the EU, the following segment will shift its attention to identity. More particularly, how did Romanians place themselves within Europe, and what did the EU mean for them specifically?

At first glance, they seemed to follow their fellow EU member states by labeling the EU as something tangible: a means to travel, study, and work anywhere in the EU. This is demonstrated by the Romanian diaspora, the fifth largest active diaspora in the world.[[38]](#footnote-38) In 2000, over 1.000.000 Romanians lived outside of Romania. By 2015, this number increased to nearly 3.500.000 Romanians.[[39]](#footnote-39) Strikingly, around 90% of Romanian emigrants in The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries live in Europe, especially in Italy. Romanians now make up 23% of Italy’s total immigrant population.[[40]](#footnote-40) The annual flow of legal migration from Romania peaked at 560.000 in 2007. For most emigrants, employment was cited as the main reason for migration.

Indeed, Romania’s accession to the EU could be labeled as a turning point that exacerbated the diaspora. Regardless of its effects, it could be argued that some Romanians saw the EU as an opportunity to emigrate for opportunities elsewhere. In this respect, joining the EU was something many Romanians favored.[[41]](#footnote-41) Thusly, Eurosceptic thought would be a natural limitation to this freedom of movement.

However, going back to the Eurobarometer data, Romanians saw the EU as more than something strictly tangible. To them, the EU was also an abstract entity. When asked what the EU meant to them personally, 42% answered with democracy and 44% with economic prosperity. These are staggering numbers, compared to the 22% and 20% respectively of the EU27 average.[[42]](#footnote-42) This could be explained by Romania’s communist past: the remnants of the Ceaușescu regime in terms of corruption and nepotism still raged rampant across the country.[[43]](#footnote-43) Following the warnings of the EC and the creation of national institutions to combat this, it is understandable how Romanian citizens saw the EU as a democratic bastion.[[44]](#footnote-44) Naturally, Romanians saw the EU as invaluable to further repel corruption.

Moreover, recurring themes in the survey establish a sense among the Romanians that the EU could serve as the economic institution with tangible benefits on their day-to-day lives. This increase in freedom and democracy would not only improve the life of the average citizen in concrete ways; the EU was to serve as a beacon of hope among the Romanian people, of which 51% said hope was the first word to come into their minds after hearing about the anniversary of the Treaty of Rome in 2007.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Interestingly, while Romanians could easily point out what they wanted out of the EU as it stood, they had a hard time deciding about its future. When asked which aspects should be emphasized by the European institutions in the coming years to strengthen the EU in the future, most countries would have some issues that most people focused on. In the case of Romania, however, the highest percentage it had was a 28% rate of people who wanted the focus to lie on environmental issues.[[46]](#footnote-46) This shows that, at the time, people did not have a clear sense of the path the EU should take for the future. It could be argued that what it represented at the time and the institutions it had were sufficient, thereby ruling out the need for a dedicated focus in the coming years. Further expansion of EU regulations could potentially become points of contention to the Romanian people. Whether this holds true will become clear in the coming chapters.

## Was There Any Skepticism?

While these trends seem favorable in keeping Romania close to the EU, it is also important to examine any dissidence present. Opinions were expressed about the EU being a waste of money (7%), causing more crime (5%), unemployment (7%), and not having enough control at external frontiers (5%).[[47]](#footnote-47) Remarkably, these percentages differ greatly when compared to the EU27 average, which answered 20%, 17%, 14%, and 18%, respectively, on these topics.[[48]](#footnote-48) It can, therefore, be assumed that, at the time, the Romanian people had a much less pessimistic view of the EU than its fellow member states.

## Was National Identity a Problem?

According to postfunctionalist theory, the attachment people have to their national identity could spark Eurosceptic thought. Interestingly, this segment of the Eurobarometer also allowed surveyees to be critical of the EU in cultural terms. Concretely, did people feel like the EU meant the loss of people’s cultural identity? While the EU27 average to this question was 12%, only 7% of Romanians felt like the EU intruded upon their national identity. The highest-scoring country in this category was the UK with 27%.[[49]](#footnote-49) Considering postfunctionalism signified national identity as a key term, this data is critical in establishing the foundation of Romanian public opinion towards the EU. Accordingly, the low amount of Romanians who feared the loss of their cultural identity signaled that national identity was not a problem at the time.

## Were There Any Salient Topics in Romanian Newspapers That Could Cause Tension?

Turning now to the territory of the press, this next segment will discuss how journalists presented Romania’s accession to the EU to their readers. România Liberă released multiple articles in the weeks leading up to Romania’s accession to the EU. Some of these pieces shared the same sentiment as President Băsescu, whose speech was discussed earlier in this chapter. In short, România Liberă saw the EU as a means to “greatly amplify” the Romanian economy and society as a whole.[[50]](#footnote-50) To them, the main benefits to the population could be found in the four fundamental freedoms the EU had to offer: freedom for the movement of persons, goods, services, and capital.[[51]](#footnote-51) Romanians were to oblige and respect the rules of the “new community and family” they were about to enter.[[52]](#footnote-52) Ultimately, România Liberă presented the entry of Romania to the EU as the completion of the reunification of Western and Eastern Europe.[[53]](#footnote-53)

However, while România Liberă saw Romania’s accession to the EU as a net positive occurrence, it did have its reservations about how the future would look. Notably, it was apprehensive about Romania’s economic sector. Romania had witnessed economic growth at the time due to privatization of the market and the exit of the state from important economic sectors. This was counterintuitive to having a strong state, which was preferred by România Liberă.[[54]](#footnote-54) Joining the EU could potentially exacerbate this balance.

At the time, Adevărulseemed to back the government’s decisions regarding foreign affairs. An example is an article written about Romania’s involvement with a possible Serbian accession to the EU and the case of Kosovo. The Romanian government had not been getting involved in matters that transcended its borders, even if it concerned ethnic Romanians. The same way it did not involve itself with the case of Moldova or Transnistria, it did not want to get involved with Serbia.[[55]](#footnote-55) Because controversial matters could potentially sour its relations with the EU, Romania steered clear of interjecting.

Though Adevărul had some articles in which it expressed its alignment, most of them were focused on delivering unbiased news during this period. In one item, it critiqued any remaining aspects from the communist era, in this case, the remnants of the Securitate and the fact that Romanians were the most surveilled people within Europe at the time. Adevărul encouraged any step away from its corrupt, communist past and saw the EU as an institution that could safeguard Romania’s future.[[56]](#footnote-56) All in all, most of Adevărul’s articles from the 2006-2008 period leave little to the imagination, and an anti-EU sentiment can hardly be extracted from them.

## Eurobarometer Data Shows a High Level of Trust

A question that remains is whether press and television sources were legitimate in the eyes of the Romanian people. If they were to be skeptical of national or local news, it would delegitimize the usage of these sources in establishing a true view of the public opinion. Luckily, the Eurobarometer has chapters where surveyees were asked about their trust in national institutions, media, and political concepts. When asked how much trust they have in certain institutions, 88% of Romanian surveyees said they trust television.[[57]](#footnote-57) This number falls grotesquely above the EU27 average of 58%. The only country to score higher is Bulgaria, with 89% trust in television. Furthermore, by far, Romanians have the most trust in the press out of their fellow EU peers; 68% tend to trust the news compared to the 47% average of the EU27.[[58]](#footnote-58)

It is important to acknowledge the trust Romanians have in television and the press. This trust legitimizes the usage of such sources to better contextualize what Romanians were going through and what influenced their thoughts. The press, in this sense, acts as the best tool for illustrating what topics people are specifically concerned with. But even with its high trust rate, the press and television do not encompass all voices. A reasonable approach to this lacuna would be to set the small percentage aside as skeptics who give the same criticism as other prominent Eurosceptic countries. In the case of Romania, this group just happens to have much smaller traction than in other countries.

A final interesting note with regard to the trust people have in newspapers springs forth from question 25 (QA25).[[59]](#footnote-59) When asked what source people use to look for information about the EU, its policies, and its institutions, Romanians had the lowest result for daily newspapers. So, while Romanians have a high level of trust in the news they consume through newspapers, the EU is not a salient topic. This falls in line with what the Adevărul has thus far presented with its articles; there is less focus on what the EU does and more focus on what direct effects it has on Romania.

## Conclusion

The results from the Eurobarometer 67 are significant in at least four major respects. Firstly, Romanian public opinion was positive towards the EU. Romanians saw the EU as a positive IGO that had tangible and intangible effects on their day-to-day lives. Secondly, Romanian citizens saw the economic prosperity the EU could bring. Thirdly, they saw being part of the EU as hope for their country, a democratic bastion that offered free movement within the continent for people to develop themselves. Lastly, the EU would help combat lingering corruption from the communist era.

Dissent was very low, if not nonexistent, at the time; the only mutters made were voiced by those who preferred a strong state as they had during the Ceaușescu regime. National identity was simply not a vocal issue point in Romania; as data has pointed out, its accession to the EU only further fueled the Romanian diaspora. There was no political movement, news outlet, or organized group for dissenting individuals to turn to. This fits in the framework of postfunctionalism because it sees the mass public as the key agent in what causes Eurosceptic thought to become prominent. In 2007 in Romania, the mass public was, simply put, more than content with EU accession.

The political elite was entrenched in a battle to show the public which candidate was best equipped to secure Romania’s place in the EU, rather than argue if they should be in it at all. According to Winzen, this meant Eurosceptic thought would find it very difficult to spread itself. Meanwhile, most of the press presented anything that could jeopardize Romania’s position in Europe as a negative development. Both in public and private life, Romania’s accession to the EU was, initially, greeted with open arms by the public.

# Chapter 2: 2012-2014: A Turbulent Period

2014 is an interesting year for numerous reasons. Firstly, it was the last year of Traian Băsescu’s ten-year-long regime as president of Romania. Secondly, it saw the newly formed coalition of the Social Liberal Union (USL) break off into their respective parties, the PSD and the PNL, to compete against each other in the presidential elections. The USL ran its first electoral campaign during the 2012 legislative election as a response to Traian Băsescu’s controversial regime, which will be elaborated further on in this chapter. Thirdly, at this point, Romania had undergone both the salient 2012 and 2014 election seasons with the highest voter turnout since the fall of the communist regime in the ’90s. Lastly, this period also presents a natural point in time to look at what effects the European debt crisis has had on Romania.

In the chapter that follows, the focus will shift from the international to the national stage. Whilst Eurobarometer data will still be the most important source to look at, 2014 presented several interesting developments on the national political scale. To some, 2012-2014 could be seen as the most tumultuous period in Romanian internal politics since the collapse of the communist regime.[[60]](#footnote-60) For these reasons, this period could potentially be the turning point for Romanian enthusiasm towards the EU.

## The 2012 Impeachment Referendum: The Bomb

The section below describes the 2012 Romanian presidential impeachment referendum. The goal is to explain what it is about and how this is a relevant case when measuring Romanian relations with the EU. Divisive periods like these have the potential to cause topics to become polarized and shift public opinion on salient issues.[[61]](#footnote-61) Therefore, this is relevant to the case of Euroscepticism in Romania.

The main drive behind the impeachment referendum was a series of controversial actions made by President Traian Băsescu, such as limiting the power of the judiciary and threatening the balance of power in Romania.[[62]](#footnote-62) These actions caused strong resentment in parliament.[[63]](#footnote-63) By this time, the main electoral leaders, the PSD and PNL, had formed the USL to combat Băsescu’s regime. Considering both parties won over 65% of the total vote of the previous election, they held considerable authority within the parliament. Spearheaded by the parties’ leaders, Victor Ponta and Crin Antonescu, respectively, their main critique against Băsescu was an infringement on the constitution, the separation of power, the independence of the judiciary, and impoverishing the population.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Băsescu’s surreptitious conduct in domestic parliaments meant that parliamentary processes were likely to be kept private. As was pointed out in the introduction of this paper, public parliamentary processes meant that Eurosceptic thought would have an easier time spreading itself.[[65]](#footnote-65) Because of the high levels of corruption, which Băsescu perpetuated, these processes remained mostly private. Thusly, Romanians did not have access to accurately follow parliamentary processes, which made the politicization of (European) topics difficult, thereby containing Eurosceptic thought.[[66]](#footnote-66)

On the day the referendum was announced, Băsescu denied all accusations made against him, claiming someone who was responsible for dividing the nation would never have followed legislative protocols, to begin with.[[67]](#footnote-67) For example, he argued a dictator would never have given the office of prime minister to a political adversary, which he had done months prior when he named PSD’s Victor Ponta the new prime minister.[[68]](#footnote-68) He also argued a tyrant would never have given his political rivals control of the most important internal information agency, the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) which he did.[[69]](#footnote-69) Indeed, Băsescu fervently rejected every claim made against him and insisted that it was the USL who was guilty of causing instability and divide within the nation.[[70]](#footnote-70)

Meanwhile, Crin Antonescu, leader of the PNL, described the referendum's formal announcement as an important milestone and “one of the brightest days in Romanian politics.”[[71]](#footnote-71) His biggest critique and accusation towards Băsescu was his attempt at making the Romanian institutions subservient to him.[[72]](#footnote-72)

The referendum was met with heavy responses from all sides, with the focal point being the turnout rate for the referendum. As was the case with any past referendum, it required at least 51 percent of the eligible Romanian voters (including those in the diaspora) to cast their vote for its result to be legitimate.[[73]](#footnote-73) Media outlets who were critical of Băsescu ran campaigns on television, urging people to go vote.[[74]](#footnote-74) Furthermore, activists and organizers around the country placed voting booths as widespread as possible, including places like restaurants and hotels, and took to the streets to mobilize citizens to cast their vote.[[75]](#footnote-75)

The referendum was held on 29 July 2012. Out of the 8,5 million votes, over 88% voted to impeach Băsescu. However, this was only 46% of the total registered voters, which forced the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR) to declare the referendum invalid.[[76]](#footnote-76) This was in due part Băsescu’s strategy to fight the referendum: by urging his supporters to stay home and boycott the vote.[[77]](#footnote-77)

The subject of the referendum was, in one respect, irrelevant. As explained in the introduction, Winzen pointed to multiple methods through which Eurosceptic thought could expand itself within a nation; referendums were one of these procedures.[[78]](#footnote-78) This means that regardless of the outcome of the referendum, salient topics within the domestic terrain, which resort to referendums, could become a slippery slope towards high opposition, the politization of topics, and dissent within the mass public.[[79]](#footnote-79) The referendum also exposed parts of the parliamentary process within the nation. This unveiling combined with affirming the usage of referendums could set the stage for Euroscepticism to spread itself easier if it came into parliament.

## The 2012 Impeachment Referendum: The Fallout

As previously stated, this affair is relevant in the context of Euroscepticism in Romania. After the referendum results came in, Ponta and Antonescu would not accept defeat and continued pressing on for Băsescu’s ousting. Arguing that the overwhelming majority of casted ballots voted in favor of impeachment, they urged the CCR to reconsider the results. Băsescu denounced these actions as an attempted coup d’état by the coalition to take control of the judiciary.[[80]](#footnote-80)

As tensions rose to new highs, prominent news outlets around the world started reporting on the situation as it continued to develop.[[81]](#footnote-81) Moreover, the international community commented on the volatile situation in Romania with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, US Ambassador Mark Gitenstein, and President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, expressing their concerns at the state of affairs.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Special concerns were voiced by the President of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy. Van Rompuy, who had met with both Băsescu and Ponta earlier the same year, was deeply concerned that the situation in Romania could spiral out of control.[[83]](#footnote-83) Specifically, he feared further corruption within state institutions and the independence of the judicial system.[[84]](#footnote-84) Considering these were salient topics that the Romanian government had promised EU institutions it would fix, the impeachment process risked jeopardizing Romania’s position in the EU.

Some foreign influences even went as far as to meddle with the referendum directly. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary urged Hungarian citizens living in Romania to stay at home and boycott the vote.[[85]](#footnote-85) While this was seen as a helping hand by Băsescu’s PDL, it soured relations between Hungary and Romania’s coalition parties. Ponta would go on to explicitly ask Orbán not to intervene in domestic problems unrelated to him.

Meanwhile, Antonescu lashed back at his western allies, condemning their involvement in a national political affair of which they “did not have their facts correct.”[[86]](#footnote-86) According to him, attempts were being made to restore order to the way things were without understanding the full context of the situation. Antonescu’s frustration stemmed from the West’s inability to acknowledge Băsescu as a threat to Romanian democracy. Furthermore, Ponta announced that he had written to Barroso that Băsescu and the PDL swindled and deceived him.[[87]](#footnote-87) According to Ponta, Barroso was liable for having made “unbased” remarks about the situation in Romania for the second time in a row. Indeed, both coalition leaders publicly showed their frustration towards European leaders and called on their constituency to be aware of the role the EU played in meddling with domestic affairs. Drawing back to Winzen’s theory, Euroscepticism becomes a significant threat when it is more present in national governments. Ponta and Antonescu’s could have swayed people to become more Eurosceptic.

While Ponta eventually acquiesced, after having made slight attempts to persuade the CCR, Antonescu did not concede as easily.[[88]](#footnote-88) He would go on to denounce any foreign involvement in the matter as he further pursued the impeachment of Băsescu. Indeed, Antonescu dismissed any outside involvement and tried to gain public support by chastising these influences as “enemies of Romania.”[[89]](#footnote-89) As the impeachment process went on, Romania’s reputation became increasingly stained, demarcating a new low in Romanian international relations. To its allies, Romania was undermining the rule of law and basic principles of democracy by attempting to validate an unconstitutional referendum.[[90]](#footnote-90) Antonescu’s demeanor during this ordeal could be said to have exacerbated the issue.

Moreover, it should be noted that Antonescu gave such speeches publicly on television broadcasts. His antagonization of Romania’s allies received mixed responses from the Romanian people. Most Romanians cared little for Antonescu’s words, and even his own PNL was somewhat divided on the issue.[[91]](#footnote-91) Regardless, there was a prominent political figure who had garnered much traction over the past years, speaking ill of the EU on public platforms. This was not something that assuaged Romanian sentiment towards Europe or vice versa. Eurobarometer data shows that this had a noticeable effect on public opinion.[[92]](#footnote-92)

Finally, on 21 August 2012, the CCR came to the official decision to declare the referendum invalid.[[93]](#footnote-93) One week later, on 28 August 2012, Băsescu returned to power and held a victory speech. He stated that he and the rest of parliament had to regain the trust of their European allies. He acknowledged the damage that was caused by not only the referendum itself but also the belligerent attitude of Antonescu to Romania’s relations.[[94]](#footnote-94)

## The 2012 Impeachment Referendum: The Reporting

Having discussed how the referendum took place and caused tension between Romania and the EU, the next part of this chapter will address how the press presented this to the mass public. The way in which the press presented the referendum could have influenced the minds of its readers. The question is if they backed the Eurosceptic USL or the pro-European Băsescu. It should be pointed out that even though the USL presented itself as Eurosceptic during this affair, this was likely due to short-term contingent factors rather than a deeper, ideological sentiment. This is because politicians in Romania have been prone to changing parties based on furthering their careers and gaining more power rather than standing for a deeper belief they personally held.[[95]](#footnote-95) Regardless, their words can still affect the population, so the way newspapers presented the referendum is important to show.

Adevărul published around 800 articles surrounding the impeachment referendum.[[96]](#footnote-96) Many of these pieces tried presenting a neutral and unbiased overview of the facts. Interviews were given to both proponents and opponents of the referendum, many of which accused the other side of fraud.

Many such articles were reports from various cities reporting fraudulent behavior. One of these described a complaint filed by PNL representatives in the Alba district against the PDL. According to them, PDL mayors threatened the local Roma population that they would no longer receive social benefits if they went out to vote.[[97]](#footnote-97) Interestingly, Adevărul published another editorial on the same day, depicting PDL as the guardians of Romania’s EU membership because they celebrated low turnout rates in cities throughout the country. The PDL claimed that the people had chosen to stand by the European community through boycotting the referendum.[[98]](#footnote-98)

Unsurprisingly, only a handful of these articles concerned matters regarding Romania’s position in the EU. Considering the few EU pieces Adevărul did issue, it could be argued that they painted the EU and its institutions in a rather positive light. It showed how the EC waited diligently on the official response of Romania’s Constitutional Court before making any official statements, thereby respecting Romania’s sovereignty as a member state.[[99]](#footnote-99) Some MEPs, like Austria’s Hannes Swoboda, claimed the EU and its institutions must accept the legal bindings of Romania’s constitution.[[100]](#footnote-100)

Ultimately, Adevărul showed both sides of the conflict, and its editors actively attempted to hide their political bias. Many of its published articles were lenient on the manner in which foreign influences, like the EU, spoke about the referendum. Indeed, Adevărul acknowledged the EC’s call to respect the domestic rule of law and thereby respect European values, to act responsibly and to treat diverging opinions constructively.[[101]](#footnote-101)

România Liberă chose a completely different strategy. Many of their opinion pieces were outright belligerent against the USL, depicting them as “coup plotters” and “swindlers” who were guilty of desecrating Romania’s institutions and constitution.[[102]](#footnote-102) Some of these columns were created to single out specific individuals, such as Antonescu and Ponta, and do little more than lay down a string of *ad hominems* towards them. Obvious character assassination and delegitimization of the opponent was the tactic România Liberă opted for.

One article went as far as calling out Prime Minister Ponta for being willing to trample on the constitution and laws of Romania to push the referendum through.[[103]](#footnote-103) Coincidentally, the same article criticized the EU, Barroso, and Merkel for having labeled Romania as a “black sheep” that would require stronger mechanisms to keep figures like Ponta at bay.[[104]](#footnote-104) Stating that it was too late for Romania to leave the union, this piece hinted at the following elections in autumn to fix the country.

There seems to be a discrepancy between what România Liberă published and what Băsescu’s PDL message was. România Liberă laid heavy criticism on the USL, thereby defending the rule of law and Băsescu’s position in the office.[[105]](#footnote-105) However, it also criticized the EU for expressing concerns about the situation, which was a sentiment shared by the USL. The inconsistency may be due to România Liberă favoring Băsescu in office while remaining Eurosceptic. Indeed, this would mean România Liberă was not aligned with either party and had its own agenda and merits, which it tried to uphold.

However, not all România Liberă editors shared the same Eurosceptic sentiment. One story was concerned about the EC’s reaction to the referendum in a very critical report it had issued about Romania.[[106]](#footnote-106) It blamed the USL and the Ponta government for this, for they had systematically attacked and violated the principles of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary.[[107]](#footnote-107) This stays in line with the vehement denunciation of the USL while showing nuance in the way România Liberă regarded the EU.

Indeed, România Liberă zealously attacked the USL, Ponta, and Antonescu for disrupting the balance of power and portrayed them as enemies of the nation. While they implicitly backed Băsescu, this was likely due to them sharing a common enemy rather than their devotion towards Băsescu, specifically.

## The 2014 Presidential Elections

This chapter has shown that the internal political field in Romania had witnessed a tremendous amount of turmoil following the 2012 impeachment referendum. This referendum had soured the ties that Romania had with the EU, and it showed a dark side that its politicians were capable of when they were put under stress. While some domestic politicians heavily critiqued the EU, this did not escalate into the politicization of salient topics. The 2014 elections forced Băsescu to leave office, as he had reached the maximum allotted terms in office according to the constitution.[[108]](#footnote-108) The following section aims to explain how these elections exacerbated problems between Romania and the EU since the impeachment referendum.

The race for the presidential office, which had 14 candidates in total, knew two potential winners. The first was PSD’s Victor Ponta, who had been prime minister since 2012. Ponta had by now become a rather controversial figure for multiple reasons. Firstly, he was accused of having plagiarized his Ph.D. thesis, which he defended in questionable manners, and has remained a recurring topic in the news to this very day.[[109]](#footnote-109) Secondly, Ponta was also accused by President Băsescu of being an undercover agent for the Romanian Foreign Intelligence Service (SIE) between 1997 and 2001.[[110]](#footnote-110)

The second person who had the biggest chance at winning the race was PNL’s Klaus Iohannis. Iohannis had climbed up the ranks within the party and became its leader after Crin Antonescu resigned, following an electoral defeat in the 2014 European Parliament election.[[111]](#footnote-111) Hailing from a small German minority group in Transylvania, his political career flourished after becoming the mayor of Sibiu in 2000, which remained his position until 2012.

The election campaigns were run much like the impeachment referendum two years ago. While most of the election passed appropriately, personal attacks and character assassination were still present in the debate.[[112]](#footnote-112) Ponta based a part of his election run on the fact that he was an autochthonous Romanian who was born and raised Christian Orthodox.[[113]](#footnote-113) He tried to distinguish himself from the German Protestant Iohannis by appealing to heritage and beliefs. Were this to be effective, it could prove that the Romanian people saw their national identity as deeply rooted in their ethnic background and religion. Outsiders and minority groups would, in such instances, be cast out and discriminated against. People who are inclined to go along with such thinking would also be prone to Eurosceptic thought, because they viewed their national identity as exclusive.[[114]](#footnote-114) This tactic taken by Ponta would have little effect, as Eurobarometer data showed most Romanians did not consider their national identity to be part of an exclusive group, but rather inclusive.[[115]](#footnote-115)

As the first round of voting passed, Ponta had won with a fairly solid margin over his competitors. However, many Romanians in the diaspora felt ostricized because of the small number of voting booths available to them.[[116]](#footnote-116) Lines outside of voting booths in major European cities reached numbers of over a thousand Romanians waiting for up to twelve hours in the cold to cast their vote. Across Europe and in Romania, tens of thousands of eligible Romanian voters took to the streets to protest the alleged attempt of Ponta to silence the migrant population.[[117]](#footnote-117)

The press was more aligned this time around compared to the impeachment referendum. Both Adevărul and România Liberă published many articles on the protests to give them light and spur the population to become aware of the situation regarding the diaspora. In this, they formed a united front against the nationalistic Ponta and backed the German-descended Iohannis. Adevărul published articles with dates and locations of soon-to-be-held protests and rallies while showing drawings and caricatures of Ponta being depicted as Godzilla, or rather, “Pontzilla”.[[118]](#footnote-118) Meanwhile, pieces from România Liberă gave the spotlight to protestors claiming that they would take back their country in the second round of voting.[[119]](#footnote-119)

Ponta, against all predictions, lost the second round against Iohannis with 45% against 54% of the vote. It was clear that the Romanian people protested not only for the rights of the diaspora but also against the long-standing corruption that haunted Romania for generations. Ponta’s nationalistic talk did not sway enough people to put their trust in him.[[120]](#footnote-120) In fact, his plan backfired to the point where his potential migrant supporters overwhelmingly voted for Iohannis: 89% of the diaspora voted for the PNL’s German candidate.[[121]](#footnote-121)

In correlation to the academic debate, this points to Romania differing from Eurosceptic nations where the majority of the population saw national identity as a salient topic. Concretely, it could be argued that Romanians simply did not share the same deep-rooted nationalistic sentiment as their European neighbors. Indeed, Romanians were tired of corruption in their country and saw Iohannis as a possible candidate to ultimately put an end to this.[[122]](#footnote-122) Ponta’s leadership had been too controversial, and even though the country had undergone economic growth, this was not enough for him to maintain office.

## Effects on Public Opinion and Eurobarometer Data

Standard Eurobarometer 82, which was conducted in autumn 2014, started by asking the same question as its predecessors. Namely, what were people’s expectations for the next twelve months: Would the next twelve months be better, worse, or the same when it comes to your life in general? When it came to Romanian surveyees, 40% expected their lives to go better, 41% expected it to stay the same, and 15% expected it to worsen.[[123]](#footnote-123)

Two things stand out when comparing this to the 2007 answers. Firstly, Romanian optimism remained arguably the same between 2014 and 2007, with only a 3% reduction of surveyees who expected an improvement in their lives. Secondly, and more notably, the EU28 average lowered significantly from 37% to 28% of surveyees who expected their lives in general to improve. This puts things into perspective.[[124]](#footnote-124) While Romanians experienced an absolute decline in enthusiasm, their relative enthusiasm increased significantly. A possible explanation could be that the effects of the crisis, while intense, were not quite as severe as they were in other countries.[[125]](#footnote-125) The eurozone crisis had caused grievances in other countries, which lead to the creation of Eurosceptic parties in national parliaments.[[126]](#footnote-126) In Romania, this was not the case.

In 2007, Romanians entered the EU with much optimism surrounding the future. Primarily, they were excited about the economic prospects of the EU and the opportunities it came along with. But after seven years of being a member state and having experienced a global recession, only 49% of Romanians judge their household's financial situation to be good. 49% judge it to be bad, with the remaining 2% being unsure.[[127]](#footnote-127) In this aspect, Romania falls far behind the EU28 average of 65%, answering with “good” and shares the bottom fifth place of least positive member states.

In addition to this, the outlook towards the future also tanked significantly. When asked what people’s expectations were for the next twelve months concerning the financial situation of their household, only 21% of Romanians expected an improvement.[[128]](#footnote-128) This is nearly half the amount of the original 39% of people who expected financial growth back in 2007. However, this can be relativized when compared to the EU28 average: only 8% of surveyees across the board expected their household’s financial situation to be better in the coming year. This strengthens the previously made claim that while Romanian enthusiasm declined, they still remained one of the more optimistic bunch in Europe. A reasonable approach would be to acknowledge the effects of the deteriorating prosperity of the EU on Romania while maintaining its relatively high rate of optimism.

Again, another case of Romanian tenacity and hopefulness springs forth when looking at how surveyees judged their current personal job situation. Romanians were quite divided on this topic. While only 34% answered with “good”, 31% answered with “don’t know,” and 35% with “bad.”[[129]](#footnote-129) The number of “good” answers fell sharply behind the EU28 average of 56%, making Romania the second-worst country in this category after Greece with 25%. Despite this, the Romanian people remained hopeful. When asked what people’s expectations were for the next twelve months when it came to their personal job situation, 29% of Romanians expected it to become better. After the UK, with 30%, Romania tied for the highest rate of people who expected their situation to improve. However, it is important to note that it still had a relatively high number of people who expected their personal job situation to worsen, with 14% answering so.

Through all of this, Romanians remained more ardent at devoting themselves to the EU than any other country. When asked whether or not things were going in the right direction in the European Union, 55% of Romanian surveyees said they were.[[130]](#footnote-130) This is more than double the response rate of the EU28 average, which sits at a mere 25%. In this regard, Romanian citizens seemed to be resoundingly positive towards the EU, regardless of the global recession they had endured. A limiting factor on Euroscepticism in Romania was the fact that Romanians did not see the EU as something that put their economic interests in jeopardy. According to postfunctionalism, economic interests is vital to keep public opinion positive towards European integration.[[131]](#footnote-131)

While Romanians seemed to cling onto their optimistic outlook on the EU, the ways in which they regarded the EU did evolve through time. As stated in the previous chapter, accession to the EU meant more democracy and economic prosperity for most Romanians. In Eurobarometer 82, this same question was asked. To 29% of Romanian surveyees, the EU meant democracy.[[132]](#footnote-132) To 22%, it meant economic prosperity. This is a reduction from the previous 42% and 44%, respectively, in 2007.

As these numbers shrank, precarious trends started to develop. More surveyees started answering with a loss of cultural identity, more crime, not enough control at external borders, and bureaucracy. These numbers amounted to 10%, 12%, 9%, and 12%, respectively.[[133]](#footnote-133) While not being noteworthy in terms of absolute numbers, most of these issues had doubled in the past seven years. It is important to monitor such incremental changes between the years, as each step further increases the chance of dissidence growing. This could lead to the formation of a counterculture or something more tangible in the lines of an organization that rejects the EU and the institutions it brings.

However, the biggest concerns Romanians at the time had were more general issues related to unemployment, inflation, social security, pensions, and the economy in general. When asked to name any two issues, 30%, 30%, 24%, 19%, and 30% of surveyees named these problems, respectively.[[134]](#footnote-134)

Whilst there were incremental changes towards more Eurosceptic answers, the question that should be asked is whether the Romanian people cared about them. When asked whether people considered themselves to have political interest, only 9% of Romanian surveyees said they had a “strong” political interest. This makes Romania the most politically apathetic in the EU, with the EU28 average lying at 16%. 41% of Romanians said they had a “medium” interest, 26% mentioned a “low” interest, and 24% said they had no political interest at all.[[135]](#footnote-135)

This is evident in the case of the 2012 voter turnouts and the presidential impeachment referendum. In general, Romania has one of the lowest voter turnouts among the EU member states for its parliamentary elections.[[136]](#footnote-136) This account must be approached with some caution because of prior researchers who concluded their publications by stating there may be no correlation between low voter turnout and political apathy in Eastern European post-communist states.[[137]](#footnote-137)

One of the main reasons for Euroscepticism comes forth from the distrust people have in EU institutions. Eb 82 made sure to include questions to ask people about how much they trusted certain institutions within the EU. When asked how much people trusted the EU Parliament, The EC, and The European Central Bank, 60%, 59%, and 53% of Romanian surveyees answered with “tend to trust” respectively.[[138]](#footnote-138) In this regard, Romania once again has a higher level of trust in EU institutions compared to its fellow member states and stays well above the EU28 average.

Eb 82 also asked its surveyees whether they trusted the EU as a whole. Of the Romanian surveyees, 60% said they tend to trust the EU.[[139]](#footnote-139) This makes it the most trusting nation towards the EU, peaking above every candidate nation’s trust as well. The EU28 average for this question was 37%. This could be explained by highlighting Romanians’

Furthermore, surveyees were asked whether the EU conjured up a positive, neutral, fairly negative, or very negative image. Again, Romanians were among one of the most optimistic countries, with 59% answering with “positive” and only 12% answering with either “fairly negative” or “very negative.” The EU28 average for “positive” was 39%, and 24% for both “fairly” or “very negative.”

Finally, the last interesting question standard Eb82 asked its surveyees was how they viewed the future of the EU. Between “optimistic,” “pessimistic,” and “don’t know,” Romania once again showed itself to be a clear proponent of the EU. Coming in at a third place, 74% of Romanian surveyees had an optimistic view of the EU’s future. 17% had an active pessimistic view, making the country tied for the lowest rate of Euroscepticism in the EU.

A valid question that can be asked is whether 2014 is an accurate point in time to measure the effects of the eurozone crisis on countries. After all, the peak of the eurozone crisis and its exact end is still a contested subject; multiple scholars have come forth with their own explanations on when it ended.[[140]](#footnote-140) Eb 82 acknowledged this debate and told its surveyees some analysts argued the peak of the eurozone crisis had passed while some believed the worst was still to come. Concretely, it asked its surveyees if they agreed with the former or latter claim. Views on this topic were mixed; 52% of Romanian surveyees said the impact of the crisis on jobs had already reached its peak.[[141]](#footnote-141) 39% said the worst was still to come, leaving the remaining 9% undecided on the matter.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the eurozone crisis was still a salient topic with a wide variety of beliefs surrounding it. The majority believed the peak was still over, but many people feared worse was to come. Eurobarometer 82 showed the concrete effects on people’s thinking after a period of domestic political turmoil. The Eurosceptic slurs from prominent political party leaders during the impeachment referendum and xenophobic campaigns during the presidential elections failed to divide the Romanian people. After these rigorous attempts, it almost seemed like Romanians trusted the EU more than their own corrupt politicians. And after all, these same politicians did not include Eurosceptic ideology in their party programs.

National identity remained a remarkably low factor after every attempt of domestic political parties at creating a division in society. The most important relevant finding was the increase in Romanians who feared that the EU would jeopardize their cultural heritage. Since 2007, this number grew from 7% to 10%. While skepticism grew, it had still gained too little traction for any major movement or national political party to center its party program on it.

Through all of this, Romania remained steadfast and a forerunner of believing in the EU, its institutions, and its ideals. National identity, an important contingency for Euroscepticism according to postfunctionalism, was still innocuous, and the pathway to further European integration was laid open for the Romanian people. It seems safe to say that the global recession, impeachment referendum, and presidential election protests, had all individually failed to create a rift between Romania and the EU.

# Chapter 3: 2020: A Global Lockdown

2020 was a legislative election year in Romania. Scheduled to be held on December 6th, election campaigns were interrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic marked the entire year as the world entered a global lockdown. Through this unprecedented time in history, Romania also witnessed the birth of new domestic political parties, which are labeled as pro-European and Eurosceptic.

This chapter seeks to look at the COVID-19 response in the country during 2020, with special attention to the end of the year and the start of 2021. This is due to the vaccine rollout, which had caused some tension between the EU and the UK.[[142]](#footnote-142) Secondly, this chapter will look at the rise of two notable parties: the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) and the Save Romania Union (USR PLUS). Considering AUR’s reputation as Eurosceptic and USR PLUS as pro-Europeanist, examining both parties could yield relevant findings. Thirdly, this chapter aims to analyze the 2020 legislative elections. Significant changes in voter behavior could provide interesting data; more support towards populist parties could mean an increase in Eurosceptic thought.[[143]](#footnote-143) Lastly, Eurobarometer data from winter 2020-2021 will concretely show what all these developments have culminated into.

## The Coronavirus Pandemic

From the moment of writing this thesis, the world is about to undergo its third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is thusly important to recognize that this is an ongoing crisis with developments occurring by the day, such as the spread of the new delta-variant.

 Romania, much like its fellow EU member states, followed the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) and enacted a state of emergency, followed by a heavy lockdown with a curfew.[[144]](#footnote-144) Police forces, assisted by the national army, patrolled the streets and fined anyone caught outside after 10pm. The pandemic caused a hasty global retreat of migrant workers and vacation-goers to rush back to their home countries. For Romania, with one of the largest diasporas on Earth, this meant that they were about to receive a massive influx of people coming back to the country. Many Romanians who worked abroad in OECD countries kept close ties to their motherland, allowing them passage back home.[[145]](#footnote-145) An estimated 250.000 Romanians returned home in the first month of the pandemic.[[146]](#footnote-146) This large-scale movement of people flocking back to their homes inadvertently brought the virus to the country; coronavirus outbreaks happened in many counties following the return of transnational workers.

As large amounts of Romanian workers returned home, this is when the troubles started brewing. Because low-income workers from Eastern Europe went back to their countries, Western European countries were faced with a shortage of workers in the agricultural, industrial, and health care sectors. As the spring season came, countries like Germany and the Netherlands needed over 550.000 seasonal workers to harvest their crops.[[147]](#footnote-147) These countries, pressed by agricultural lobbies, pressured the Romanian government to grant its citizens exemptions from the lockdown and clear a safe passageway between the countries. Therefore, thousands of Romanians, many hailing from poor regions which were struck hard by the coronavirus, were jammed onto planes and buses, with little to no room for social distancing, to go work in Germany.[[148]](#footnote-148) The point here is that the poor treatment of these low-income workers damaged the way Romanians viewed the EU, which posed a threat to European integration.

The problem was not that Western European countries relied on Eastern European countries for low-wage work. The problem was the conditions and atmosphere surrounding Eastern European laborers. The COVID-19 pandemic did little more than expose the setting in which migrant workers were put. Until now, immigrants in Western European countries were often made out to be criminal job stealers who leeched off the social benefits these countries handed out.[[149]](#footnote-149) Following the pandemic outbreak, it became undeniable that these workers were crucial to the western economies. Their importance did not match the poor conditions they were put in. COVID-19 outbreaks were a regular occurrence in the workplace—one incident in a German slaughterhouse caused over 200 Romanians to be infected.[[150]](#footnote-150) Fed up with their poor environment, workers took to the streets and protested in Bonn about unpaid salaries and terrible working conditions. Adevărul reported on these developments and compared the treatment of migrant workers to modern enslavement.[[151]](#footnote-151) The pandemic had thus shown the exploitation of Romanian workers by their wealthier, fellow EU member states, which soured relations. It could be argued that Romanians were starting to become disillusioned with the image of a prosperous Europe in which they could freely travel and happily work.

Many Romanians believed the EU did not involve itself enough in fixing the pandemic.[[152]](#footnote-152) While the common person could interpret the EU’s role as not abundant enough, it did not sit idly by and let the coronavirus happen. Under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen, the EC took steps as early as January 2020 in gathering funds to mobilize research on the coronavirus outbreak in China. It has since then taken many steps to combat the virus through means such as: coordinating the transferal of breathing aid devices and medical supplies throughout the EU, helping stranded EU citizens abroad get back to their homes, issuing guidelines on stopping the spread of the virus, and investing in research on vaccines, diagnostics, and treatments.[[153]](#footnote-153) The point of contention is that while the EU was demonstrably making a difference, many decisions which influenced the population’s day-to-day lives were taken on a national level by domestic political parties rather than the EU. In short, while the EU and its institutions took many steps in negotiating with countries to coordinate a plan against the coronavirus pandemic, it failed to make its presence felt by the mass public and thus by the Romanian people. According to Eurobarometer 94, Romania was a relatively satisfied country when it came to the EU’s approach to fight the coronavirus pandemic, but it still left nearly 40% of Romanian surveyees dissatisfied.[[154]](#footnote-154)

## The Emergence of AUR

This thesis has thus far shown the domestic political terrain in Romania to have been dominated by a handful of parties: the PDL, PSD, and PNL had historically won between 60 and 85 percent of the votes between each other. Chapter one had shown that these parties did not politicize European affairs with Romania, an exception being the 2012 referendum. Nevertheless, Romanian parliament historically speaking was quite entrenched and private, which limited the reach of Euroscepticism. The 2020 legislative elections were different in this aspect: for the first time in over a decade, the PSD and PNL struggled to get over half of the votes. Two newcomers, USR PLUS and AUR, threatened the old, rooted political elite with fresh and new political campaign slogans.

The AUR is a newly formed political party whose ideology is heavily based on conservative ideals. According to the AUR itself, the party is based on four pillars: faith, liberty, family, and nation. Its conservative backing and emphasis on Christian faith are the root of the party’s position on social matters: it opposes homosexual marriage, legal abortion-on-demand, euthanasia, and gender ideology.[[155]](#footnote-155) Because of these positions, the AUR is often associated with being a far-right faction.[[156]](#footnote-156) It also presents itself as an extremely nationalistic party, advocating for the reunification of Romania with the Republic of Moldova and having set up an AUR party in Moldova as well.[[157]](#footnote-157) Such nationalistic sentiments could bode badly for Romanian-EU relations. Some researchers have linked the AUR with authoritarianism because of its publicized opposition towards homosexuality, emphasis on Christian faith, and wanting to take action against that which could jeopardize traditional Romanian culture.[[158]](#footnote-158)

The AUR’s conservative views have also led it to criticize the current standings in Europe. This does not mean that the AUR opposes the EU; the AUR claims that Romania can only thrive if it utilizes its position in Europe and engages with its fellow European partners.[[159]](#footnote-159) Nevertheless, they do want to fundamentally reform the EU to become a union of free nations with no binding rules. The AUR opposes the idea of a federal EU superstate with its own capital, government, and parliament. Concretely, this means the AUR proposes the abolishment of EU Law, the European Parliament, and wants to constrain Brussel’s reach. Ultimately, it could be argued that the AUR is a soft-Eurosceptic party because it does not propose Romania’s withdrawal from the EU. However, it does want to fundamentally change, or rather weaken, the EU by removing its institutions and emphasizing national sovereignty.[[160]](#footnote-160)

Besides their blatant Eurosceptic views, the AUR formed a danger to European integration in other ways. According to postfunctionalism, politicization of topics is relatively harmless, until it gets picked up by a political party.[[161]](#footnote-161) As the next segments will show, the AUR would politicize topics like the coronavirus pandemic and the treatment of low-income workers to garner votes. Moreover, their appeal to nationalism and the reunification with Moldova under the Romanian banner could influence some people to become nationalistic. As stated in the theoretical framework, an exclusive national identity is often associated with Eurosceptic thought.[[162]](#footnote-162) All in all, these actions could not only pervade Euroscepticism within Romania, it could turn Romanians into open Eurosceptics, and hinder European integration.

Indeed, the AUR made a stark contrast between itself and the moderate parties of old. It portrayed itself as an anti-establishment, nationalist, populistic, conservative, Eurosceptic party that used new technology to reach its target audience across the world.

## The Birth of USR PLUS

The USR had already made itself known to the Romanian public following a strong electoral entry during the 2016 legislative elections. The newly formed party had gathered nine percent of the vote and held 30 seats in parliament. Following this, the USR fused with the Party of Liberty, Unity and Solidarity (PLUS) in 2019, officially becoming the USR PLUS. It did this to increase its electoral odds during the 2019 European Parliament election. This time, the USR Plus won 22 percent of the vote and 8 seats, becoming the third-largest party and only one seat shy of equaling the PSD.

The USR PLUS can be categorized as a center-right, liberal-leaning, globalist, progressive party. Their end goal is comparable to that of the AUR: to break free of the old ways of politics in Romania and bring a breath of fresh air. Accordingly, the USR PLUS heavily emphasizes anticorruption in its campaign and has fought against the corruption of the PSD and PNL party members.[[163]](#footnote-163)

However, the main distinction between the USR PLUS and AUR is their fundamental difference in ideology. Rather than having the EU be a loosely-tied union with no executive power, the USR PLUS supports the idea of a strong, united, supportive, federal EU. It sees the EU as a modern, elite club that should be utilized more in Romanian domestic politics.[[164]](#footnote-164) The USR PLUS also values Romania’s membership in NATO. It believes this, combined with Romania’s strategic partnership with the USA, is of vital importance to its national security from threats such as Russia and China. Therefore, some USR PLUS party members had heavily criticized French President Macron’s calls to restore ties between the EU, NATO, and Russia.[[165]](#footnote-165)

Some researchers have depicted the USR PLUS as a populist party because of its heavy emphasis on salient topics in Romanian domestic politics, such as anti-communism and anticorruption.[[166]](#footnote-166) Dragoman holds the view that the party puts itself parallel against the ruling parties and depicts them as the “corrupt elite” that has taken power away from the sovereign, real people.[[167]](#footnote-167) It could be argued that these are the reasons why the USR PLUS is a proponent of direct democracy: referendums would bypass corrupt politicians but also discredit the power that the domestic parliament holds. Furthermore, the implementation of referendums would mean more parliamentary mechanisms would become available to Eurosceptic parties, such as the AUR.[[168]](#footnote-168)

In short, the USR PLUS portrayed itself as a natural antithesis to the AUR. While one party wanted the EU to lower its federal power, the other sought further co-operation with Europe and an expanse of EU jurisdiction. While these parties portrayed themselves as polar opposites in the context of Romania in the world and voter perspectives, they both endorsed the enablement of potentially dangerous parliamentary mechanisms, such as binding referendums.

## The 2020 Legislative Elections

As explained at the beginning of this chapter, the 2020 legislative elections changed the domestic political landscape in meticulous ways. It knocked the PSD, and to an extent, the PNL, from their entrenched positions after the new populist parties claimed a quarter of the seats in parliament. This section will show how the AUR and USR PLUS concretely changed the domestic political terrain.

While the AUR was created in 2019, it gained most of its traction in 2020. It portrayed itself as a party that went against the mainstream of the large, semi-moderate parties. During the 2020 election, it won almost 10% of the total vote, claiming 14 seats during its first election. Four matters stand out when explaining the party’s electoral victory.

Firstly, the AUR was the only political party that criticized the government’s COVID-19 approach. It vehemently denounced the lockdown, curfew, usage of face masks, and vaccination pressure.[[169]](#footnote-169) In a country where over 52% of the population is either hesitating or refusing to get vaccinated, the AUR presented itself as a good candidate for people to vote for.[[170]](#footnote-170)

Secondly, the AUR could capitalize on the large number of migrant workers in the OECD countries who felt extorted after being treated poorly in the wealthy EU countries where they worked throughout the pandemic.[[171]](#footnote-171) These low-income workers became completely disillusioned with the EU. The AUR saw potential in these individuals and thusly targeted this group for advertising. Almost a quarter of the diaspora cast their vote on the AUR, which is where the party was most successful.[[172]](#footnote-172)

Thirdly, the AUR was able to utilize social media channels to get its message across the world.[[173]](#footnote-173) Platforms like Facebook were immensely popular, with AUR’s leader, George Simion, receiving over 4 million interactions on his page before election day.[[174]](#footnote-174) Through this method, anyone who was unhappy with the current standings in Europe could be convinced to cast their vote on the AUR.

Lastly, the AUR’s conservative ideological background allows it to be a catch-all party for anyone who shares such views. Because the PSD is focused on socialism and the PNL on liberalism, the AUR is the answer to the conservative group in society who had felt left out. Because of its open conservative, nationalist, and irridentist views, the AUR was, pragmatically speaking, the only choice to many.

Meanwhile, the USR PLUS enjoyed electoral victories in nearly all major cities in Romania. These include Bucharest, Timisoara, Brasov, Iasi, and Constanta. It also was very popular in the diaspora, winning almost a third of its vote. It is difficult to explain this result, but the USR PLUS’s popularity might be related to the education rate in the places where it had the biggest electoral success.

Firstly, urban areas have historically been known as centers where education rates are higher than in rural areas. QS World University Rankings has seven Romanian universities on its ranking list; all of these are located in the previously mentioned cities.[[175]](#footnote-175) Acknowledging this is one thing. It is also important to acknowledge that, historically speaking, people with a college degree or higher are more prone to vote progressive than conservative. When looking at the specific data of voter IDs, it is shown that 37% of USR PLUS voters had obtained a college degree.[[176]](#footnote-176) Moreover, 45% of its voters were aged 18-35, and 72% lived in urban areas. Therefore, it can be assumed that the USR PLUS was popular among the younger, well-educated voter base present in the urbanized centers of Romania.

Secondly, the reason why the diaspora voted on the USR PLUS is comparable to the first. Romania had for many years dealt with a systematic problem of brain drain; many well-educated young adults migrated elsewhere in search of better salaries and quality of life.[[177]](#footnote-177) This means a disproportionate amount of Romania’s academic population currently resides outside of the country. It is important to note that only 8% of AUR voters graduated college or higher and that the AUR targeted low-income migrant workers in the diaspora.[[178]](#footnote-178) It, therefore, seems possible that the remaining block of voters in the diaspora, which voted for the USR PLUS, was the academic elite, which is part of this brain drain.

In short, the 2020 Romanian legislative elections were a massive success to the new populist parties, the AUR and the USR PLUS. While one party was Eurosceptic and the other pro-European, it did signify the polarization of Romanian domestic politics. The arrival of these two parties, which was caused by voters’ frustration with the entrenched, corrupt politicians of the PSD and PNL, signifies the potential start of a new chapter in Romanian politics.

## Eurobarometer 94: Winter 2020-2021

This chapter has shown how the coronavirus pandemic had affected the way some Romanians thought about the EU. It has also shown the balance within the domestic political spectrum shift by the rise of two prominent populist political parties. The next part of this chapter will, for the final time, analyze Eurobarometer data and measure the concrete effects these developments have had on the Romanian people.

Eurobarometer 94 started by asking people how they expected their lives to change in the coming twelve months. In 2007, 43% of Romanians expected their lives to better in the next year. In 2014, this number was 40%. In the latest Eurobarometer, this percentage had dropped to 28% of surveyees expecting to see an improvement in their lives.[[179]](#footnote-179) 45% expected it to stay the same, and 25% expected a worsening. While this could be due to the uncertainty surrounding the coronavirus pandemic, Romania had historically scored much higher than the EU-27 average on this question. In this instance, it had nearly reached the bottom five most pessimistic countries. This low rate of optimism could be attributed to a sense of disillusionment with the EU; it had in the past served as a beacon of hope, whereas now some Romanians had become indifferent, following

Another concerning development is the view Romanians had on their household’s financial situation. At first glance, the results seem positive: 54% of surveyees considered that it is good, while another 46% said their personal job situation was good.[[180]](#footnote-180) Yet, the problem is that Romanians used to answer much more positively than the EU27 average on these topics. This time around, it scored considerably lower. Concretely, the EU27 average on these same questions was 68% and 58%, respectively.

In fact, the EU27 average lay above every single answer the Romanian surveyees had given regarding their outlook on the future. 19% of Romanians expected to see an improvement in their personal job situation, compared to 20% of the EU27 average.[[181]](#footnote-181) 21% expected the economic situation in their country to be better, compared to the 29% of the EU27 average. It is concerning that Romanians, who had historically laid above the EU average, now lay below it.

Moving onto the relation between the EU and its citizens, Eb 92 asked its surveyees whether the EU conjures up a positive or a negative image. In this case, the results were a little more positive. 47% of surveyees answered with “positive,” while 46% answered with “neutral,” and 7% with “negative.”[[182]](#footnote-182) Considering the EU27 average for these lay at 46%, 38%, and 15%, respectively, the Romanians were still in a good position. This does still mean that there was a relative drop in positivity regarding the EU; Romanians started becoming increasingly indifferent towards the EU. Whereas six years prior, the country peaked above its other member states with a 67% positive rate, it now bordered the average and nearly fell below it.

The Romanian people had historically put more trust in the EU than their own national government. Eb 94 confirms that this had not changed; 58% of Romanian surveyees said that they trust the EU, compared to the 29% who said they trust their national government and the 26% who trust their national parliament.[[183]](#footnote-183) To put this in perspective, the Romanians scored much higher than the EU27 average when it came to trusting the EU and much lower when it came to trusting their national government and parliament.

Some trends regarding the coronavirus pandemic confirm that the Romanian people judged the EU as a more reliable institution than their own national government. When asked how satisfied they were with the measures taken to fight the pandemic by the Romanian national government, 42% of surveyees responded with “satisfied.”[[184]](#footnote-184) This lay one percent under the EU27 average. In contrast, 57% were satisfied with the measures taken by the EU, putting Romania in the top five most satisfied countries in the EU.

The coronavirus outbreak also shows that the Romanian people either remained optimistic or did not take the pandemic seriously. Surveyees were asked when they thought the Romanian economy would recover from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. While 61% of the EU27 average thought their country’s economies would recover in 2023 or later, only 44% of Romanians thought the same.[[185]](#footnote-185) Only 6% of the EU27 average thought this would happen in or before 2021, compared to 18% of Romanian surveyees who thought so. In fact, Romania was the single most optimistic country when it came to economic prospects in the future. Conversely, Romanians also considered the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the economy the least serious out of all EU countries. Whereas the average lay at 93%, thinking it had serious effects, only 81% of Romanians thought the same.

## Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, the year 2020 had seen numerous significant developments occur in the Romanian socio-economic, cultural, and political spectrums. The coronavirus pandemic highlighted key issues in the way that low-income migrant workers from Romania were treated in the EU. These workers, who were outraged at the way the EU had treated them, turned towards the AUR during the elections. The newly established AUR criticized the EU in its current form, promoted ultranationalistic ideas like the reunification with Moldova under Romanian leadership, and criticized the EU and the national government’s approach to the coronavirus. All of these points promote Euroscepticism because it calls for fundamental EU reform to weaken it, endorses the idea of an exclusive national identity, and politicize salient topics that involve EU engagement. In the meantime, the USR PLUS appealed to the intellectual Romanians in the major cities and those scattered around the diaspora as a result of the brain drain to get electoral support. The 2020 legislative elections were thereby the first time where new, populist parties had seen major electoral victories in the country in a very long time. Most strikingly, Eb 94 had shown that, while the Romanians remained net positive towards the EU, it had starkly declined its relative level of optimism towards it.

# Conclusion

This thesis set out to trace the evolution of Euroscepticism in Romania from 2007 to 2020. The results of this investigation show several things. Firstly, to many Romanians, EU accession had been a salient topic ever since the fall of the communist regime. Domestic politicians had consistently made attempts to realize this until it became a reality in 2007. Nearly all Romanians saw accession to the EU as crucial to their future and economic interests. It not only offered tangible benefits like free travel for job opportunities and education but also hope in the form of a stable, democratic institution that could combat the rampant corruption in the country. For these reasons, Romania’s accession was universally supported by its citizens. Eurobarometer data supports this by showing incredibly high rates of optimism from Romanian surveyees when asked about their opinion regarding the EU.

Secondly, this thesis has shown that throughout its membership in the EU, Romania’s domestic political turmoil slightly affected the way people looked towards it. This is after the political elite, including the prime minister, vehemently denounced the EU because of its involvement in domestic affairs. The European debt crisis, a global recession, which to many was a sign of weakness of the EU’s machinations, left Romanian public opinion scarcely affected. But throughout nearly every episode of domestic tension, no social, cultural, or political movement was created to protest or criticize Romania’s membership in the EU. However, the period between 2007 and 2014 did show a slight halt in the levels of enthusiasm Romania had initially shown.

Lastly, it showed the role that the coronavirus pandemic played in changing public opinion. For the first time since the Ceaușescu regime, people’s liberties were severely restricted. This period saw criticism surrounding COVID-19 measures and the way Romanian migrant workers were treated across the EU. These developments helped the creation of two new populist parties, who won almost a quarter of the vote in the 2020 legislative elections. While one is soft-Eurosceptic and the other pro-Europeanist, it shows the political terrain becoming polarized. As the theoretical framework argued, the disempowering of the entrenched political elite meant that ordinary citizens were more easily exposed to Eurosceptic ideals. The latest Eurobarometer data confirmed this; whereas Romanians had historically been the most optimistic people towards the EU, many had become indifferent to it by the end of 2020.

In the end, it seems that people did not immediately react to domestic political turmoil, such as the 2012 impeachment referendum. However, people did become increasingly discontented with the condition of their parliament, which had seen politicians repeatedly make headline news surrounding corruption scandals. This all would not have been a problem for European integration, until populist and Eurosceptic parties were voted into parliament. Even though one of these parties is pro-Europeanist, the ultimate effect is the polarization of Romanian internal politics, with populist (Eurosceptic) parties claiming electoral victories. People’s disillusionment with the EU has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, which highlighted the exploitation of migrant workers by wealthy EU (OECD) countries.

The results of this thesis support the idea that public opinion towards the EU shifted more easily once new political parties challenged the entrenched elite. It has confirmed the theory of Winzen, who argued that populist ideas spread more easily to the public once the political elite was no longer entrenched. The coronavirus pandemic was crucial in highlighting migrant workers’ exploitation and the limitations on people’s liberties. This allowed the Eurosceptic AUR to pander itself to those critical of these developments and work itself into parliament.

The generalizability of these results is subject to certain limitations. For instance, there could have been other developments between 2014 and 2020 which influenced people’s opinion towards the EU. It is also important to note that there is an ongoing global pandemic whose definite effects are still unaccounted for. Considering the 2012 impeachment referendum and 2014 presidential elections changed little, the balance of the domestic political spectrum only noticeably shifted when the world was in crisis. It could be argued that people’s pessimistic behavior is influenced by the pandemic, and therefore not conclusive. Whether the AUR can present itself as a good candidate to vote on after the pandemic remains to be seen.

Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample, this thesis offers valuable insights into the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on Romanian sentiment towards the EU. It has shown that Romania has historically been a big proponent of the EU and that domestic political turmoil had in normal circumstances done little to change this attitude. A further study could assess the long-term effects of COVID-19 on Euroscepticism in Romania. If the debate is to be moved forward, a better understanding of the effects of the coronavirus pandemic needs to be developed. This includes measures taken by the national government, people’s attitudes, and the meticulous ways through which the AUR had gotten people to vote on it. Lastly, there would be merit in researching how exactly the PSD had undergone such a heavy electoral loss during the 2020 legislative elections. Its fall had contributed to the emergence of these new populist parties.

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