

Reconfiguring EU Peripheries

Political Elites, Contestation,
and Geopolitical Shifts

Edited by

Miruna Butnaru Troncotă
Ali Onur Özçelik and
Radu-Alexandru Cucută

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Miruna Butnaru Troncotă
Ali Onur Özçelik
Radu-Alexandru Cucută

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Contributors

Başak Alpan is an associate professor and a lecturer in European politics and political sociology at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Türkiye. She holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham for her research on Turkish discourses on ‘Europe’ in the post-1999 period. She conducts research and extensively writes on European integration, discourse theory, post-structuralism, Türkiye–EU relations, and football and identity. Alpan has worked in many EU-funded projects as a researcher, including FREE (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe) and FEUTURE (The Future of Turkey–EU Relations). She is currently the coordinator of the JM Network LEAP (‘Linking to Europe at the Periphery’).

David Aprasidze is a professor of political science at Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. His research focuses on political transformation, democratization, and regional developments in the South Caucasus.

Krisztina Arató is a full professor and director of the Institute of Political Science, Faculty of Law, ELTE University, in Budapest, Hungary. In the 2023/24 academic year, she is the Jean Monnet Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre (European University Institute) in Florence, Italy. Her research interests are history and theories of European integration, and civil and social dialogue. She has authored and edited textbooks about the EU (*The Voyage of Europe* with Boglárka Koller and *The Political System of the European Union*, co-edited with Boglárka Koller, both in Hungarian) and recently co-edited the volume *The Political Economy of the Eurozone in Central and Eastern Europe: Why In, Why Out?* (Routledge, 2021).

Leonora Bajrami is a PhD student in the Department of Political Sciences at the South East European University in Tetovo, North Macedonia. Her article ‘The shadow of Republika Srpska on the association of municipalities with a Serbian majority’, funded by the Sami Frashri Institute in Tirana, is ongoing. Between 2019 and 2023, she completed two master’s degrees at the University of Prishtina, in the fields of European integration and public administration and international relations and diplomacy. Previously, as an intern, Leonora was part of the supervision of the work of the Parliamentary Commissions of the Republic of Kosovo by the Democratic Institute of Kosovo and the Ministry of Culture Youth and Sports. She is also part of the Diaspora for Women in Politics project, within the organization Germin, as well as the Leadership Mentoring Program of the National Democratic Institute, Kosovo.

Bardhok Bashota is a professor of political science at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Prishtina, Kosovo. In 2014 he earned a PhD in international relations at the University of Tirana. He has served as a trainer and expert in several national institutions and is currently serving as a researcher for the LEAP (Linking to Europe at the Periphery) project. His areas of research interest are state-building, theories of international relations, and European studies. He has published several scientific articles in international journals, such as *Southeastern Europe*, *UNISCI Journal*, and *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, as well as a university textbook on international relations and a monograph on the theory and practice of international territorial administration. He has participated in several international conferences and symposiums.

Miruna Butnaru Troncotă, PhD, is an associate professor, a PhD advisor, and the director of the Centre of European Studies in the Department of International Relations and European Integration of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest, Romania. She has a direct research interest in EU integration, the Europeanization research agenda, EU foreign and security policy, and the post-conflict reconstruction of the Western Balkans. She has published numerous academic articles and policy papers in this field and is a commentator on recent geopolitical events in South East Europe for national and international media outlets.

Radu-Alexandru Cucută, PhD, is a lecturer with the Department of International Relations and European Integration of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest, Romania. His research interests lie within the fields of theories of revolution and theories of international relations. His most recent writing deals with the influence that liminality has on the use of fashionable concepts in Romania's strategic documents.

Dren Gërguri, PhD, is a lecturer at the Department of Journalism, University of Prishtina, Kosovo, and a Fulbright scholar. His research agenda is at the intersection of disinformation, political communication, and journalism. He serves as the associate editor at the *Central European Journal of Communication*. His articles have been translated into around ten languages, including English, German, French, Russian, and Japanese. Recent publications are *Fake News: Information Disorder in the Digital Age* (published in Albanian and English); 'Infodemic and the crisis of distinguishing disinformation from accurate information: Case study on the use of Facebook in Kosovo during COVID-19' (a paper published in the journal *Information & Media*) and 'Kosovo: Political crisis, one more challenge alongside COVID-19', a chapter in the volume *Political Communication and COVID-19*, published by Routledge.

Oana-Andreea Ion, PhD, is a lecturer at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest, Romania. With a background in political sciences, her primary research interests lie in the field of European Union studies, with a specific emphasis on governance and Europeanization. Dr Ion has actively contributed to numerous projects since 2008, assuming roles such as manager or expert. Her involvement has centred primarily on the meticulous design and effective implementation of public policies, particularly within the realms of education and sustainable development.

Hatidža Jahić, PhD, is an associate professor at the Department of Economic Theory and Policy, School of Economics and Business, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her fields of interest include education economics, development economics, and international economics. She is the author of numerous papers presented at

conferences and published in domestic and international journals. She has participated in several domestic and international research projects. In 2016 she was awarded a Fulbright scholarship.

Roman Kalytchak, PhD, is an associate professor at the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy at Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine, and a visiting scholar in the Department of German and Slavic Studies at the University of Manitoba, Canada. He is a political scientist and his research interests include Ukraine's foreign policy, European integration, and area studies more generally.

Adnan Muminović, PhD, is an assistant professor at the Department of Economic Theory and Policy, School of Economics and Business, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. His fields of interest include macro-economics, political economy, and economic psychology. In addition to his academic career, he has worked as an economic adviser to numerous international organizations and the Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2019, he was awarded a Chevening scholarship.

Ali Onur Özçelik, PhD, is an associate professor in the International Relations Department at Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Türkiye. He holds an MA in transatlantic relations from the University of Birmingham and a PhD in politics from the University of Sheffield. His research focuses on Europeanization, multi-level governance, the politics of non-state actors, interest representations, and lobbying. He is co-editor of two books: *The World Community and Arab Spring* (Palgrave) and *EU Conditionality in Turkey: When Does It Work? When Does It Fail?* (Rowman & Littlefield). Özçelik has contributed to youth projects supported by the EU and UN and has served as a regional coordinator for the Anatolian Centre of Excellence and a researcher for the Jean Monnet Networking Project 'Linking to Europe at the Periphery' (LEAP).

Melek Aylin Özoflu, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of International Relations, Özyeğin University, Istanbul, Türkiye. She also conducts postdoctoral research in the Institute of Political Science, Faculty of Law, at ELTE University in Budapest, Hungary. Her main research areas focus on identity politics, European identity,

European politics, and EU crises. Her paper ‘The populist framing of the Russia–Ukraine war by the Hungarian government: Convergence or contestation in the EU’ (co-authored with Krisztina Arató) was recently published in the SSCI-indexed *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*.

Daniel Pascal is a PhD student at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania. His background is in international relations and diplomatic studies. He is currently working on an EU-financed project implemented in the Republic of Moldova. His fields of interest are foreign policy and the process of integration of Moldova within Europe and within the EU.

Nicolae Toderaş is a lecturer at the Department of International Relations and European Integration, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania, where he teaches courses in the fields of European studies, EU policies, and evaluation of European policies and programmes. One of his subjects of interest is the analysis of the process of the Republic of Moldova’s approach towards the European Union. He has published articles and public policy studies related to the Republic of Moldova’s integration within Europe. He has also provided consultancy services to various public institutions in the Republic of Moldova on subjects specific to European integration.

Andriy Tyushka, PhD, is a senior research fellow who holds the European Neighbourhood Policy Chair at the College of Europe in Natolin, Poland, and a researcher with two EU-funded Horizon projects (H-2020 ENGAGE and H-Europe REUNIR) focusing on the EU’s global actorness and its neighbourhood policies, respectively. His research focuses on EU–Ukraine association and integration, the EU’s relations with the Eastern neighbourhood at large, and (Eastern) European security matters.

CHAPTER 1

Contours of EU Peripheries in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

The Perspectives of Political Elites

Ali Onur Özçelik

Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Eskişehir

Miruna Butnaru Troncotă

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest

Radu-Alexandru Cucută

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest

Oana-Andreea Ion

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest

Abstract

This chapter presents the rationale behind employing the term ‘EU peripheries’ in the book and clarifies the theoretical framework adopted to define this term within the context of the EU integration process. The first section scrutinizes the concept of ‘EU peripheries’ as it will be theorized in the book. Its main aim is to critically examine the evolving connotations of the term, particularly in light of several crises of the last decade. Subsequently the chapter delves into the diverse

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manifestations of emerging forms of EU contestation at the peripheries, followed by the methodology section and an outline of the book's structure. In the last section we examine the selected country cases and their contribution to the proposed conceptualization of EU peripheries, drawing connections with existing literature on the subject from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Finally, the chapter outlines the unique aspects of our approach and its potential contributions to existing scholarship in this field.

Keywords: EU peripheries, political elites, geopolitical shift, EU integration, contestation

Introduction

Margins become privileged sites for observing the formation and re-formation of space. Understanding from the margin's point of view thus reveals what is otherwise obscured.

Noel Parker (2008:10)

This book aims to explore the diverse nature of the European Union's interactions with its peripheries by focusing on the perceptions of politicians in the context of contestation during a period of rising regional tensions marked most recently by the war in Ukraine. The volume casts important new empirical and conceptual light on the diverse motivations that underpin the political elites' attitudes towards the EU and the integration process. Consequently, the book presents a comprehensive examination from both theoretical and empirical standpoints regarding the EU's interactions with distinct categories of its periphery, encompassing member states (e.g., Romania and Hungary), candidate countries (e.g., Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Türkiye), and potential candidate countries (e.g., Kosovo and Georgia¹).

The book has two main objectives. The first is to problematize the various understandings of the EU's interactions with its different peripheries by outlining the constructed nature of 'peripherality'. The second is to explore in a comparative manner the various domestic political elites' attitudes towards the EU and their complex motivations in countries at different stages in the EU accession process over a period of accumulation of crises and war. Therefore, we aim to tackle the issue of peripherality in the EU integration process as a multidimensional problem. We build on definitions of 'peripheries' from

post-structuralism, constructivism, and critical geopolitics, which are differentiated by various degrees of liminality in relation to the EU (taken as the main centre of reference), and through this conceptual background we aim to analyse the last decades' crisis-driven dynamics within various EU and non-EU countries. These empirically rich case studies will enable both interpretations of and debates on the EU integration process marked by diverse forms of contestation of or attraction to the adoption of the rules, and the main characteristics of these dynamics will be viewed as closely related to the 'self-perceived' nature of the societies in question in relation to the EU. Acknowledging the need to systematize and deepen our knowledge of the reality of the existing EU peripheries, we aim to focus on the question of peripherality through the lens of various peripheral regions, such as the Eastern neighbourhood, the Western Balkans, the Black Sea region, and also South-East and Central Europe.

The primary research inquiries in this scholarly work revolve around two fundamental aspects: first, the interpretation of political elites concerning their respective nations' stances vis-à-vis the EU; and second, the nuanced understanding of and significance attributed by these elites to the notion of the EU periphery as it unfolds in the current geopolitical context, which has fundamentally reshaped how the EU relates to some of its candidate and potential candidate countries. By exploring such questions, the book's overarching contribution lies in its exploration and analysis of the pivotal discourse surrounding the reconfigurations of the EU's centre-periphery dynamics as well as the evolving relationships between the EU and its neighbouring countries. In short, our central research question in this book is: *How is the concept of 'EU periphery' defined by the perspectives of political elites interpreting their countries' positions towards the EU?* To tackle this question, the book will explore different insiders' accounts of the EU's declining or rising appeal as seen by political elites in turbulent times defined by the war in Ukraine and rising illiberal practices in several member states and in candidate countries in the EU's neighbourhood.

We will therefore discuss the very meaning of 'EU peripheries' in its complexity, reflected not only in the EU's strategic decisions but also in the subjective perceptions of political elites from the countries in the EU periphery themselves. The term 'political elites' in this context specifically encompasses elected politicians, including representatives of relevant political parties within both the government

and the opposition, who hold positions in national parliaments and are actively engaged in decision-making processes pertaining to EU affairs (for more, see the methodology section below). Additionally, it encompasses individuals who have participated in joint parliamentary committees involving their respective national parliaments and members of the European Parliament, thereby exerting influence over EU-related matters. Similarly, a more nuanced examination is required to fully comprehend the elites' shifts from contestation to full support in its various forms in the EU's peripheries.

This book stands out by presenting a critical examination and challenging of the diverse peripheries within the EU. It achieves this by uniting experts from different disciplines of European studies, hailing from various countries and representing a range of career stages. The volume aims to conceptualize and empirically map the political conflicts that shape policy-makers' perceptions of the EU in eight countries from 2010 to the present. In this respect, the chapters include original qualitative data from each case study that reflects shifts in domestic actors' perceptions before and during the rapidly worsening situation in Ukraine and its visible impact at the regional and global level. The subsequent sections will initially scrutinize the concept of 'EU peripheries' within the context of EU integration as it will be theorized in the book. Subsequently, the chapter will delve into the diverse manifestations of emerging forms of EU contestation at the peripheries, followed by the methodology section and finally an outline of the book's structure.

Theorizing 'EU Peripheries' in the Context of EU Integration

As stated, one of the primary objectives of our book is to critically examine the evolving connotations of the EU's peripheries within the broader context of the EU integration process, particularly considering several recent crises. In this section, we will elucidate the rationale behind employing the term 'EU peripheries' and clarify the theoretical framework adopted to define the term within the context of the EU integration process. Subsequently, we will examine the selected country cases and their contribution to the proposed conceptualization of EU peripheries, drawing connections with existing literature on the subject from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Additionally, we will

outline the unique aspects of our approach and its potential contributions to existing scholarship in this field.

The term ‘EU periphery’ has several contradictory connotations in terms of geographical, economic, cultural/ideational, and political factors. Recent studies abound focusing strictly on the economic perspective, particularly in the context of the Eurozone crisis, and looking at core–periphery relations in the European Monetary Union (Campos & Macchiarelli, 2021; also see Gräbner et al., 2020). Classically, referring to the strictly economic side of the concept ‘periphery’, the dependency theory literature discusses the ‘core versus periphery divide’ with a predominantly economic focus that assumes a hierarchical order (with the core in a superior position to the periphery) (Öniş & Kutlay, 2019).

Although we are aware of these strictly economic underpinnings of the term, we opt for a meaning that tackles the more political and geopolitical essence of the ‘periphery’, connected to a certain group of countries and their shifting political relationship with the EU on a Europeanization–de-Europeanization continuum. This perspective assumes that peripheral countries are, in one way or another, under the political influence of the EU (the so-called ‘transformative power’ taken from the Europeanization research agenda; see Grabbe, 2006), due to their status either as new entrants or prospective or current candidate states, or as states within the framework of EU neighbourhood policy. It is also important to note that the impact of the EU’s actions can also be understood under the more direct impact of conditionalities (see, for example, Bieber, 2018; Džankić et al., 2019; Hamburg, 2022; Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 2018; Zucconi, 2019; Cianetti et al., 2020; Lushaku Sadriu, 2019). As Celi et al. (2022) argues, there is a need for a more critical overview of the current forms and manifestations of peripherality in the EU, and outside the EU, as well as a better understanding of peripheries’ self-representations and political self-realization.

Our perspective also goes in a different direction of assessing core–periphery relations in the EU integration context by reflecting on how geopolitical contexts shift the dynamics between the EU and its peripheries, with a greater focus on complex interdependencies in the realm of meaning-making rather than on a hierarchical, static core–periphery relation. We take an inter-disciplinary perspective that will help us to illustrate the peculiar and evolving nature of the ‘EU

peripheries’ – and in this case, the plurality of power relations inducing more politicization into the EU integration process and thus reflecting on reverse dynamics between the EU and its peripheries, opening the possibility for the peripheries to impact and shape the core (as Noel Parker’s quote suggests in the epigraph to this chapter). This implies going beyond the dependency thesis underlying the peripheral position and using the label ‘periphery’ not with negative connotations but rather as a distinctive form of critique from the sidelines. This in turn implies understanding the EU integration process from the peripheries’ perspective as expressed in the discourses of political elites (for both the countries that are partially integrated and those that have recently initiated the integration process). This is relevant to showing how peripheral societies understand, debate, and construct their identity in the European context during a period of successive crises.

Providing a theoretical conceptualization of EU peripheries without being strictly limited to an economic understanding of asymmetries as in other strands of EU integration literature (Börzel & Langbein, 2019; Gräbner et al., 2020) or simply looking at how the decisions of the core model the periphery, one may focus on the dual process taking place in profoundly changed contexts such as the war in Ukraine, where the periphery also has a new perspective on the core. In this regard, the contributors to this book undertake a reassessment of the concept of the EU periphery within the context of the profound systemic challenges that have confronted European integration over the past decade. By focusing their analysis on recent events and examining their influence on elite perceptions, the chapters present eight distinct case studies in order to shed light on the evolving understanding of EU peripheries.

Our approach to selecting case studies that fall within the notion of ‘EU peripheries’ is contingent on the political relationship that each respective country maintains with the EU. Within the context of this political relationship, the book encompasses cases from a diverse range of EU policy-making frameworks, including two member states (Hungary and Romania), four candidate countries (Türkiye, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova), and two potential candidate countries (Georgia and Kosovo). The primary rationale for including member states is their status within the EU decision-making process, characterized by an incomplete attainment of full integration with the EU or resistance towards adopting specific norms,

standards, and policies. The chapters dedicated to Romania and Hungary extensively examine the degree to which these countries, often regarded as ‘laggards’ in specific policy domains and even considered outliers or reactionaries within the EU, are categorized as politically peripheral. For non-EU member states, whether they are candidates or potential candidates, the contributors to the book analyse the evolution of the EU’s foreign and security decisions over the past decade, investigating instances of differentiated treatment or accelerated processes, aiming to comprehend the extent to which the EU has generated specific dynamics of exclusion. These dynamics encompass not only political dimensions but also aspects of citizenship, ethnicity, and religion. In this regard, the book delves into the perceptions of political elites in EU and non-EU countries that have encountered various forms of exclusion, examining how their attitudes towards the EU and the integration process may have evolved over the past decade, particularly considering recent events such as the ongoing war in Ukraine and the challenges it has posed to the integration process.

We adopt a constructivist standpoint and, in alignment with other critical authors in EU studies, argue that the concept of the EU periphery is not fixed; rather, it can change with the accession of new states or the exit of member states (Parker, 2008; Celi et al., 2022). For example, in the context of the EU integration process, each enlargement wave has changed the meaning of ‘EU periphery’. The configuration of the EU periphery has witnessed notable shifts in an eastern or south-eastern direction during distinct time periods, namely 2004, 2007, and, most recently, 2013. These changes have occurred as certain new countries gain membership in the EU, thereby leading to the emergence of new external regions referred to as the EU periphery. It is important to note that this dynamic transformation is influenced not only by the EU’s enlargement policy per se but also by other global events that lie beyond the scope of EU decision-making authority. Additionally, political elites’ perceptions of and engagement with EU institutions play a significant role in shaping the course of the integration process. In this respect, theoretically, our main claim is closely associated with post-structuralist and constructivist perspectives. Both of these perspectives argue that when EU integration dynamics change, so does the meaning of the EU periphery. To paraphrase Alexander Wendt’s (1992) words, ‘the periphery is what states make of it’, and this depends on the position of the observer.

This complex meaning-making process depends on whether it is seen with an outsider's gaze (from the perspective of the EU core) or with an insider's gaze (of those who inhabit the peripheral space itself). Following the arguments provided by Noel Parker's (2008) theoretical framework, the outside perspective on the EU periphery, which often uses 'Orientalizing narratives' and pejorative terms to construct the periphery as the Other of Europe, needs to be completed by an inside gaze looking at how political elites in the EU periphery define their relations with the EU and the way they themselves problematize the meaning of 'periphery' in the current turbulent times. In this book, our main contributors – scholars from the countries in focus – reflect on the specificities of each context, including reflections on institutional legacies, structural constraints, or electoral dynamics and how they interact in shaping these fast-moving realities.

One might contend that different post-structuralist studies employ varied terminologies that are only partially synonymous with the notion of 'periphery', such as 'marginality' (Parker, 2008) or 'liminality' (Rumelili, 2012). To mitigate potential confusion, we have chosen to consistently employ the concept of 'periphery' throughout the entire study. Indeed, we shall predominantly utilize it in this conceptual literature review specifically in its plural form as 'EU peripheries'. This deliberate choice stems from our intention to comprehensively explore the diverse nature of peripheral spaces within the EU. Our aim is to provide a comparative perspective on multiple peripheral spaces in relation to the EU core, encompassing both its internal regions (such as Romania and Hungary) and its neighbouring areas (such as Türkiye, the Balkans, and the post-Soviet space).

As discussed, we aim to make a significant contribution to the existing literature by conducting a comparative analysis of various perspectives from the EU peripheries. By adopting an 'insider's gaze' approach, we strive to shed light on obscured aspects of the EU integration process. Parker's (2008) work serves as the foundation for our theoretical discussions of EU peripheries while also considering recent geopolitical changes within the EU and its surrounding borders. We therefore acknowledge that the concept of 'periphery' carries historical baggage and negative connotations. However, starting from conventional perspectives, we embrace Parker's definition of marginality, which allows for the possibility of peripheral regions impacting the centre (in this case, the EU) and leaving it fully exposed to influences from its various

peripheries. Post-structuralist approaches discuss how these political aspects of peripherality are discursively constructed from the inside and outside of the periphery itself and what material conditions are connected to this discursive 'peripheralization'. Our perspective is EU-centred, as we examine the shifting peripheries on all sides of the EU's formal borders, both internally and externally, and explore their evolving interactions. In this context, the EU is perceived as a source of political order, acting as a centre with the political power to define different peripheries.

We believe that both cores and peripheries are defined by their relationships, and therefore they are not random. Their existence depends on each other's position. The identities of both the core and the periphery are, therefore, determined to some degree by their interrelationships. From this perspective, post-structuralist accounts focus on the fluidity of spaces constructed around centres. In Parker's words, 'we turn to the margins as sites where the fluidity of identities will surface and be played out' (2008, p. 11). His view is rooted in the philosophical significance of the marginal in Derrida's post-structuralism, which underlines the profound interconnected nature of the two concepts: 'without margins (edges), centers (metropolises, capitals) could not be centers; without centers, margins' marginal position(s) could not be identified' (Derrida, 1972, paraphrased in Parker, 2008, p. 11). 'Yet the margins' very existence holds up to view the center's incompleteness' (Parker, 2008, p. 11). This coincides with the expanding literature on European identity in both international relations and anthropology, discussing how identities are constructed in the international arena in a dynamic way. This perspective is closely aligned with the constructivist portrayal of the EU's enlargement policy, which aims to serve the interests of both prospective members and the EU itself to strengthen its political, economic, and normative influence. As a result, we consider this theoretical framework to be highly valuable and relevant in an academic context.

In conventional perspectives, the term 'peripheral' implies a passive condition of being shaped by or excluded from the centre (Parker, 2008, p. 9). In contrast, within this research, the dynamics of centre-periphery relations are perceived as interactive and mutually influential, with the periphery also exerting positive effects on the centre. In essence, in post-structuralist interpretations, peripheries are credited with the ability to surpass boundaries and alter both physical and

symbolic domains, irrespective of the impositions sought by sovereign states and markets from the centre (Kuus, 2007; Ballinger, 2017). This understanding of the concept leaves space for a more ‘empowered’ type of periphery, rather than a dependent and underdeveloped one as presented in pure economic studies. Taking into consideration the arguments and their implications, this study aims to assess how the EU, conceptualized as a space of socio-political order through the EU integration process, can be comprehended from the perspective of its various peripheries.

We also build on contributions of critical geopolitics that have highlighted the fact that defining a certain political space as a periphery is not something we should take for granted (like simply referring to that country’s position on the map); rather we should analyse the multiple processes of ‘sense-making’ and framing that are likely to impact how a geographical space is treated as peripheral by a centre of power (Goldsworthy, 1998; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Kojanic, 2020). We adopt the concept of EU peripheries from a critical post-structuralist standpoint, viewing it as an ongoing process of asymmetrical relations dynamically constructed and reconstructed in the Europeanization and de-Europeanization processes over the past decade.

Unravelling Different Forms of Contestation at the EU’s Peripheries

Studying a period characterized by successive crises, commonly referred to as a ‘poly-crisis’ (Zeitlin & Nicoli, 2020), and specifically examining a tense period marked by an ongoing war at the immediate borders of the EU, holds significant value in comprehending the emergence of polarized opinions and shifting perspectives regarding the EU both internally and externally. The 2008 economic crisis showcased the transformative influence of global crises on the conceptualization of core–periphery relations. This phenomenon was further evident during subsequent events such as the refugee crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and most recently, the war in Ukraine. The EU currently confronts unparalleled instability in its neighbouring regions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The past years have therefore witnessed significant transformations in the EU’s neighbouring regions, with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia-Herzegovina becoming candidate countries and member states such as Romania assuming

stronger positions in the Council. These developments are marked by some South-East European countries' efforts to assist Ukrainian refugees and bolster their military strategic positions as leaders of NATO's eastern flank.

These changes are even more puzzling given that EU studies scholars have shown that, pushed by recent crises such as the Eurozone crisis, migration crisis, and Brexit, European integration has become an increasingly contested process (Brack & Gürkan, 2021; Özçelik et al., 2023). Starting in February 2022, the war in Ukraine significantly changed this process because it determined some decisions that were previously 'unthinkable' for the EU: to offer candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova (which were previously associated countries before, seeking membership but, as part of the Eastern Partnership, never promised it) and to Bosnia and Herzegovina (which had been stagnating since it first applied for candidate status in 2016, due to its lack of reforms). The geopolitical context of the war in Ukraine and numerous security concerns in the EU's neighbourhood determined this radical shift in the EU's policy. But experts argue that in some countries, the accession process is most positively regarded, whereas in other countries in EU's periphery it remains more contested than ever, following an intensifying trend of so-called de-Europeanization (Alpan & Öztürk, 2022). Scholars have concluded that the EU faces transformative and normative constraints due to recent events, which involve disputes regarding the EU and efforts to move away from its institutional or normative frameworks, occurring both within and outside the EU (Foster & Grzymiski, 2022; Makarychev & Butnaru-Troncotă, 2022).

Extensive research has been conducted on various domestic actors who adopt anti-EU arguments, perceiving the Union as an illegitimate supranational entity that undermines national sovereignty, poses a threat to national identities, or exacerbates domestic social and economic challenges within member states (Pirro et al., 2018; Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018). Yet there is significantly less research on how the EU is contested outside the EU (Stojić, 2021). In addressing this lacuna in the extant literature, we focus on the diverse mechanisms triggering contestation and resistance towards the EU integration process in different peripheral spaces, from within and from its immediate neighbourhood. We thus engage with recent contributions to the European integration agenda in crisis research (Schimmelfennig, 2022; Brack &

Gürkan, 2021). The topic is also of increased policy relevance because of the recently launched European Political Community, proposed by President Emmanuel Macron of France, which materialized in 2022 – an intergovernmental format that aims to foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest for countries in the EU’s neighbourhood, the UK, and others. These evolutions prove that the complex ways in which successive crises have impacted the EU’s relations with its neighbourhood still require in-depth research, and this is the area where our edited volume will make a new contribution.

In analysing the most recent crises in the EU, namely the Eurozone, Schengen, and Brexit, in order to comprehend the EU’s current crisis, Börzel and Risse (2018) put more emphasis on politicization and identity politics. In addition to the validity of contemporary integration theories, this book similarly argues that changes in EU politics are inherently significant for the politicization and political contestation of the EU, and our assumption is that the motivating factors for these attitudes share a set of common patterns in different countries’ relations with the EU (old candidate country, new candidate country, potential candidate country, or even Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states that experience different forms of de-Europeanization). However, the important nuance here is that contesting the EU is not confined to member states; it has also extended towards the non-member states in the EU’s periphery, limiting the transformative capacity of the EU outside its borders. This complex phenomenon has also suffered severe changes since the war in Ukraine started.

As Özçelik et al. (2023, p. 688) claim:

together with the rising costs of harmonizing with the EU (particularly for the new EU members), the low credibility of the EU membership (particularly for the case of a candidate or potential candidate), the decrease in the EU’s attractiveness (particularly for the non-member states), the increasing influence of Eurosceptics as veto players in national policy-making processes, as well as the increasing establishment of the illiberal forces (e.g., China and Russia) have provided a fertile ground for contesting the EU at domestic politics in its periphery.

International and regional contexts are part of a larger framework that influences EU institutions, regulations, and policies. Neither the EU nor its member states, therefore, are immune to changes in the international system. Defining it in a specific EU integration context,

scholars discuss EU contestation as a form of ‘raising objections and critical engagement with the EU’s norms, policies, and practices’ (Wiener, 2018, p. 2) but also as ‘a way to express differences of experience, expectation, and opinion’ (Wiener, 2014, p. 11). Regardless of objections and challenges posed by various EU contestation practices, contestation need not result in non-compliance with EU norms, or in simply reversing EU-induced reforms (as the literature on de-Europe-ization suggests), but can lead to a wider array of ambivalent reactions towards the EU.

Wiener and Puetter (2009, p. 7) contend that ‘norm contestation is a necessary component in raising the level of acceptance of EU norms’. We build on this theoretical observation, while we plan to assess the various ambivalent positions of countries in the EU periphery and their shifting perspectives towards the EU. This understanding implies that countries can still be actively engaged in the EU integration process while resisting or contesting some aspects of it at the same time. This means that they formally still embark on seeking prospective EU membership (thus aiming for convergence with EU requirements), while on certain topics they take a differentiated or even opposite perspective (adopting a divergent position towards the EU). Almost all of the eight countries that we discuss as our case studies can illustrate such an ambiguous position on very different topics in relation to the EU, and that makes the very concept of contestation in EU periphery more challenging but also more appealing for an in-depth comparative analysis. In taking this approach we do not assume that EU contestation is a dominant narrative in these spaces, but we have decided to focus primarily on a more nuanced understanding of if and why political elites contest the EU while being committed at the same time to the EU integration process.

While there have been numerous attempts to define contestation, the role of contestation as an integral part of European integration processes from which specific policy options are derived can be asserted (Wiener & Puetter, 2009, pp. 2–3). Multiple crises, such as the Eurozone, migration, COVID-19, and most recently the war in Ukraine, can in fact present additional obstacles to EU integration and trigger contestation dynamics in domestic settings in member and non-member states. In this respect, Özçelik et al. (2023) argue that contestation of the EU may happen at three different levels. At the first level, domestic actors contest the adoption of EU policies, norms, and

values. Different venues and forums may be preferred by domestic actors to express their objections on national or international occasions. Disputes occur at the second level because member states disagree during the policy-making process. This level of contestation hinders the European integration process. This is referred to as ‘intra-EU contestation’ (Petri et al., 2020; Thevenin et al., 2020, pp. 452–454). At this level, only member states may challenge the EU during decision-making and policy-making events, such as summits of the European Council or meetings of the Council of the EU. The third level of contestation may exist if rival powers such as the United States, Russia, and China contest EU policies, norms, and values (see Aydın-Düzgit & Noutcheva, 2022; Dandashly & Noutcheva, 2022). Due to the clash with norms, policies, and values upheld by rival powers, contestation at this level has a negative impact on the EU’s transformative power in its surroundings. The political and economic influence of rival powers in the EU’s periphery will determine the magnitude of this negative effect. Illiberal states (Russia or China) may offer better incentives, or they may challenge the EU in their shared neighbourhoods and at global forums by challenging the legitimacy of EU norms and policies (Aydın-Düzgit & Noutcheva, 2022, p. 2).

Although we are aware of such a differentiation among different levels of contestation, our specific focus is on domestic contestation in different member and non-member countries of the EU at its peripheries. The most important reason for making an in-depth analysis at the domestic level is that the domestic root causes of contestation between the EU and the peripheral states have received comparatively little attention so far. Existing studies in the literature have been conducted either focusing on a single country case (for Türkiye: Alpan & Öztürk, 2022; Bodur-Ün & Arıkan, 2022; for Hungary, Ágh, 2015; for Serbia: Castaldo & Pinna, 2018; Stojić, 2021) or through a comparison of several countries involved in EU politics within a similar framework (for South-East Europe: Kapidžić, 2020; for East and Central Europe: Lorenz & Anders, 2021; for the European neighbourhood: Dandashly & Noutcheva, 2022; for Eastern Europe: Deugd & Hoen, 2022; for new members and a candidate state: Soyaltın-Colella, 2022). Focusing on several countries that interact with the EU at several levels and under legally different frameworks (i.e., member, candidate, and neighbour countries), this book seeks to fill the gap in the extant literature.

It is also imperative to unpack the concept of de-Europeanization, as it bears profound significance concerning the notion of contestation. Despite being a relatively recent concept in EU studies, de-Europeanization provides valuable insights by highlighting the potential reversibility of EU-induced reforms and instances of resistance and contestation against EU norms, values, and institutions (Alpan & Öztürk, 2022). The concept has been thoroughly examined in multiple systematic empirical studies, addressing its adverse effects not only on regions beyond the EU's boundaries (such as candidate countries seeking future membership) but also within the EU's member states themselves (Lazăr & Butnaru-Troncotă, 2022). De-Europeanization is also explained as a split between general societal preferences and those of the political class, perceived as a selfish collective actor pursuing its own interests (Martin-Russu, 2022). This perspective warrants further examination and deliberation. The emergence of such trends was observed in the post-accession dynamics of the most recent EU member states (see, for instance, the chapters on Hungary and Romania), indicating a state of stagnation or potential reversal of the reforms that had previously taken place. This situation has raised concerns regarding the trajectory to be pursued by the present pre-accession countries, which do not enjoy the same level of societal enthusiasm towards the EU as was evident during the enlargement wave of 2004–2007. Therefore, the original incentives (the size of the EU's rewards, the determinacy of the conditions, the credibility of conditionality, and the size of the adjustment costs of compliance for target governments; see Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020) have been reanalysed from three particular standpoints (pre-accession Central and Eastern European countries, post-accession Central and Eastern European countries, and pre-accession South-East European countries), pointing out that the major problem for current new member states as well as for (potential) candidates consists in a downsizing of the EU's credibility regarding both sanctions (for the first group) and rewards (for the second).

Failing to offer and implement proper actions when its members fail to comply with the existing *acquis* (here is mentioned the case of the illiberal democracies), and failing to support a solid image of the membership promise for (potential) candidate countries, the EU faces a lack of compliance fuelled by domestic political elites eager not to pay immediate electoral costs when 'background conditions have obviously changed, owing to the domestic politicization of the EU in

the member states, the prevalence of identity politics, and the geopolitical competition for influence in the East of Europe' (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2020, p. 22). Due to the latest political developments in the most recent EU member states such as Romania and Bulgaria (Buzogány, 2021; Martin-Russu, 2022), as well as taking into account new approaches from the specialized literature on the enlargement countries (Džankić et al., 2018; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020), we consider that a new possible pathway must also be forged, including one more category, that of de-Europeanization.

We therefore include reflections around the concept of de-Europeanization in EU peripheries, understood as a rowing back of initial changes triggered at the domestic level by EU influence, broadly defined. It is not a duplication of the existing concept of 'retrenchment': the main difference between retrenchment and de-Europeanization consists in the time when that specific action occurs. If retrenchment takes place at the moment of the first impact between the supranational and the national level, de-Europeanization occurs at an undefined. after the so-called 'positive' changes (i.e., getting closer to the *acquis communautaire*) have already been observed at the national level. For various reasons that we will analyse later, 'progress' pauses and change reverses, sometimes not even stopping in the place where it initially started. We concur with Martin-Russu's (2022, p. 27) analysis concerning the correlation between retrenchment and de-Europeanization. However, in contrast to her perspective, we contend that de-Europeanization extends beyond the confines of the initial framework proposed by Radaelli (2003), encompassing not only the process of 'absorption' but also the aspects of 'accommodation' and potentially even the phenomenon of 'inertia' that may culminate in a significant level of 'retrenchment'.

A Methodological Examination of Political Elite Perceptions of EU Integration

The primary rationale for investigating the perceptions of political elites is rooted in the recognition that EU integration is fundamentally an elite-driven process. Political elites were considered pivotal both for the phase of institutionalizing the Union's architecture and for the successive Europeanization stage, when the already functional supranational dimension began to impact the polity-politics-policy domestic

elements of member states. The factors at the national level that determine these variations must be better understood through a focus on the role of domestic political elites. The indisputable role of the political elites in the creation of the European Communities and, later, the EU, as well as in their development, is one of the main tenets of classic neofunctionalism (Ion, 2013).

We define elites, using Oxford Online Bibliographies' definition, as groups that have 'vastly disproportionate access to or control over a social resource' (Khan, 2011) – resources valuable by themselves or through their ability to be exchanged and that generate access or control in other societal segments as well. Thus, among the different types of elites that can exist (political, social, economic, cultural, etc.), our interest falls on the political elites that have decision-making power, or at least are part of the decision-making process, in the EU integration process. The main assumption here is that, in many ways, these elites' perceptions of the EU influence their country's actions on the EU integration path.

Understanding patterns of contestation and de-Europeanization among political elites in the EU's peripheries is crucial for several reasons. First, it helps us to identify instances where changes in societal attitudes towards the EU could indicate de-Europeanization, potentially erasing significant divisions between political and social groups. Second, in a political science analysis, any actor should be tagged as not selfish but rational when they pursue the satisfaction of their own interests. Indeed, when aggregating the preferences of multiple rational actors (individual or collective), irrational results can typically appear (Arrow, 2012). In addition, the presumed so-called selfish character of domestic political elites is not always supported by analyses indicating that the commitment of other societal voices, broadly defined, towards the EU's values is real and not declarative or susceptible to a U-turn at key moments (in the case of the non-Ukrainian migrants, for example).

From the above analysis, we keep two main ideas in mind. First, de-Europeanization is a step (or multiple steps) back after several reforms have already been performed. It challenges the perception of inalterable EU-determined changes. Second, political elites (regardless of their relationship with the rest of the actors in the respective state) matter in this back-and-forth movement. We can therefore analyse the interpretation of political elites concerning their respective nations' stances

vis-à-vis the EU and focus on political elites' subjective perceptions of the notion of the EU periphery. In this respect, the underlying assumption of the study is that elite perceptions are a significant variable in explaining the nature of the interaction between the EU and actors situated in the peripheral space, and that the nature of acceptance or contestation of EU processes is intrinsically linked to it. The book, therefore, highlights how European construction and deconstruction proceed by looking at the manner in which political elites from several countries on the EU's peripheries engage with the conflicting meanings of Europe in times of crisis.

The book primarily centres on examining the perspectives of elected politicians, specifically members of national parliaments, in eight diverse countries. Its overarching objective is to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the EU is perceived by these political actors. To ensure methodological rigour, the research design incorporates a carefully considered selection process for the qualitative analysis, taking into account various criteria. These criteria encompass gender, age, political party affiliation, and levels of knowledge pertaining to EU affairs. By employing such a comprehensive approach, the study aims to enhance the scholarly and academic validity of its findings.

To make a genuine comparison between case countries, it is also essential to investigate which practices are more dominant and how and why different perceptions of the EU emerge, beyond the strictly bureaucratically defined interactions between the EU Commission and national governments. Some scholars have posited that the evolution of the EU's institutional framework has played a significant role in fostering elite convergence across Europe (Cotta & Best, 2007). This process of convergence, however, simultaneously generates a countervailing momentum that fuels the rise of Euroscepticism, as noted by the same scholars in a subsequent publication (Best, Lengyel, & Verzichelli, 2012: 11).

Within the broad spectrum of potential political elite attitudes towards the EU, we have chosen to concentrate on a specific category of elites for all of our case studies: members of national parliaments. This deliberate focus stems from the fact that these national political elites are directly accountable to their respective electorates and are cautious about incurring the wrath of their voters due to unpopular policies imposed by European institutions. As a result, this book undertakes a comprehensive examination of the perceptions held by

elected politicians (members of parliament) in seven out of the eight selected case countries. The sole exception is Hungary, where conducting interviews with politicians proved exceedingly challenging. Hence, the authors made the decision to analyse the public discourse of elites within the Hungarian parliament instead. This methodological adjustment ensures that a comprehensive understanding of contestation and its manifestation within the perspectives of these political actors is attained.

EU integration has always been an elite-driven process, and as such, we believe that analysing the way different politicians see and discuss the EU's role in their country is a very fruitful avenue for in-depth research. Each case study employs semi-structured interviews with political elites about the major events that have shaped their country's relationship with the EU over the last decade. This provides an opportunity to assess in a comparative manner not only the limits of the EU's power to transfer its rules to its periphery when the credibility of the accession process is low, but also how this dynamic has changed in the context of war in Ukraine (as in case of Moldova, Ukraine, and Bosnia-Herzegovina being offered the status of candidate states – previously simply not an option on the EU's table at all).

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has had a notable impact on the external actions of the EU, manifesting itself in two key dimensions. First, the crisis has constrained the allocation of resources by both member state governments and European institutions, limiting their capacity to dedicate adequate attention and resources to foreign policy endeavours encompassing areas such as defence and international cooperation. Concurrently, this constraint on resources has had implications for certain foundational elements of the EU's international identity. Specifically, it has influenced the underlying self-perception that shapes the EU's interactions with external actors, thereby influencing the determination of its ultimate objectives within the realm of external action.

A wide array of discourses emerges from the research and interviews. It is noteworthy that both pro-European and Eurosceptic voices are found within the periphery, and the content of their messages is significantly influenced by the political realities arising from recent crises.

From a methodological standpoint, the primary objective of the authors is to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of these

processes within countries that have witnessed distinctive trajectories over the past decade. These trajectories encompass post-accession exceptionalism, characterized by stagnation, a lack of reforms, deepening political crises, and the looming threats of secession or external interference, as observed in the cases of Romania and Hungary. Türkiye's EU membership prospects have long been the subject of ambivalence and contentious debates, extending beyond mere political and economic considerations. These discussions have encompassed cultural, religious, and societal dimensions, further complicating the evaluation of its potential accession to the EU. Countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo have faced significant challenges characterized by ambiguous EU membership prospects. Analogous to the situation in Türkiye, the EU membership prospects of these countries have been mired in protracted contention, the focus of prolonged disputes that transcend political and economic considerations, encompassing a broader range of cultural, religious, and societal dimensions.

Another set of countries under examination is those that have signed association agreements with the EU as part of the Eastern Partnership without any concrete membership perspective. However, in the exceptional context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, these countries, including Georgia, were offered candidate status, and were encompassed within the EU's enlargement policy. It is noteworthy that they underwent this transition despite their internal struggles and their failure to fully adhere to the Copenhagen Criteria. Hence, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova are investigated due to their unique circumstances. These countries faced the challenge of the Russian invasion of Ukraine while signing association agreements, thereby bringing them under the purview of the EU's enlargement policy.

The selection of diverse case countries is of paramount importance as it enables a comprehensive examination of how the perceptions of elites in the chosen countries exhibit similarities or contrasts. This analysis serves as a foundation for making meaningful generalizations that can inform further research, particularly in the context of countries situated on the peripheries of the EU. Our research anticipates that in certain instances, perceptions of the EU will be influenced by negative filters stemming from various factors. These factors include the ramifications of the Eurozone and refugee crises, as well as the protracted process of a significant member state, such as the UK, exiting the EU. Additionally, there may be feelings of being subjected to

double standards and unfair treatment, as exemplified by the cases of the rejection of Romania's and Bulgaria's applications to join the Schengen area.

In other cases, we anticipate that the exceptionally challenging circumstances arising from the war in Ukraine will lead countries such as Ukraine and Moldova to perceive the EU as their primary guarantee against Russian aggression. Consequently, these countries may view the integration process as their principal focus in foreign policy. Our analysis will incorporate an examination of the evolving core-periphery relations during the tumultuous dynamics of the war and their impact on the perceptions of the EU among relevant actors. Furthermore, despite the external dynamics outside the EU, we will also consider recent instances of significant shifts in positions towards the EU. Notably, we will explore cases such as Hungary and Romania, which have experienced periods of anti-EU sentiment and visible democratic regression. We believe that including these examples will contribute to the existing literature by providing an additional layer of analysis and insight.

All chapters consider within their focus the emergence of dissenting voices questioning the benefits of EU membership, as our research aims to examine the self-perception of political elites concerning the relationship between their respective countries and the EU. Using specific questions from our semi-structured interview framework, we intend to identify and investigate the perspectives held by political elites on this crucial aspect. The authors conducting the interviews preserved consistency by adhering to a similar set of questions. These questions included: how would you best describe the current relationship between your country and the EU? Considering the past decade, what are the major issues and critical junctures that your country and the EU have experienced? What are the significant achievements and failures of your country in its relationship with the EU so far? How do you envision the evolution of the relationship with the EU? How has the ongoing war in Ukraine impacted the relationship between your country and the EU?

One of the notable contributions of this book resides in its methodological choice of employing qualitative analysis. Investigating the interests of political elites poses challenges in terms of measurability. Therefore, a qualitative analysis provides a valuable means to gain insights into the positioning of elites within the context of contestation.

By employing this approach, the book offers valuable insights into the intricate dynamics and perspectives of political elites, enhancing our understanding of their role within the broader framework of EU perceptions and interactions.

Structure of the Book

The book begins by establishing a theoretical framework and methodological approach that examine various political and social contexts characterized by their ‘peripheral’ nature in relation to the EU and its associated processes.

Following this introductory chapter, the remaining chapters are divided into three parts. The two chapters in [Part I](#) are devoted to the cases of Hungary and Romania, two EU members explored as different forms of the EU’s ‘inner peripheries’. The four chapters in [Part II](#) are devoted to candidate countries: Ukraine, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Türkiye. The two chapters in [Part III](#) are devoted to prospective candidate countries, namely Kosovo and Georgia. Finally, the last chapter draws together in a comparative manner all chapters’ contributions and draws overall conclusions.

With a particular emphasis on the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, [Chapter 2](#) investigates how the Hungarian national political elites view the EU’s global ‘actorness’ and the formulation of its foreign and security policies. It highlights the fact that Hungary is now in an increasingly peripheral position as the Hungarian approach has become a significant cause of contestation in defining a unified foreign policy orientation at the EU level. The chapter seeks to contribute to a thorough understanding of how political elites in the EU periphery define their relationship with the EU by using critical discourse analysis of parliamentary debates within the Hungarian national parliament and enhancing existing findings from official documents and scholarly articles. In order to shed light on the intricate dynamics that create the EU’s periphery, this study aims to offer an ‘inside gaze’ into the viewpoints and attitudes of the country’s political elites.

[Chapter 3](#) provides an examination of Romania as an illustrative case of the EU’s ‘inner periphery’. The chapter asserts that Romania has often been categorized in mainstream Europeanization literature as one of the ‘laggards’ in terms of EU accession and scrutinizes the symbolic consequences of this stigma. The authors aim to elucidate the

perceptions of Romanian elites regarding the EU itself, as well as their perspectives on Romania's political and symbolic position within the EU. To accomplish this, they employ a broad theoretical framework that includes concepts such as liminality, constructed centre–periphery relations, party-based Euroscepticism, and critical geopolitics. They use a mixed-method approach, including analysis of Eurobarometer statistical data from 2007 to 2022, discourse analysis, and semi-structured interviews with members of the Romanian parliament. This allows them to investigate whether significant events that occurred between 2020 and 2022, such as the economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak of the Ukrainian war, and Romania's exclusion from the Schengen zone, have influenced Romanian elites' perceptions of the EU and increased forms of Euroscepticism. The chapter discusses the ambivalent nature of various forms of 'subtle' Euroscepticism especially in connection with the disappointments of the Schengen rejection.

Chapter 4 delves into the perceptions and contestations of Ukrainian political elites regarding Ukraine's current and desired position within the EU and Europe as a whole, as well as the evolving understanding of peripherality. To examine the discourse and framings of EU–Ukraine integration dynamics over the last three decades, the chapter relies primarily on interviews with political elites conducted in late 2021. The authors investigate parliamentarians' collective response to Russia's ongoing aggression since 2014, as well as their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. To do this, they also add samples of more recent data and elite opinions from February 2022 when the war in Ukraine started. The chapter assesses the extent and intensity of the divergence between hopes and expectations and the perceived performance of the EU in specific contexts by employing the framework of 'critical expectation gaps' in foreign policy analysis. This investigation contributes to a comprehensive understanding of Ukraine's complex dynamics with the EU and sheds light on Ukrainian political elites' evolving perspectives in response to significant geopolitical and health crises.

Chapter 5 delves into the Republic of Moldova's evolving peripheral status, specifically the shift from the Russian Federation's influence to that of the EU. The analysis focuses primarily on the promotion of visions and aspirations for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession by various political parties and key political actors, including both

government and opposition figures. The chapter aims to capture and interpret politicians' perceptions of recent developments, including the ongoing war and overlapping crises, using a historiographical lens and the path-dependency paradigm. The study looks at how political parties and key actors in the Republic of Moldova have constructed and advocated for their respective visions of EU integration, considering the implications of these visions for the country's peripheral status. In the end the chapter aims to provide insights into how the Republic of Moldova's peripheral status has been influenced by changing geopolitical dynamics and domestic political considerations by exploring politicians' perspectives within this evolving context.

Chapter 6 examines the shifting sentiments among local political elites regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) EU integration process. While the public in BiH continue to exhibit widespread support for the country's EU integration, the chapter aims to explore whether there have been notable changes in attitudes and feelings among local political elites. The study, which is based on semi-structured interviews with members of BiH's parliaments, sheds light on the general lack of enthusiasm among political elites for the Euro-integration process. This finding is contextualized in relation to BiH's accession challenges, which are framed through the lens of local ethno-national dynamics.

Chapter 7 investigates the evolving perspective of the Turkish political elite regarding the EU and European integration in the post-2010s period. The chapter investigates the waning influence of EU conditionality and the growing disillusionment among political elites and the public. The analysis considers a variety of factors that have contributed to turbulence in Turkish–EU relations, such as the March 2016 migration agreement and a variety of domestic and international developments. The authors emphasize the shift in Turkish–EU relations from conditionality to transnationalism. This shift is being driven by several factors, including the migration crisis and its impact on European politics, as well as a growing perception among Turkish political elites that the EU's commitments and promises have not been kept. As a result, the influence of EU conditionality as a mechanism for shaping Turkish domestic policies and reforms has waned. Furthermore, the conflict in Ukraine has had a significant impact on the dynamics of Turkish–EU relations. The conflict's geopolitical considerations and realpolitik have overshadowed normative concerns, contributing to the Turkish political elite's transactional approach.

Chapter 8 examines the intriguing phenomenon of Georgian political elites simultaneously supporting and opposing the EU and EU integration. This puzzle includes both incumbent and opposition members of the Georgian parliament. The chapter investigates how political elites frame their perceptions of the EU and EU integration, as well as the factors that contribute to their simultaneous support and contestation, using the theoretical framework of rational choice institutionalism and a mixed-method (interviews and secondary data) approach. The chapter sheds light on the multifaceted nature of political elites' perceptions and actions regarding EU integration by analysing changes in their attitudes and engagement with Europe.

Chapter 9 sheds light on a unique dimension of centre–periphery interaction in EU–Kosovo relations, a country that is still unrecognized by five EU member states. A specific theoretical approach is employed to reflect the type of interaction between these two entities, not only in a static hierarchical centre–periphery line or conceptualized only through quantitative indicators that show how the EU as a centre models the behaviour of the states in its periphery, but also in subjective and political terms that show how the EU is perceived, imitated, debated, and contested by political elites in various peripheral spaces. The chapter investigates the ambivalent perceptions of the EU of the Kosovar political elite, who, while contesting and criticizing the way the EU has treated Kosovo in relation to certain stages of cooperation, have continued to show full commitment to convergence with it, keeping the issue of EU integration as a top priority of the country's foreign policy. This study contends that the political elites in Kosovo have not developed a coherent political strategy to oppose and contest the EU's role. Instead, political elites express their scepticism and contestation of the EU in a reactive manner in response to frustration with how the EU has approached and interacted with Kosovo on the topic of visa liberalization.

The **concluding chapter** presents a comparative analysis of the key findings derived from all the case studies. It provides a comprehensive synthesis of the novel insights generated by the examination of various countries on the EU's periphery. The chapter aims to identify commonalities, divergences, and overarching patterns that contribute to a better understanding of EU–periphery dynamics by analysing the individual case studies in conjunction with one another. The comparative analysis emphasizes the study's significance and relevance to the

broader field of research on EU integration and peripheral relations. It highlights the unique contributions made by each case study, shedding light on the complexities and multifaceted nature of the EU's interactions with its periphery. Furthermore, the chapter identifies areas that require further research, acknowledging that the study's findings provide a foundation for future investigations as well as a basis for expanding knowledge in the field.

Notes

- 1 During the writing process of this book, Georgia had not officially acquired candidate status; therefore, it was designated as a Potential Candidate. The final version of the book was submitted in September 2023. However, Georgia was granted candidate status in December 2023, subject to the completion of the requisite steps delineated in the Commission recommendation of 8 November 2023.

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PART I

The EU's 'Inner Peripheries'

CHAPTER 2

Perceptions of Hungarian Political Elites of the EU's Foreign and Security Policy during the War in Ukraine

Melek Aylin Özoflu

Özyeğin University, Istanbul

Krisztina Arató

ELTE University, Budapest

Abstract

The outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war as a geopolitical confrontation between the East and the West has necessitated a reconfiguration of the EU's global role and actorness and its foreign and security policy priorities. Such a recalibration necessarily involves defining how the EU is perceived by national political elites. Therefore, this chapter examines how Hungarian political elites perceive the EU's actorness and foreign and security policy priorities concerning the specific challenges of the Russia–Ukraine war. To this end, it conducts a critical discourse analysis of the minutes of parliamentary debates to consider statements uttered by elected members from both the opposition and the government within the Hungarian national parliament. The selected timeframe of the analysis covers the period from the outbreak

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of the crisis, 24 February 2022, to the Hungarian national consultation on EU sanctions against Russia, 15 January 2023.

Keywords: Russia–Ukraine war, Hungary, elite perceptions, Hungarian parliament, foreign and security policy, EU–Hungary relations, critical discourse analysis

Introduction

The EU faced the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war against a background of its international actorness already having been disrupted because of the rising expectation–capability gap stemming from other recently experienced crises. Moreover, the previous initiatives of the EU vis-à-vis the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 led to growing doubts about its capabilities in relation to regional and global governance (Gehring et al., 2017). In this context, while the crisis has provided leeway for the EU to prove its commitment to its normative values, ensuring its global actorness depends heavily on the reconfiguration and redefinition of its global role and security policy priorities and preferences. Given that the EU is conceptualized as an ‘elite project’ in the making (Risse, 2010) and that the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) does not intervene in national foreign and security policies of its member states, which would result undermining the EU’s adopted common policies (Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017), such a reconfiguration is closely associated with how the EU is perceived by the national political elites within the realm of foreign policy-making. However, member states’ mediation of their relations with the EU in the face of divergent national foreign policy priorities has recently appeared as one of the sources of contestation, especially within the European periphery. To fully understand these dynamics between the EU and its periphery, an outside perspective on the EU periphery needs to be completed by ‘an inside gaze’ on how political elites in the EU periphery define their relationship with the EU and the way that they problematize the meaning of ‘periphery’ in the context of the last decade’s challenges to the European integration process.

Among those peripheral countries within the Union, Hungary presents a unique case due to its deteriorating relations with the EU under the leadership of nationalist-populist leader Viktor Orbán, exacerbated by its deepening rapprochement with Russia, which has often culminated in its relations with the EU becoming entrapped in

a quagmire. In addition, its geographical proximity to and Hungarian ethnic minority population in Ukraine put it in a particular position within the Union in the specific context of the Russia–Ukraine war. Therefore, as its main research question this chapter deals with how the EU, its actorness, and its foreign and security policy priorities with respect to the specific challenges of the Russia–Ukraine war are perceived and approached by Hungarian national political elites.

To this end, in our research we conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the minutes of parliamentary debates within the Hungarian national parliament as complementary to an overview of official documents and scholarly articles. The analysis relies on the discourse historical approach (DHA) to CDA. CDA is usually concerned with analysing how social domination is (re)produced by discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Therefore, it is focused on revealing the use of language by those in power. Moreover, since it regards the context of language use as crucial (Wodak, 2015), it will be valuable in grasping the larger socio-political and historical context within which the EU's foreign and security policy is debated and communicated by the Hungarian political elites.

In this way, this chapter contributes empirically to debates revolving around national elites' perceptions of the EU from an 'insider's gaze', thereby surfacing EU foreign policy-making dilemmas and challenges during the period of the crises, which have restrained EU's transformative power and global actorness to a great extent. To this end, we first briefly address EU–Hungary relations with a particular focus on how Hungary has been contesting the EU and its perspectives for formulating a unified foreign policy direction in light of its relations with Russia. This contextualization of the EU political scene with respect to Hungary's impactful transformation in its relations with the Union will help us to fully understand the dynamics of fluctuating relations with the EU within the specific context of the Russia–Ukraine war. Then, we discuss the method and discourse-analytical tool of DHA as a framework. The chapter concludes with the main findings of the analysis.

Hungary's EU Membership and the Outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war

The 2004 wave of EU enlargement signified crucial political, economic, legal, and social changes in the ten acceding post-communist Central Eastern European countries. The normatively justified notion of 'one of us' within the pan-European identity (Friis, 1998) has been the main driving factor of the EU's Eastern enlargement, intended to overcome the division of 'Iron Curtain' (Sjursen, 2002). Yet the crises and challenges that the EU has faced over the last decade have transformed the unity and coherence of the Union; after a few years of membership the new East-Central European member states entered a period of poly-crisis together with the old member states, which did not help to overcome the traditional East/West divide within the EU. The literature has thus handled these issues alongside discussions of a 'differentiated EU' (Dyson & Sepos, 2010; Schimmelfennig et al., 2023), 'multi-speed Europe' (Chrysogelos, 2017; Craig, 2012), or 'two-speed EU' (Piris, 2011).

In this process of Eastern enlargement and the history of the political and policy processes of the enlarged EU, Hungary presents an interesting case for several reasons. First, its fluctuating relations with the EU provide an opportunity to observe the transformation of a member state's position from 'permissive consensus' to 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Accordingly, while Hungary maintained its obligations and major initiatives to achieve high democratic standards, rule of law, and market economy under the conditions of EU membership throughout its accession process and the early years of its membership (Arató & Koller, 2018; Jenne & Mudde, 2012), it entered a period of backlash following the victory of Viktor Orbán's Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz) party in the 2010 national elections and the formation of the second Orbán government (Enyedi & Benoit, 2010). Since then, Orbán's power base has grown in subsequent elections, and fundamental rights, the rule of law, freedoms, checks-and-balances systems, and the liberal democratic space have incrementally shrunk (Batory, 2016). The deteriorating trend of Europeanization has been termed a U-turn by Kornai, referring to the country's estrangement from the fundamental principles of democracy and rule of law (Kornai, 2015). Hungary has been called the 'worst-case' scenario of the 'post-communist success story' by the mainstream literature (Ágh, 2016; Herman, 2016).

Second, apart from the democratic backsliding process, there has been a remarkable shift within the Hungarian government's references to and construction of the EU, which has incrementally put Hungary in the position of an 'internal Other' in the EU. After the system change in 1989/1990, there had been an all-party consensus about EU membership and belonging to the West, but the post-2010 move in an illiberal direction has been accompanied by the Orbán government's increased nationalist-populist sentiments, with the EU described by Orbán himself as an 'external dictate' comparable to the communist-era dictatorship on various issues (Kormányzat, 2010). Through such a representation, the Hungarian government has contested the EU by claiming that its national sovereignty, values, and identity have been 'threatened' by the EU's interference (Butnaru Troncotă & Ioniță, 2023). In this way, the Hungarian government has constructed an intra-group differentiation within the in-group of the European communities.

Third, apart from the rhetorical construction of the EU as Hungary's 'Other', several policy-level decisions show a detachment of the Hungarian position from the EU majority. While after the breakout of the refugee crisis, several East-Central European member states sought common solutions in the face of their diverging policy priorities (Arató & Koller, 2018), Hungary was left alone in several EU foreign policy decisions (common foreign policy declarations and international agreements) (Euractive, 2023).

It is against this background that the Russia–Ukraine war broke out following the Russian invasion of the Ukrainian territory on 24 February 2022. Hungary occupied a unique position within the Union, appearing to adopt a contesting role in the formulation of a common European response to the situation. This stemmed mainly from factors such as Russo-Hungarian rapprochement under the Fidesz government, Hungary's geographical proximity to Ukraine and the presence of ethnic Hungarians living in the border region of Transcarpathia.

Within the framework of its renewed foreign policy agenda of 'Eastern opening' which was launched in 2010, Hungary has deepened its relations with non-Western countries in order to decrease its dependency on the EU/the West (Végh, 2015). Prime Minister Orbán stated his vision of Hungary as an 'illiberal democracy' and presented Turkey, Russia, China, India, and Singapore as the role models to follow (The Prime Minister, 2014). In this direction, Hungary's relations

with Russia have been particularly reinforced, signifying the country's estrangement from Euro-Atlantic community policies (Ágh, 2016) already before the Russia–Ukraine war. The rationale behind the Russo-Hungarian rapprochement was often explained in terms of securing economic interests and keeping energy and trade relations stable with Russia, since 85 per cent of Hungarian gas supply and 65 per cent of its oil supply are provided by Russia (Euronews, 2022). Moreover, the Orbán government has commonly used rapprochement with Moscow as a bargaining chip in shaping and maintaining relations with the EU. As a result of the close bilateral ties, Hungary, in contrast to its European partners, has not seen Russia as a threat to European security (Hungary Today, 2021). This stance in turn seriously limited Hungary's room for manoeuvre during the several rounds of EU sanctions against Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Due to its attempts to block the sanctions, the Orbán government was accused by both its European partners and the opposition of having a pro-Russian attitude. The government declared that it would neither supply military aid and troops to Ukraine nor agree on the transition of any lethal weapons to Ukraine through its territory (Politico, 2022). Moreover, it initially blocked the EU package of financial aid for Ukraine worth €18 billion, leading to another source of tension between the country and its EU partners (Tidey, 2022). Although it later agreed to lift its veto in exchange for €5.8 billion of post-COVID recovery funding and a reduction in the amount of the funds it had frozen from €7.5 billion to €6.3 billion (Tidey, 2022), Hungary became the key actor in contestation among EU member states.

Another notable reason behind Hungary's critical position during the Russia–Ukraine war stems from its being a neighbouring country to Ukraine. Because of its geographical proximity, it has faced an influx of Ukrainian refugees. Since the beginning of the war, more than 2,000,000 Ukrainians have entered Hungary either directly from Ukraine or through other nations (UNHCR Hungary, 2022). Moreover, it has accepted 787,000 refugees from Ukraine (Januzi, 2022).

The Hungarian government's readiness to accept Ukrainian refugees is explained by its kin-state politics (Eröss et al., 2018). Located on Ukraine's border with Slovakia and Hungary, the Transcarpathia region has a population of around 150,000 ethnic Hungarians (New York Times, 2022). Accordingly, the region has close cultural and historical ties with Hungary (Makszimov, 2022). The nature of this

kin-state politics and the rising ‘Transcarpathian Question’ have thus shaped relations between Hungary and Ukraine. With the aim of ensuring the safety of the Transcarpathian Hungarian community, the Hungarian government has long aspired to be an active agent in any geopolitical tension in the region (Eróss et al., 2016).

In some cases, it has even reached beyond the improvement of cultural, political, and social ties within the Transcarpathian Hungarian community. For example, in 2010, the Hungarian parliament introduced an amendment to the Hungarian Citizenship Law to issue dual citizenship for Hungarian communities abroad without actual residency in Hungary (European Parliament, 2011). With the Electoral Act of 2012, non-resident Hungarian citizens were also enabled to participate in Hungarian parliamentary elections. In this way, trans-border Hungarian communities were included in Hungarian home affairs (Pogonyi, 2014). The Hungarian government has also aspired to exert influence within the internal affairs of the Ukrainian state. For example, when the Ukrainian parliament introduced a new education law in 2017 to restrict the use of historic minority languages in school education, Hungary reacted fiercely, leading to a souring of relations between the parties to a great extent. Because of this ‘Ukrainian anti-minority practice’, Hungary has since 2018 blocked ministerial-level political meetings between NATO and Ukraine in protest over what it regards as Ukraine violating the human rights of its ethnic minorities (Embassy of Hungary Washington, n.d.). In sum, all of these briefly explained factors affected the Hungarian response to the Russia–Ukraine war. Thus, a full-fledged analysis of Hungarian elite perceptions of the EU’s actorness and foreign and security policy-making was based on an analysis of the identity and the kin-state politics of the Hungarian government.

The Data, and the Methodological Framework of the Discourse Historical Approach

The analysis of the research relies mainly on data collected from the minutes of parliamentary debates within the Hungarian national parliament as complementary to an overview of existing findings in official documents and scholarly articles. The relevant data was obtained mainly through the official website of the Hungarian parliament (www.parlament.hu) within the designated timeframe from the outbreak of

the crisis, 24 February 2022, to the Hungarian national consultation on EU sanctions against Russia, 15 January 2023. All of the published minutes of parliamentary debates during this period were collected. In total, the number of text corpora collected and analysed was 47. The excerpts selected to be illustrated here are representative discourse fragments within the main body of data according to the representativeness criteria of DHA (Jäger & Maier, 2009).

DHA argues that language serves as a means of acquiring and sustaining power for social actors from various social groups (Wodak, 2015). In this respect, discourses are regarded as social practices that legitimize or delegitimize the power relations within the society (Wodak, 2015). Such power relations are analysed through DHA's topoi and argumentation schemes. While both of these are defined as content-related warrants conveying a specific conclusion regarding a case that is applicable to any rhetorical cases (Rubinelli, 2009, p. 84; see also Wodak 2013, p. 529), topoi cover both rhetorical and dialectical schemes according to Aristotle. Accordingly, topoi refers to both devices for finding relevant arguments within the set of conceivable arguments known as *endoxa* and probative formulae, which give the plausibility of the step(s) from the argument(s) to the conclusion (Kienpointner, 2001, p. 18). Thus, as a persuasion device, topoi convey the argumentation or assertion to the conclusion, which can be refuted or defended. Therefore, they are often constructed through the proposition 'if one ... then the other' (Rubinelli, 2009).

The political discourse employed by political elites often contains argumentation in its presentation of the normative rightness or truth of their assertions. Thus, we regard using argumentation strategies as a suitable choice to reveal elite representations of EU foreign policy during the Russia–Ukraine war and methods of justification and (de)legitimization of the political behaviour and foreign policy orientations adopted by elites with respect to the necessities of the war. [Table 2.1](#) shows the content-related topoi used within the discourse analysis of the research.

Table 2.1: Content-related topoi

Topoi	Warrant
Burden/weighing down	'If a person, an institution or a country is burdened by specific problems, one should act in order to diminish those burdens.'
Threat/danger	'If there are specific dangers or threats, one should do something against them.'
Responsibility	'Because a state or a group of persons is responsible for the emergence of specific problems, it or they should act to find solutions to these problems.'
Reality	'Because reality is as it is, a specific action/decision should be performed/made.'
Definition	'If an action, a thing, or a person (group of persons) is named/designated (as) X, the action, thing, or person (group of persons) carries or should carry the qualities/traits/attributes contained in the (literal) meaning of X.'
Finance	'If a specific situation or action costs too much money or causes a loss of revenue, one should perform actions that diminish those costs or help to avoid/mitigate the loss.'

Source: authors' construction based on Reisigl and Wodak (2001, pp. 74–80).

Analysis

Previous research has found that the relations of the political parties in Hungary with the EU are basically determined by whether they are in a ruling or opposition role (The Prime Minister, 2014). In parallel to this finding, the extensive qualitative analysis of this research found that this trend is maintained in constructing elite perceptions of the EU's actorness and foreign and security policy-making. Accordingly, methods of construction diverge between the three main factions in the national political system, namely the government (Hungarian Civic Union/Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party/KDNP), the opposition (the United for Hungary coalition), and the far-right nationalist Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk Mozgalom). Thus, the analysis that follows will separately address the main concerns raised by these three factions. While on each side of the political spectrum the common refrain is highlighted as 'We prioritize our national

interests at all costs’ and ‘We are on the side of the peace’, the construction and interpretation of reality to achieve these endeavours differs greatly.

Perceptions of Hungarian United Opposition Party Elites

The opposition parties, i.e., Dialogue, Politics Can Be Different (LMP), the Democratic Coalition (DK), Momentum, Jobbik, and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), are observed to generally attribute a positive role to the EU’s actorness and foreign policy-making. The exception to this is the Our Homeland Movement, which has employed national-interests-based discourse implying neither pro-EU nor pro-Russian sentiments; therefore, the statements of Mi Hazánk will be analysed separately following the analysis of the united opposition parties. The political communications of the opposition parties within the specific context of the Russia–Ukraine war construct them as the representatives of the interests of the Hungarian people and their desire for Europe, freedom, and security while positioning the government as a threat to these values. Accordingly, national security is often constructed as hinging on Hungary’s EU membership and compliance with EU-wide decisions as a reaction to the war.

Bence Tordai: Every well-informed, well-intentioned person in this country knows exactly that security is not guaranteed by the Putin-friendly government of Viktor Orbán, but by our membership in NATO and the European Union ... He knows that the Hungarian people chose Europe and freedom, not Putin, Russia, and the dictatorship. We, in the united opposition chose freedom before and now, we choose the European Union ... Viktor Orbán said that there is life outside the European Union. We know he’s already thinking about it. We, in the opposition, on the other hand, choose the West and not the East, we choose EU membership and not Russian colonialism, we choose freedom and not a dictatorship. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022a)

Péter Jakab: In recent years, they have betrayed Hungary, and they have also betrayed Europe when they have continuously kicked our own Western allies with even feet; they weakened the European Union, while they wooed Putin for some power. Somehow they never wanted to stop Moscow, they always wanted to stop Brussels – it turned into a

bloodshed war. April 3 has acquired a new meaning, fellow representatives: Putin or Europe, war or peace, East or West, ruble or euro. We choose the West, we choose Europe, we choose peace, and they choose Putin and war. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022d)

Bertalan Tóth: All signs indicate that the world, including Europe, is facing difficult years. With Putin's senseless war, the aggressor Russia not only threatens the countries of the European community but also puts Transcarpathian Hungary in immediate danger. The effects of this war, whatever the Fidesz people try to make us believe, together with the suffering of Ukrainian people, we all feel it, because as a result of the war, food shortages, shortages of raw materials, lay-offs, unemployment, rising prices, impoverishment may develop in the countries of the region, and starvation in the African countries that need Ukrainian grain. The resulting dissatisfaction may lead to many new local conflicts and wars, and humanitarian crises may arise, which must be dealt with. We could say that, despite the many difficulties, Hungary is safe, and as a member of the European Union, together with the other states, it will be easier to cope with the difficulties. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022d)

In the first excerpt above, parliament member Tordai aligns the united opposition with the West, EU membership, and freedom, while contrasting this with Russian colonialism and dictatorship. Accordingly, he constructs the EU as the safeguard of Hungarian national security and freedom by employing the topos of definition which is based on the conditional of being a 'well-informed, well-intentioned person'. Tordai aligns the opposition with this conditional, suggesting a moral high ground over the government. At the same time, he represents Russia as the 'ultimate Other' by portraying Putin's government as a dictatorship via the topos of threat. In addition, Russia is portrayed as a 'colonialist' country through the topos of history, which refers to the past negative legacy of Hungarian victimhood stemming from Russian interference in the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 and the Communist regime after the Second World War. This construction is reinforced by forming a solid dichotomy between 'us' (the West, EU, freedom, and the Hungarian united opposition) and 'them' (the East, Putin, Russia, dictatorship, and the Orbán government). In this way, the member of parliament (MP) justifies and legitimizes the united

opposition's anti-Russian sentiment while simultaneously delegitimizing the Orbán government's alignment/rapprochement with Russia.

In the second excerpt, MP Jakab puts forward his accusations against the Fidesz government for its pro-Russian foreign policy preferences aimed at wooing Putin. In addition, he constructs in-group favouritism for the united opposition as defenders of the West and peace, promoted as the 'right choice', while portraying the ruling elites as aligned with Putin and war in a way that has weakened Hungary's ties with the EU – utilizing the *topoi* of definition and reality. In this way, he positions the government and Putin's Russia as a threat to Hungary and the EU, via the *topos* of threat. This is further achieved by forming a juxtaposition between war and peace, East and West, ruble and euro, which is instrumentalized to claim political credit and support in the Hungarian national elections of 3 April 2022. Moreover, while the metaphor of 'Father Europe' provides a frame of reference for the EU as a family, the Hungarian government is portrayed as the betrayer child and recipient of his favours that should have complied with the norms of obligations and solidarity derived from its family membership. The evaluative aspect of this scenario is correlated with the *topos* of reality, appealing to the Hungarian voters with the sentiment, 'If you choose peace and the West, you should vote for us', implying the distinction of the in-group of united opposition from its political Others, i.e. the ruling elites.

While constructing the emphasis on the EU's importance as a source of support for Hungary's safety in a similar way to the previous excerpts, the third excerpt from MSZP member Tóth reveals the sense of urgency and danger associated with Putin's war and Russia's aggression, the potential negative consequences of the war, through the *topos* of danger/threat. This construction relies on the motif of victim and suppressor, representing the Ukrainian and the Hungarian people as victims and Russia as perpetrators. Within this differentiation, the Fidesz government is represented as aligned with Putin. In the face of Russian aggression, Hungary's potential vulnerability in the power relations between Russia and Hungary is balanced by Hungary's EU membership. Accordingly, in an anti-Russian manner, utility-based considerations of Hungary's EU membership are highlighted via the *topos* of definition, based on the conditional that EU membership makes coping with the difficulties easier, providing a secure space. This finding is very much in line with previous research which

has found that pro-EU discourse often advocates EU membership as a positive-sum game by emphasizing the national benefits in various areas, including security and international relations (Özoflu, 2022).

Perceptions of the Our Homeland Movement's Party Elites

The radical right party, Mi Hazánk Mozgalom, the Our Homeland Movement, is observed to employ nationalist discourse while communicating about the EU's actorness during the Russia–Ukraine war that reflects a critical stance towards the Hungarian government, the EU, and Ukraine. Thus, it offers an alternative portrayal of the EU's actorness which is aligned neither with the opposition nor with the government. Yet, its discourses have sometimes overlapped with the government's argumentation of 'war inflation', blaming the EU for economic setbacks. Moreover, it is interesting that it does not address war/peace or democracy/dictatorship but shares the government's opinions on opposing the oil embargo on the basis of the national interest of Hungary.

László Toroczkai: instead of declaring a state of emergency, it would be of much greater help to Hungary if the government changed its previous, in our opinion, very dangerous and very harmful position, which supported Ukraine's almost immediate accession to the European Union. We see that it is not simply a matter of the European Union taking on an extremely corrupt and dangerous country with its oligarchs – who built a private army in Mariupol, for example, like Ihor Kolomojsky – but it is also simply a matter of someone having to rebuild Ukraine. If the Hungarian government supports this crazy idea of almost unconditionally and almost immediately admitting Ukraine to the European Union, then this also means that we will have to pay for the restoration and reconstruction of Ukraine. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022b)

László Toroczkai: while the government is now quite rightly opposing the oil embargo, at the Versailles summit Viktor Orbán did not speak out against the series of sanctions launched at the time, but instead gave assurances of his support for this series of measures. Moreover, in perhaps one of the most serious cases, the Hungarian government, Viktor Orbán, and Fidesz support the globalist intention of Brussels to admit Ukraine to the European Union quickly, very quickly, out of line,

and almost without conditions, which practically means the end of the European Union. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022c)

In the first excerpt, Toroczkai, the president of *Mi Hazánk*, evaluates the EU's response to the war through calculations based on Hungarian national interests. Accordingly, he raises concerns regarding Ukrainian accession to the EU through the topoi of danger and burden. This is further suppressed by the topos of finance with the argument that since Ukraine's accession to the EU would result in the financial responsibility for its restoration and reconstruction, which costs too much money, it should be avoided. This anti-Ukrainian stance is also legitimized by portraying the country as corrupt and dangerous, emphasizing the existence of oligarchs and private armies, via the topos of threat/danger.

In a similar manner, in the second excerpt, Toroczkai questions the EU's response to the Russia–Ukraine war and the government's decision to support it. He formulates a critical perspective on Ukrainian accession to the EU, which is connoted as detrimental to the existence of the EU through the topos of danger/threat. In this way, he legitimizes *Mi Hazánk's* antagonist position towards the EU and the government while simultaneously constructing them as allies under the 'globalists' labelling. Through such an understanding and reconstruction of the external reality, the distinction between us (the nationalists) and them (the globalists) is formulated. Within the dichotomy, Ukraine is covertly portrayed as the Other of Europe as well. Toroczkai also points out the inconsistency between the government's stance on the oil embargo and its support for EU sanctions against Russia. His statement implies *Mi Hazánk's* critical stance against the European Union's ban on the export of Russian oil product. When intertextually evaluated, the party's opposing position is found to be legitimized by the construction of discourses which are reinforced with a strict emphasis on the prioritization of Hungarian national interests. The recurring discourse fragments within the wide range of discursive strategies employed by *Mi Hazánk* follow the logic that 'The embargo against the Russians still caused incalculable damage to the Hungarian economy, which is why prices continue to rise, inflation increases, and all of this can also cause supply disruptions. Now finally let the Hungarian interest come' (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022e).

Accordingly, the EU's response to and its actorness regarding the war are read through the 'Hungarian lenses' of national economic interest by using a combination of the topoi of reality, finance, and responsibility. Thus, Toroczkaï supports the government's argumentation of 'war inflation' and blames the EU for economic problems.

Perceptions of Hungarian Ruling Party Elites

The ruling Fidesz–KDNP Party alliance perceives the EU's actorness and its foreign and security policy priorities based on national security and economic interests. Its arguments have been constructed upon nationalist sentiments accompanied by Eurosceptic tones to justify and legitimize policy responses and political behaviour of the government, which has been called 'national interest Euroscepticism' by Szczerbiak and Taggart (2000).

Hajnalka Juhász: Russia produces more than 40 per cent of the natural gas used in the European Union, as well as a quarter of the crude oil. It is also a fact that Europe does not have enough piped natural gas of non-Russian origin, and it is also a fact that, due to the lack of a coastline, our country cannot build floating terminals, so currently Russian or any crude oil can only arrive in Hungary via pipelines. The Brussels proposal would destroy our country's stable energy supply. So far, we have supported five Brussels sanctions packages. Five. But the Hungarian government has emphasized from the beginning that ensuring Hungary's energy supply is a red line. The Hungarian people should not be made to pay the price of the war, as is already the case. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022c)

Viktor Orbán: The war and the European sanctions policy in response caused an energy crisis ... Today, Europe does not have any means to deal with the conflict taking place in its neighbour. Lacking power and means, the continent's leaders are convinced that with the help of European sanctions, Russia can be brought to its knees. For the sake of European unity, the country of Hungary will not prevent sanctions until they cross the red line of self-defence of the Hungarian economy, i.e. as long as they do not endanger Hungary's energy security ... It is true that Brussels today seeks to suppress the sovereignty of the member states, including Hungary. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022d)

László Kövér: The war taking place on the territory of Ukraine is a European war in a geographical sense, which the European Union did not have the moral and diplomatic power to prevent, just as it does not have sufficient authority and political power to promote the end of the war as soon as possible. The European Commission, which has arbitrarily transformed the decision-making system of the European Union in its own favour, seems to have sufficient bureaucratic power only to destroy the economies of European countries with economic sanctions intended to punish the aggressor Russia, which have proven to be ineffective in this regard ... The politics that define the European Union today do not want to recognize, dare not declare, and are not able to enforce European self-interests, therefore Europe is not a shaper of world politics, but a victim. Europe is not the master of itself, but the slave of democratic control mechanisms and economic and political interest groups outside the continent. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022d)

In the excerpt above, MP Juhász emphasizes Russia's critical role in supplying natural gas and crude oil to Hungary and the EU. This fact, which is used to criticize the sanction policy of the EU, combined with the lack of alternative sources, supports the notion of Russian dominance over the EU in constructing the power relations between the two through the topos of reality. In addition, the government's cautious stance towards Brussels' sixth sanctions package against Russia is justified through the topoi of threat/danger and burden. The topos of burden is further reinforced by invoking a populist dichotomy between ordinary 'Hungarian people' and Brussels elites through which a victim/perpetrator relation is constructed. Accordingly, the EU and its sanction policy as the response to the war are portrayed as the bogeyman in terms of the financial consequences of the war.

The second excerpt presents the archetypal example of how the Hungarian government prioritizes utilitarian considerations while interpreting the EU's actorness and foreign policy preferences regarding the war. This stance is legitimized through the topoi of reality, finance, and burden, acknowledging the conditional, 'We adopt EU-based positions if they do not minimize our national economic interests'. This is further supported by the undermining of the EU's ability to tackle the conflict taking place in its neighbour's territory. This is conducted via the combination of the topoi of reality, burden, and finance.

In this way, Orbán constructs his government as a national interest maximizer. This portrayal is firmly associated with and supported by his intergovernmentalism, understanding the European integration process as one that disassociates Hungary from the EU-wide interpreted and constructed necessities of foreign policy-making priorities which might appear a zero-sum game ('until they cross the red line') that clashes with national energy security interests. Yet, regardless of Orbán's critical stance, the government's self-contradictory official support of EU sanctions against Russia up to that point is justified by highlighting that this support is given for the sake of European unity, via the topos of definition, to claim internal legitimacy within the Hungarian national political setting.

In the third excerpt, MP Kövér adopts a Eurosceptic discourse and criticizes the EU's insufficient power and foreign policy abilities in responding to the war, which is framed as 'European' through the use of the topos of definition. In this way, by evoking a sense of belonging, increased expectations of in-group members of the European community within the EU are constructed that the war should be prevented/ended. The fact that the EU is highlighted as not capable of ending even its 'own' war covertly degrades its external actorness and legitimizes the Hungarian government's intergovernmentalist stance via the combination of the topoi of threat/danger and responsibility. Kövér further undermines the EU's weight in world politics as a legitimate and recognizable actor by representing it as the victim of its own institution, i.e. the European Commission. Here the constructed power relations are evident in the critique of the bureaucratic power of the European Commission, which is represented as imposing economic sanctions on member states via the topoi of burden and finance. In addition, the intergroup differentiation between the in-group as victim and out-groups as perpetrators helps to form two-faceted Othering at both intergroup and intra-group levels. At the intra-group level, Kövér represents the Hungarian government as the gatekeeper of European self-interest, contrary to the Others of the in-group, i.e. EU institutions, while at the intergroup level he evokes in-group favouritism through the constructed dichotomy of 'us versus "economic and political interest groups outside the continent"'. This reinforces his portrayal of the government as the national and European front.

Conclusion

This research examined how Hungarian political elites perceive the EU's actorness and foreign and security policy priorities in relation to the specific challenges of the Russia–Ukraine war. To this end, by adopting a discourse historical approach, we conducted a critical discourse analysis of the minutes of parliamentary debates within the Hungarian national parliament from 24 February 2022, i.e. the outbreak of the Russian occupation till 15 January 2023, when Hungarian national consultation on EU sanctions against Russia was organized.

In parallel with previous research, the analysis revealed that the political parties' perceptions of the EU's actorness within the realm of foreign policy-making are shaped in accordance with their party-political position as government or opposition. While both sides firmly advocate their positions as the national front and as the maximizer of national interest and communicate about the EU's actorness to justify their own respective political behaviour and cause, their definitional standpoints regarding how perceptions of the weight of the EU are highly divergent. Thus, the analysis discussed the perceptions of the government, the united opposition, and the Our Homeland Movement separately. As a 'third side', the latter opted out of discussions on the war itself and detached itself from both the government and the united opposition discourse while claiming to represent national interests.

Accordingly, the united opposition has adopted a pro-European stance, acclaiming the EU as the guarantor of Hungarian economic and security interests. This political position is further fine-tuned through anti-Russian sentiment, which is simultaneously instrumentalized to delegitimize the ruling elites' alignment/rapprochement with Russia. This construction of the opposition's pro-Europeanist stance versus the government's pro-Russian has been used to claim political credit.

On the other hand, Mi Hazánk, the far-right political party in Hungary, which positions itself as the defender of Hungarian national interests, culture, and identity, has pointed to an alternative construction in interpreting EU's actorness in the Russia–Ukraine war. Its Eurosceptic tone, derived from its nationalist and anti-globalist ideologies, overlaps with the position of neither the united opposition nor the ruling elites. Accordingly, it evaluates the EU's response to the war through calculations based on Hungarian national interests, which are associated with

financial concerns regarding prospective Ukrainian accession to the EU through the topoi of threat/danger, burden, and finance.

The ruling coalition of Fidesz and KDNP has communicated about the EU's global actorness through a nation-centric ethos operationalized as a tool of justification for their prioritization of 'sovereign positions' over EU-oriented positions with respect to the Russia-Ukraine war. Through propounding national security and economic concerns, the government undermines the EU's global actorness with the aim of generating room for political manoeuvre in mediating its relations with Russia. Therefore, the EU's foreign policy decisions are represented as the reason for the financial instability of the continent in the wake of the war.

Perceptions of the EU's global actorness among Hungarian political elites have been found to be operationalized and instrumentalized in accordance with the political aims and causes of the opposition and the government respectively. While the former associates its perception of the EU's actorness with its aim of claiming political credit and power, the latter uses the construction of its perceptions to claim justification for its political decisions and behaviour. This finding offers a critical point of reference for further research studies aiming to compare government and opposition elites' perceptions of the EU.

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CHAPTER 3

The Ambivalent ‘Eurosceptics’ of the EU’s ‘Inner Periphery’

Assessing Perceptions of the EU among Political Elites in Romania during Turbulent Times

Miruna Butnaru Troncotă

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest

Radu-Alexandru Cucută

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest

Abstract

The nature of perceptions of the EU among Romania’s elites is an under-studied and seldom explored issue. The central research question of this chapter is whether the major events of the 2020–2022 interval (marked by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the start of the war in Ukraine, and the rejection of Romania’s second attempt to join the Schengen area) have altered Romanian elites’ perceptions of the EU. The empirical part discusses qualitative data

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resulting from ten semi-structured interviews, analysed in relation to three main theoretical taxonomies of political party attitudes towards the EU – those of Kopecký and Mudde (2002), Lubbers and Scheepers (2005), and Krouwel and Abts (2007) – to highlight the particularities of Romanian Eurosceptic discourse and its ambivalent nature.

Keywords: European Union, EU accession, political elites, periphery, perceptions, Romania

Introduction

Romania submitted its application for EU membership back in 1995, preceded by the ‘Snagov Declaration’, a document endorsed by all of the extant 14 parliamentary political parties. The declaration highlighted the parties’ full consensual support for EU membership. Ever since, EU integration has been one of the major cross-party goals in post-communist Romania. Public opinion polls such as Eurobarometer repeatedly have Romanian citizens as some of the most enthusiastic supporters of the EU, and their trust in EU institutions has been consistently above the EU average and above that of other post-communist countries such as Poland, Hungary, Czechia, or Slovakia (Troncotă & Loy, 2018). Moreover, symbolic domestic communication about the EU based on populist anti-EU rhetoric has not been present at all in mainstream Romanian public debates (except for short episodes during the 2017–2018 anti-corruption protests, when the Romanian government led by the Socialist Liviu Dragnea expressed several controversial anti-EU positions; Butnaru Troncotă & Ioniță, 2022). Despite this domestic political consensus and the citizens’ thriving Euro-enthusiasm, and with no significant challenger party spreading Eurosceptic messages in the national political arena, serious discussions on a potential Romanian wave of Euroscepticism have remained episodic (Gherghina & Mișcoiu, 2014). A series of events that occurred between 2020 and 2022 brought several changes to this unanimously pro-EU pattern of Romanian politics (Mișcoiu, 2021). Yet the topic of an emerging form of party-based Euroscepticism in Romania, distinct from similar manifestations in Poland or Hungary or even in Bulgaria, remains still under-researched.

The January 2023 European Parliament report covering the 15 years since Romania’s accession shows a drop of almost 10 per cent in the EU’s favourability rating over the last couple of years among Romanian

respondents. Romania has thus dropped below the EU average, while the EU average itself, now at 62 per cent, has increased from the 59 per cent mark reached in 2020 (European Parliament, 2023). The shift is even more worrying when compared with the 71 per cent of public opinion that was positive towards EU membership in 2007, when Romania officially became an EU member. Consequently, it is legitimate to enquire whether we are witnessing more visible forms of Euroscepticism and contestation of the EU in Romania and what could be the context for this shift. As we know that the opinion polls themselves do not tell us much about the causes of change in public perceptions, we believe that a more in-depth focus on political elites provides a chance to delve deeper into and gain a better understanding of this shift in EU perceptions in Romania. This is because political elites can tap into mass attitudes towards the EU and European integration, and they tend to follow them and so reflect them at the decision-making level, for obvious electoral purposes.

EU studies scholars have shown that, pushed by recent crises, European integration has become an increasingly contested process (Foster & Grzymalski, 2022), and emerging studies have focused specifically on the impact of this contestation not only in the founding member states such as Germany, Italy, or France, but also at the EU's political and geographical margins (Stojić, 2022). In this vein, a burgeoning literature has developed around the concept of 'party-based Euroscepticism', and within these scholarly debates elite opinions have been seen as relevant when researching evolving forms of contestation in the EU's peripheries. As Böttger and Van Loozen (2012) have shown, European integration has, even back to the 'founding fathers' in the 1950s, been understood as an elite-driven phenomenon, around which the public was seen as having a 'permissive consensus'. But this was the case mainly in the first decades of the process and applied mostly to the six founding states of the European Community. Neofunctionalism later argued that internal crises brought the demise of the 'permissive consensus', to be replaced by a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2005; 2009). As such, the scholarly debates have focused on the development of Euroscepticism at a national level as a central aspect of the reorientation of positions on the EU/Europe, propagated by 'party-based Euroscepticism' that took specific forms in the new post-communist member states, already manifesting when they were candidate countries (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004).

In this context, the views of Romania's political representatives on the EU are still under-studied. There are numerous studies focused on the more illustrative CEE cases of Poland and Hungary (see e.g. Csehi & Zgut, 2021; Vogel & Göncz, 2018), especially in the context of their democratic decline and rule-of-law crises between 2017 and 2018 and the confrontational rhetoric between these countries' leaders and EU representatives over the last years (Brack et al., 2019). But there are far fewer studies focused on the case of political elites' views on the EU in Romania. Previous studies have shown how Romanian elites differ from their Polish and Hungarian counterparts – something very visible during the 2017–2019 Future of Europe debates (see more in Butnaru-Troncoță & Ioniță, 2022). Our study tries to address this gap in the literature, adding an update regarding recent events, and reflecting also on how perceptions have evolved following the most recent crises between 2020 and 2022. In the Romanian case, this period has a particular relevance because after the December 2020 parliamentary elections, the subject of nationalism resurfaced in Romanian politics when the first Eurosceptic right-wing populist party (Alliance for the Union of Romanians, AUR) entered the Romanian parliament. In this context, we argue that the period between 2020 and 2022 represents a critical conjuncture as the EU was hit not just by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic but also by the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine. The main question that our chapter addresses is: how did all of these major events taking place between 2020 and 2022 affect perspectives on the EU among Romanian political elites?

To answer this, we used original qualitative data from ten extended semi-structured interviews with nine members of the current Romanian parliament and one senior politician directly involved in Romania's EU pre-accession negotiations.¹ We aimed to interpret and contextualize the results with reference to Austria's veto against Romania's accession to Schengen, a subject that brought the EU back into the Romanian public sphere and stirred reactions broadly in the media (Hotnews, 2022; G4media, 2022) and across different groups – citizens and elites alike. Thus, the hypothesis at the centre of the present volume is tested in this chapter: is Romania regarded by its own political elites as part of the EU's 'inner periphery', and what is the meaning attached to this term, depending not merely on geographical position or on economic indicators but also on how its domestic political elites

(who interact with EU institutions) perceive and engage in the integration process?

Another important theoretical anchor for our analysis is the idea of 'EU peripheries' as political constructions (see more in [Chapter 1](#)). In Foucauldian terms of knowledge and power, the periphery is and becomes what the centre defines it to be. From a constructivist point of view, the identity of actors considered part of the periphery is co-constituted and results from the inter-subjective interactions between what is perceived as the 'centre' and the periphery, as well as the interactions among different actors self-perceived as part of periphery themselves. This is why we find it relevant to explore the types of interpretations, attitudes, and reactions that political elites hold about recent Romania–EU relations, in order to explore how various representations of Romania's position in the EU have emerged among its 'political entrepreneurs'. We do not claim that these perceptions determine these actors' behaviour, but just mapping the often contradictory meanings attached to Romania as treated by the EU as a periphery can still contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding of the paradoxes experienced by Romania's elites. These paradoxes entail contradictory attitudes expressed sometimes by the same person, or manifested in the same political party, consisting of both nationalist arguments referring to Romania being treated as an 'EU colony' and very harsh self-criticism stating that Romania does not in fact keep up with EU standards and that its 'backwardness' justifies the country's position in the EU periphery.

The chapter is divided into five sections as follows: the first section explores the image shared by EU scholars of Romania and Bulgaria as constant 'laggards' of the EU accession process, a status that appeared before the two countries joined the EU and was prolonged for almost two decades in the post-accession period; the second section reviews the main arguments of previous studies that have focused on elite Euroscepticism and presents the main theoretical categories defined by Kopecký and Mudde (2002), Lubbers and Scheepers (2005), and Krouwel and Abts (2007), outlining the main analytical model that will be used to interpret the qualitative data; the third section presents the main methodological considerations and briefly reflects on the limits of political elite-based interviews; the fourth section discusses the context of Romania's elite perceptions with an emphasis on the debates around the country's December 2022 failed Schengen bid; the last

section interprets the main findings using the aforementioned theoretical perspectives and methods, highlighting the conclusions alongside avenues for future research.

Constructing the EU's 'Inner Periphery': Eastern Enlargement and the Stigma of Being the 'Laggards' of EU Accession

The fifth enlargement wave, consisting of Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the EU, also labelled pejoratively the 'Eastern enlargement', attracted a special focus in the Europeanization research literature. In EU studies literature, Romania was commonly regarded as the laggard among the post-communist countries that sought EU membership and thus it became subject to a stricter application of rule-of-law conditionality in 2004 (Levitz & Pop-Eleches, 2010). The case of Romania was illustrative in highlighting the role of 'differentiated integration', which entailed the exceptional procedure of the Coordination and Verification Mechanism (CVM), alongside the country's delay in joining the Eurozone and the Schengen area.

Initially, in the 2000s, looking at the rapid pace of reforms and successful democratization in CEE countries, EU enlargement was widely hailed in the literature as 'the most successful foreign policy of the EU'. But soon after 2007, when Romania and Bulgaria entered the EU with a 'delay' and with a set of exceptional clauses, the analysts of enlargement began to signal a visible 'crisis of the enlargement process' (Brunet, 2013). The year 2007 thus remains an important milestone both for scholars of enlargement and for EU policy-makers, as it represented a cornerstone in terms of how the EU would rethink and redesign its future enlargement negotiations with the new generations of candidate countries. As a lesson learnt from the hurdles faced by Bulgaria and Romania in the integration process and their 'unfinished reforms', the EU launched stricter conditionality for the new candidate countries in the Western Balkans and a special focus on rule-of-law reform, together with a more rigorous system of monitoring reforms. The disappointment of certain EU member states in this process soon led to very visible 'enlargement fatigue', something that officially confirmed at the political level by Jean Claude Juncker's announcement, before he began his term as president of the European Commission, that during his mandate there would be no further enlargement (Juncker, 2014).

The EU's 'leap' from 15 to 25 (and later to 28) members was supposed to have ended the Cold War legacy of separate and hostile camps divided into Eastern and Western Europe. Still, there were numerous material and symbolic elements highlighting the visible divide between what now became 'new' versus 'old' member states within the EU. An important observation to start with is that even if they were all considered parts of the same group, the post-communist countries were not all treated the same; a certain differentiation among them by the EU institutions was visible from the beginning. This was only later officially confirmed, with the Eastern enlargement taking place in two stages – first in 2004 (CEE countries) and then in 2007 (Romania and Bulgaria, decoupled from the rest). Out of the 12 states announcing their intention to seek EU membership back in 1993, by 1998 a total of ten countries from CEE had formally begun their membership negotiations. The process occurred in two stages – first, in 1998, the countries that received a green light were the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. Due to instability and lack of reforms, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovakia were not invited to start accession negotiations following the 1997 Luxembourg European Council. Despite the opposition of some member states, Romania and Bulgaria were invited to start negotiations at the 1999 Helsinki Summit. By 2000, all ten CEE countries had thus been invited to start negotiations (Grabbe, 2002). During the 2002 Copenhagen European Council, the 'big bang' enlargement was officially scheduled to take place in 2004, but Romania and Bulgaria were not among the states which were allowed to accede to the EU that year. The EU called for further progress in meeting the membership criteria in general and in reforming the administration and the judiciary in particular, while the Commission launched a completely new procedure to adapt to the 'exceptional' situation of the two countries. Consequently, Romania was treated by the EU as 'an exception to the general rule' of enlargement, and this contributed to its labelling in the conventional Europeanization literature as the laggard of the post-communist countries seeking to join the EU.

After Romania and Bulgaria had provisionally closed all *acquis* chapters, the Brussels European Council of 16–17 December 2004 confirmed the accession date of 2007 yet introduced the instrument of 'safeguard clauses' (Trauner, 2009). This exceptional procedure which had never been used previously by the EU meant that the Commission

could withhold the benefits of membership before accession or in the three years after accession, if certain reforms had not been completed. Thus, the two countries had a delay of almost two and half years compared with other post-communist countries in the CEE; they signed the Accession Treaty to the EU on 25 April 2005, and based on this they were to become EU member states on 1 January 2007.

This persisting label of ‘reform laggards’ and its explicit negative connotations have clung to both Romania and Bulgaria ever since they handed in their applications for accession in the early 1990s. Moreover, the ‘laggard’ label continued to appear in literature concerning Romania’s Europeanization long after its accession process had concluded. Romania’s case was thus studied in the academic literature using the unique concept of ‘post-accession compliance’, referring to the political conditionalities placed by the EU only on Romania and Bulgaria for the first time in the history of EU enlargement, which were monitored regularly during the accession process (Pridham, 2007a). Moreover, a new mechanism was specially designed by the European Commission that would monitor compliance with these conditionalities in the fields of the fight against corruption and rule of law after accession. When they joined the EU on 1 January 2007, Romania and Bulgaria still had progress to make in the fields of judicial reform, corruption, and (for Bulgaria) organized crime. The Commission set up the CVM as a transitional measure to assist the two countries in remedying these shortcomings. Subsequently, the Commission reported on progress on a regular basis and the CVM was extended for almost 15 years (it finally concluded in 2022). It is not uncommon to see that Romania and Bulgaria’s ‘special status’ remains central to the analysis of the EU. Gallagher (2009), for example, argues that Romania’s predatory rulers have inflicted a humiliating defeat on the EU. He argues that Brussels was ‘tricked’ into offering full membership to Romania in return for substantial reforms which its rulers refused to carry out. Authors such as Pridham (2007b) and Trauner (2009) who have analysed Romania’s post-accession compliance with EU law have argued that failures in the areas of justice, administrative, and agricultural reform show how the country moved backwards politically during the years of negotiations and after accession.

This pejorative laggard status was kept alive also by Romania’s near-constant placement at the bottom of the convergence indicators rankings. Only very recently have more nuanced analyses begun to shift

the perspective. Dimitrova (2021) argues that there is not sufficient evidence to assess Romania and Bulgaria as exceptions or laggards. On the contrary, there are many instances in which they could be qualified as 'regular member states'. On the one hand, analysing from a strict 'transposition of the *EU acquis*' point of view, as Ram (2012, p. 417) argues: 'Romania and Bulgaria have a good record in general, which has even improved since accession. On the other hand, looking at judicial reform and combating organized crime and corruption – the evolution is very modest or in some cases has regressed since accession.' This led to an unprecedented gesture at the time, when the EU froze Bulgaria's pre-accession funds in 2008 (Gow, 2008).

The label was reinforced by unfavourable comparisons with the states that had joined the EU in 2004. During the decade and a half since their delayed accession, both Bulgaria and Romania have been identified in the relevant literature as examples of 'successful laggards' (Noutcheva & Bechev, 2008), or as illustrations of 'Balkan particularism' (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007), 'Balkan Exceptionalism' (Papadimitriou & Gateva, 2009), 'post-accession hooliganism' (Ganev 2013), or the 'roots of enlargement exceptionalism' (Dimitrova, 2021). Even if different indicators are used to measure Europeanization, the mainstream literature in the field tends to point to a mostly negative perception of Eastern enlargement, associating a wide range of mostly negative characteristics or metaphors with Romania's accession such as 'backsliding' (Rupnik, 2007), 'shallow' (Ladrech, 2009), 'empty shells' (Dimitrova, 2010), 'enlargement on paper against enlargement in practice' (Trauner, 2009), 'back-pedaling' (Buzogány, 2012), and 'eternal laggards' (Dimitrova, 2021) or naming Romania and Bulgaria as the 'two Cinderellas of EU accession' (Dimitrov & Plachkova, 2021). Even a superficial look at these dominant metaphors and types of argument used by prominent EU scholars makes it easy to identify elements of stigma connected with the delayed accession and the exceptionality clauses. Scrutinizing some of the most referenced articles on the topic on Google Scholar, we can observe how this stigmatizing label fits within the metaphorical 'race' of accession, where there are supposedly 'frontrunners' and 'laggards' and Romania and Bulgaria are explicitly associated with the latter (Pridham, 2007b; Chiva, 2009; Trauner, 2009; Andreev, 2009; Spendzharova & Vachudova, 2012).

This focus makes it easier to highlight Romania's shortcomings in complying with EU conditionality, while making other more positive

transformations beyond the strict interpretation of EU conditionality less visible. This process can be analysed as a form of ‘academic peripheralization’, reflected in the ways that both Romanian political elites and scholars themselves internalize this perspective in their own assessments of the process, even in situations when indicators do not point to such a bad track record. Labels often used in influential academic discourse are relevant because peripheral regions of the EU are not just spatially or economically distant; they are also perceived as different by the centre (the location of epistemic authority in this case) – and their difference is often symbolically and politically constructed as Otherness (*alterity*).

The image of Romania as a part of the EU’s ‘inner periphery’ is not necessarily a result of recent crises and events (such the failed Schengen bid or problems in combating corruption); rather, it is part of a continuum that started in the pre-accession period. Procedurally speaking, Romania was treated as an exception to the general rule of EU accession and this created the premises for the feeling of being ‘not fully an EU member’; this in turn positioned the country from the beginning with an in-betweenness that served in the EU studies epistemic community as a stigma.

Shades of Euroscepticism and How to Differentiate Its Nuances

Like many complex and often confusing concepts, the EU is understood in very different ways by different social categories. The same differentiation applies to the ways that it is contested. Taking stock of this variety of understandings of the EU implies that there are diverse types of Euroscepticism as well as various forms of EU support. Immediately after the Eurozone crisis, Euroscepticism became widespread in the European public sphere at all levels: in public opinion, among political parties and civil society groups, even in media discourses. Scholars have argued that the broad set of attitudes critical of the EU covered by the umbrella term ‘Euroscepticism’ manifests in different ways: public opinion becoming more hostile towards the EU (decreasing trust in the EU as reported by the Eurobarometer data); increasing support for political parties that oppose the EU or the further European integration; and an increase in Eurosceptic rhetoric in public debates. In fact, it has been argued that Euroscepticism has become

increasingly 'embedded' within European nation states (Usherwood & Startin, 2013). This tendency has been accelerated by the post-Brexit uncertainty (after 2017). We will briefly explore the main arguments of previous studies that have focused on elite Euroscepticism and present the main theoretical categories for grasping the complexity of political parties' EU attitudes, particularly in the context of the awakening of public interest in the EU which contributed to its increased politicization (Haapala & Oleart Pérez de Seoane, 2021).

There is a wide consensus in the literature that in the post-Maastricht period, Euroscepticism has become a more significant phenomenon than in earlier decades, and that there has been a shift from a 'permissive consensus' to a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2008; Down & Wilson, 2008). Post-functionalist authors have argued that the process of European unification is driven mainly by the self-interest of elites who enjoy a wide margin of autonomy, as opposed to the general population, in pursuing policies of European integration (Best et al., 2012). According to this approach, political elites see the EU integration process as 'a means to advance political goals which they would not be able to enforce alone' (Haller, 2008, p. 42). In this sense, the theory of permissive consensus perceives public and elite interest in European integration as being mutually reinforcing. Moreover, different facets of the EU's subsequent crises in the last decade brought about different obstacles to European integration: supranational versus national proposals for the Future of Europe, specific forms of 'supranational politicization' of the question (Butnaru-Troncotă & Ioniță, 2021), and whether identity politics were activated via these crises (Börzel & Risse, 2018). De Wilde and Trenz (2012) have highlighted the diversity of Eurosceptic positions across different party families in the European Parliament and often even within the same party family. Even though there are other categorizations that have emerged more recently, dealing with the potential changes in parties' attitudes towards the EU in the light of the multiple crises that engulfed the Union throughout the 2010s, we found it useful to explore elite contestation narratives in Romania using these initial categories, considering also that Euroscepticism is a much-delayed phenomenon in the case of Romania as compared with other CEE countries. The main argument recently presented in the literature is that Euroscepticism is not a unitary, coherent position, and it covers very different types of party attitudes to European integration (Borțun, 2022). Moreover, Borțun

argues for the need to go ‘beyond the binary classification of party-based Euroscepticism, and discuss whether those structural and overlapping EU crises might also have led to changes in how we understand and classify party-based Euroscepticism’ (Borçun, 2022, p. 1417).

Studies especially focused on the emergence of various forms of Euroscepticism cover different elements of the phenomenon and different actors expressing some form of opposition to the EU, ranging from ‘Europhobia’ to ‘Europhilia’ among different sections of national elites. There are also studies that focus on the shift visible in many Western member states towards opposing European integration, contesting the EU, and Euroscepticism (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; de Vries, 2018; Leruth et al., 2018). Other studies look at how the most recent crises have fuelled Euroscepticism and how this in turn influenced the results of the 2019 European elections (Braun et al., 2019; Brack, 2020). All of these studies make use of a set of much older concepts highlighting the analytical value of ‘party-based Euroscepticism’ advanced by Kopecký and Mudde (2002), Lubbers and Scheepers (2005), and Krouwel and Abts (2007). The present chapter also makes significant use of these models to interpret our qualitative data.

Kopecký and Mudde’s Categorization

One of the most comprehensive perspectives is that formulated by Kopecký and Mudde (2002), which was put forward as ‘an alternative way of categorizing opposition to Europe by defining the term Euroscepticism in relation to other (party) positions on “Europe”’ (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, p. 300). They make a distinction between four major types of attitudes towards the EU (Euro-enthusiasts, Eurosceptics, Euro-pragmatists, and Euro-rejects), focusing on different positions with regard to how parties identify with both the idea and the practice of European integration.

Based on their understanding, the Europhiles are defined as believing in the key ideas of European integration: ‘institutionalized cooperation based on common sovereignty (the political element) and a liberal integrated market economy’ (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, p. 301). Thus, the Europhile attitude may include those who ‘see European integration as a project for the creation of a new supranational state (for example, the federalists), but also for those who see European integration exclusively from an economic point of view (for example, the

creation of a free trade area)' (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, p. 301). By contrast, the Europhobes oppose all of the above principles that are the basis of the EU. The classification leads to the formulation of four main ideal type categories of party positions on Europe: *Euro-enthusiasts*, *Eurosceptics*, *Euro-rejects*, and *Euro-pragmatists* (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, pp. 301–303) (see [Table 3.1](#)).

Table 3.1: Kopecký and Mudde's 'Typology of party positions on Europe'

Party position	Typical features
Euro-enthusiasts	Combines Europhile and EU-optimist positions: ++ support both the idea and the practice of European integration
Eurosceptics	Combines Europhile and EU-pessimist positions: + support the idea but - oppose the practice
Euro-pragmatists	Combines Europhobe and EU-optimist positions - oppose the idea but + support the practice
Euro-rejects	Combines Europhobe and EU-pessimist positions -- oppose both the idea and the practice

Source: authors' construction based on Kopecký and Mudde (2002, pp. 302–303).

Despite its widespread use in integration studies and Euroscepticism research over the last two decades, Kopecký and Mudde's (2002) typology has not been used in relation to political elites in Romania or Bulgaria. Moreover, it can be argued that between the extremes of Europhobia and Europhilia there are multiple possible positions and most often political elites shift on this continuum based on numerous contextual factors; we find this scale useful for exploring Romanian political elites' perceptions of the EU.

Lubbers and Scheepers' Categorization

Another important distinction is between 'political' and 'instrumental' Euroscepticism, formalized by Lubbers and Scheepers (2005). They explore the extent to which nationalist characteristics drive political

Euroscepticism, in addition to political and economic characteristics (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2005, p. 644).

This is a complementary perspective useful in our analysis because it deals with a different distinction than the one described by Kopecký and Mudde (2002). Lubbers and Scheepers analyse political Euroscepticism in 21 European countries (not including Romania and Bulgaria, which were not EU members at that time). Their contribution is relevant because they show that ‘political euro-scepticism is associated particularly strongly to fears about European immigrants and losses of wealth and traditions due to the inflow of new immigrants’ (Lubbers & Scheepers 2005, p. 664). They make a distinction between utilitarian, or economic, explanations of Euroscepticism and political explanations. In their view, ‘political’ Euroscepticism is concerned primarily with the process of European integration (understood as a focus on ‘the importance of political interest, knowledge and trust’), whereas ‘instrumental’ Euroscepticism is concerned with its outcomes (understood as ‘a cost–benefit evaluation that is crucial for people’s attitude towards the EU’) (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2005, p. 645). Moreover, this distinction is relevant because it allows for more nuances when making a distinction between nationalist and economic drivers of Euroscepticism. As Borçun (2022, p. 1418) points out, ‘while “political Euroscepticism” entails a preference for national over EU prerogatives in certain, if not all, key policy areas, “instrumental Euroscepticism” is framed in cost–benefit terms, with its adepts emphasizing the negative consequences of EU membership’.

Krouwel and Abts’ Categorization

The third and the most nuanced categorization of party-based Euroscepticism is offered by Krouwel and Abts (2007). They develop a two-dimensional conceptualization by combining the target and the degree of popular discontent with the EU and European integration. This allows us to delve deeper into the structure of political discontent and its effects on political trust in EU member states by distinguishing between different types of Euroscepticism on a sliding scale of political attitudes, which in this categorization runs from trust, through scepticism, to political distrust, cynicism, and alienation. Their two-dimensional framework distinguishes between ‘the targets of political support and the degree of reflexivity, that is to say the extent to

which individuals are able to differentiate evaluations between different actors and institutions in a political system' (Krouwel & Abts, 2007, p. 256). The article shows that 'the dynamics between increasing levels of political discontent and populist mobilization of latent negative evaluations of European integration can actually have significant impact in national and European politics' (Krouwel & Abts, 2007, p. 254). In this sense, it is important to look at elites' political actions at the EU level as being highly constrained by public opinion regarding the accelerated process of European integration. The varying degrees and targets of public discontent can be traced in recent Eurobarometer data, and we have found this a fruitful additional avenue of research in discussing Romanian political elites' evolving perceptions alongside the most recent evolutions of Romanian citizens' levels of trust in both EU and national institutions. Krouwel and Abts illustrate that populist parties are successful in elections particularly because they very carefully watch and capitalize on shifts in public trust in the EU. Consequently, what citizens think about the EU (as reflected by Eurobarometer polls) is related to what political elites think about the EU.

There is consistent research already pointing to the fact that trust in the EU has always fluctuated over time. In this context of fluctuating trust, Krouwel and Abts underline that 'skepticism could be defined as reluctant (dis)trust of political power, meaning that skeptics can always revoke their confidence in specific political actors and institutions. Since (dis)trust never becomes unconditional, skepticism is a matter of doubt rather than denial' (2007, p. 259). The two authors propose a very complex and detailed scale, with five major categories starting from *Euro-confidence* (the most positive attitude towards the EU) continuing with *Euroscepticism*, which is in fact a combination of acceptance and mild criticism, and three other categories – *Euro-distrust*, *Euro-cynicism*, and *Euro-alienation* (the most extreme negative rejection of the EU as a whole) (see Table 3.2). They underline the fact that this last category, Euro-alienation, mirrors the fourth category of Kopecký and Mudde (2002) – Euro-rejects – in that it is 'rather applicable to extremist parties, no matter what their ideological affiliation is (far right or left), because they are simply ideologically opposed to European integration *per se*' (Krouwel & Abts, 2007, p. 263). This resonates very well with the other authors' argument that Euro-rejects 'may be nationalists, socialists, or isolationists, or simply because they believe the idea of European integration is a folly in the face of the

Table 3.2: Categorization based on Krouwel and Abts' 'Sliding scale of European discontent'

Categories	Definition of the attitude	Transposition of the attitude into opinions and actions (or how to recognize this attitude)
+ Euro-confidence (the most extreme attitude of satisfaction with the EU)	'A preconceived and pre-reflexive generalized attitude of obedient assent to EU politics'	'They evaluate EU policy output as satisfactory; and they support further development of European integration'
Euroscepticism	'A trade-off between some dissatisfaction with current EU performance and confidence in the overall project of European integration. Eurosceptics are ambivalent about European authorities and the regime'	'They adopt a critical attitude towards particular EU policy initiatives, and they may be sceptical about deepening or widening'
Euro-distrust	'Based on frustrations with the perceived failure of the EU to meet their expectations and demands'	'They are frequently disappointed, which results in a negative evaluation of the current operation, as well as pessimism about the future performance of the EU'
Euro-cynicism	'Combines a generalized disdain for European authorities with outright disbelief in the virtuous functioning of the EU institutions and fatalism about the future of the European project'	'They disclose a "generalized negativism" and they reject the whole project of European integration'
- Euro-alienation (the most extreme attitude of dissociation from and dissatisfaction with the EU)	'The enduring and profound rejection of the EU. We can distinguish here two subgroups: the <i>Euro-estranged</i> and the <i>Euro-rejects</i> '	'The milder form of Euro-estrangement indicates a loss of diffuse support for European integration and favourable attitudes towards the European project, as well as a lack of identification with the European political community - Euro-rejects are principled and ideologically opposed to the European integration'

Source: authors' construction based on Krouwel and Abts (2007, pp. 261–262).

diversity existing among European states' (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, p. 301).

Another important takeaway from Krouwel and Abts (2007) that is useful for our analysis is the political opportunities that these various positions bring to a wider and more democratic public and European debate. In other words, Euroscepticism is, to a certain extent, healthy for a plural European public debate. In contrast with other theoretical perspectives on the topic, the authors suggest in fact that rather than viewing Eurosceptic or Euro-distrustful attitudes as incompatible with or in opposition to pro-European positions, we should consider them as 'reconcilable with positive evaluations of the larger European project' (Krouwel & Abts, 2007, p. 263). Moreover, they argue that 'Cynicism and alienation, on the other hand, are in strict opposition to the EU and incompatible with the idea of European integration' (Krouwel & Abts, 2007, p. 263). Our analysis agrees with this perspective: criticism of the EU or of EU integration is not a zero-sum game for political actors; in fact, it provides political elites with significant room for manoeuvre, and we will try to observe these nuances in Romanian political elites' discourse on the EU and EU integration.

Methodological Note

In the current context of EU 'poly-crises' marked by war at the Union's borders and deep instability, political elites' views on the EU matter more than before. That is why the motivation of the political elites in their response to EU democratic conditionalities, as well as their interaction with democratic pressures, are undoubtedly relevant (Surubaru & Nitoiu, 2020). Best et al. (2012) have argued that the process of European integration is continuously dependent on and driven by the accord of its national elites. Moreover, political elites are in direct contact with the EU's supranational institutions. National elites think, talk, and act under changing conditions, following different standards and political agendas (see for example what Best et al., 2012, label 'Eurelism' to precisely define the elitist character of European integration, mediated by the strategies of domestic political actors). Based on these perspectives, and assuming the limitations of a strictly elite-centred analysis of the EU in Romania, our study embraces the assumption that political elite perceptions have been a driving factor in the country's EU integration endeavours. The overall aim is to assess the visions

and attitudes developed by Romanian political elites and their different perceptions of the EU in times of crises (post-Brexit), especially in the 2020–2022 interval. Our study makes the additional assumption that the visions, attitudes, and opinions of Romanian political elites regarding the EU have been impacted by recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and, most recently, the failed attempt to join the Schengen area. We also want to see whether the decline in trust in the EU visible in Eurobarometer data (European Parliament, 2023) is visibly reflected in the elites' discourse.

In addition to the Eurobarometer data, our study makes use of original empirical data obtained from semi-structured interviews with politicians, a method rarely employed by studies dealing with Romania. We found research interviews an adequate approach to mapping subjective perceptions, while at the same time being aware of the method's implicit limitations. The interviews were conducted in the Romanian language – for the sake of clarity – and translation into English of selected extracts poses the risk of partially distorting the meanings expressed by the participants (the risk of being 'lost in translation'). To alleviate this risk, we tried to combine the qualitative data collected with other data (opinion polls and observations from recent literature in Romania) in order to better contextualize our main assumption: that Romania's failed Schengen bid in December 2022, together with disillusionment as a result of previous EU crises and the more active presence of a populist far-right party (AUR) from 2020, created a favourable symbolic space for discursive representations that enforce Romania's image as one of EU's inner peripheries. The data collected from the semi-structured interviews was used to evaluate how Romanian politicians make use in their discourses of the various negative connotations and feelings of frustration associated with this image of being in the EU periphery, not being a full member state, or being treated as a second-class member state.

The main methodological assumption that we started with was that neither elites nor citizens have fixed views on Europe. In the past, large waves of Euroscepticism have been followed by a period of civic passivity or even by a U-turn towards Euro-enthusiasm. Citizens' and political elites' views are deeply connected to one another, and they are context bound. It is only logical to assume that a period of successive crises at EU and global level (such as the poly-crises of the last decade) would deeply influence both citizens' and elites' views of the EU.

One initial assumption could be that Euroscepticism, together with open contestation of the EU in public debates, becomes more visible in times of crisis, but our endeavour is an attempt to see more deeply the nuances of this phenomenon and its contextual factors in the case of Romania. This is why we have chosen to focus particularly on the period between 2020 and 2022, which coincided with impactful events that brought the EU back into the national public sphere – namely, the measures taken in the context of combating the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects; the start of the Russian invasion in Ukraine and the wave of solidarity of member states and the EU as a whole in supporting Ukraine; and the decision to once again reject Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen area, as a result of Austria's veto at the end of 2022. We conducted interviews with Romanian MPs between February and March 2023 – very shortly after this last event, which was charged with numerous emotional outbursts of disappointment towards the EU, especially regarding how some member states treat Romania even after 16 years of membership.

Drawing on insights from the most recent EU public opinion research, together with original data from our in-depth research interviews with political elites in Romania, also enables us to identify contextual factors that facilitated or inhibited certain attitudes among Romanian politicians regarding EU integration between 2020 and 2022. We used the data provided by our ten semi-structured interviews with members of the Romanian parliament (nine from the current parliament and one former high-profile politician involved in Romania's EU accession). To avoid biases, we tried to keep the group of selected interviewees as diverse as possible; thus, we used multiple criteria of selection. The first criterion was the respondent's knowledge and experience of EU affairs. We included former ministers, former members of the European Parliament (MEPs), and retired politicians involved in Romania's pre-accession negotiations. The second was ideological positioning based on the political party the interviewee represented, with the intent to include as many different political perspectives as possible. Thus, we included representatives from both government parties (five) and opposition parties (four), and MPs representing Romania's ethnic minorities (one). The third criterion was gender, and here we did not maintain a good balance, as we managed to include only two women compared with eight men (although this does in fact reflect the gender imbalance in the Romanian parliament). The age

distribution of the interviewees was also broad, with five politicians between 21 and 40 years of age and four more experienced politicians between 41 and 60 years of age, as well as one retired politician (over 61). The interviews had a fixed structure of five general questions/items that were common to all of the case studies in this book, but we also adapted the flow of the conversations to the specific context of Romania, adding ten more specific questions connected to the different topics. The fixed format of eight main questions addressed to all politicians included the following topics: what is your opinion about the most recent rejection to enter the Schengen zone? Do you think that this might raise the level of Euroscepticism in Romania? How would you assess Romania's image in the EU for the last two years? What were the major events that affected this image in relation to the EU? How would you assess Romania's overall membership in the EU? How did Romania change over the last 16 years of EU membership? And the last two questions were the same for all ten interviewees: do you believe Romania is part of the EU's periphery? How would you define that position? The discussion with interviewees sometimes led to additional questions around these topics, and sometimes the order of the questions was changed, adapting in each case to the flow of the conversation. All respondents signed agreements to be included in the study and to protect their identity, and we use codes from IN1 to IN10 to replace their names (for more details about respondents, see Appendix, [Table A3.1](#)).

The Symbolic Costs of the Schengen Rejections: How Political Elites See Romania's Place in the EU

The Paradoxes of 'Euro-Enthusiasm'

As already mentioned, there are few studies focused on whether and how the EU is contested in Romania, and just a limited number of these studies are dedicated specifically to political elites. Nevertheless, they remain useful for better understanding the context of our interview data.

The first rejection of Romania's application for accession to Schengen, in 2011, is discussed in the literature as one of the first moments when we can observe a Europeanization of the national public sphere –that is, when an EU-related topic becomes a central focus in national

media and a nationwide debate evolves around it, with polarized perspectives (Dobrescu & Bârgăoanu, 2011). A conclusion of that first moment was that 'Romanian elites chose to normalize Europe and to narrate EU in a banal way' (Radu & Bârgăoanu, 2015, p. 174). Moreover, it is interesting to see that elites' role is taken seriously in terms of impact on the public sphere: it was argued that Romanian elites played a key role in the 'nationalization' of European topics in the media, 'by engaging in a blame-avoidance game, by tacitly agreeing not to bring Europe forward on the public agenda' (Radu & Bârgăoanu, 2015, p. 163; see also Troncotă & Loy, 2018).

This first wave of disappointment connected to Romania's failed Schengen bid did not in fact affect citizens' trust in the EU in visible ways. A trend visible in the Eurobarometer data in Romania, as in other member states, is that levels of so-called 'Euro-enthusiasm' (or high trust in EU institutions) has been constantly decreasing since the country entered the EU in 2007. However, even with this visible decrease, Romanian citizens have continued to trust the EU more than EU average citizens do (with trust levels at 10–15 per cent above the EU28 average) (Troncotă & Loy, 2018). Scholars discuss these very high levels of trust in the EU as a sort of 'transfer of trust' in connection with very low trust in national institutions: the source of the Romanians' Euro-enthusiasm has national, rather than EU-related drivers (see more in Bankov & Ghergina, 2020). One of the most comprehensive studies on Romanian political elites' key narratives on Europeanization (Radu & Bârgăoanu, 2015) focuses on the 2014 European elections. This was the second round of European elections in which Romanian citizens had participated since the country's accession. One of the study's main conclusions is that 'Romanian elites – be them political, administrative, or media-related – declare themselves as euro-enthusiasts or euro-realists; at the same time, through a diversity of blame-avoiding games, they use the EU as a means of diffusing (national) responsibility for crisis-related hot topics, such as the implementation of austerity measures' (Radu & Bârgăoanu, 2015, p. 174). This is an element worth researching in the context of the current recent EU crises and events that have marked Romania–EU relations, to see if this trend is still present among Romanian political elites.

Another important study on the same topic based on Trenz's (2014) model of Europeanization narratives points to the fact that elite discourse in Romania between 2011 and 2015 underwent a gradual

transition from ‘triumphant’ to ‘banal Europeanization’ (Durach, 2016). This makes the case of Romania intriguing in terms of studying perceptions of elites, because support for the EU has consistently been high in Romania in the last decades. At the time of Romania’s accession to the EU in 2007, there was broad societal consensus about the benefits of EU membership for the country. Despite the exceptionality of the CVM mechanism and the ‘laggard’ label, political elites consistently remained strong Europhiles and there were insignificant signs of Euroscepticism among the Romanian political class (Radu & Bărgăoanu, 2015; Durach, 2016). In the classification of Krouwel and Abts (2007), Romanian elites could be placed in the first category – that of Euro-confidence (see [Table 3.2](#)) – and this situation has persisted for almost a decade.

Since the 2011 Schengen rejection, there have been only rare moments when Romanian political representatives in executive positions (government or presidency) have outspokenly criticized or opposed the EU. Such situations most notably occurred in 2012, between 2017 and 2019, and, most recently, after the latest veto against Romania’s accession to the Schengen zone in December 2022, when criticism of a member state’s veto (Austria) morphed into criticism of the EU itself. As shown in previous studies, the Future of Europe debates between 2017 and 2019 showed a lack of consensus among the political elites on important questions about the EU’s direction (Butnaru Troncotă & Ioniță, 2021). CEE countries were characterized by increasing challenges to the quality of democracy and by more critical voices against the European project. We have argued previously that Romania also had its anti-EU moment, when government figures clashed with EU representatives during the massive anti-corruption street protests between 2017 and 2019 – this being the only instance when Romania became closer to the group of EU ‘Eastern discontents’ particularly in the context of the Future of Europe debates and proposals for EU sanctions against backsliding member states (Butnaru Troncotă & Ioniță, 2022). In this tense context, other authors, such as Ciobanu et al. (2019), report that the proposal for the so-called ‘Rule of law budget conditionality’ had ‘further widened the East–West divide in the EU family’ (Ciobanu et al., 2019, p. 2; see also Volintiru et al., 2021, p. 100). Moreover, Martin-Russu (2022) draws attention to the problem of the reversal of anti-corruption reforms as providing sufficient evidence of a post-accession ‘de-Europeanization’ trajectory in the case of Romania. Making an in-depth assessment of Romania’s

reform inconsistencies caused by self-serving behaviour on behalf of the political elites, Martin-Russu (2022) concludes that broader and stronger compliance-inducing mechanisms and the extended conditionality for Romania did not serve EU's initial intentions and was used by political elites to protect their own private interests.

There are signs that the lasting Euro-enthusiasm shared by Romanian elites and public opinion is decreasing. Looking at the most recent Eurobarometer data (European Parliament, 2023), we see that in 2014, 68 per cent of Romanians considered EU membership a good thing, a significant 14 per cent more compared with the EU average of 54 per cent at the same time. The same report shows that between 2015 and 2022, there was a significant drop in Romanians' trust in the EU (see Figure 3.1). By 2020, Romania was still within the European average, but a reverse phenomenon took place over the subsequent three years whereby we can observe a fall in trust in the EU in Romania, while trust was rising on average in other EU countries. Despite this recent shift in citizens' trust in the EU, growing Euroscepticism, a phenomenon visible in numerous other EU member states, including in CEE countries – was not present in Romania until 2019. Researchers have pointed to more frequent markers of Euroscepticism present in Romanian public debates over the last years (Şcheul, 2020; Mişcoiu,

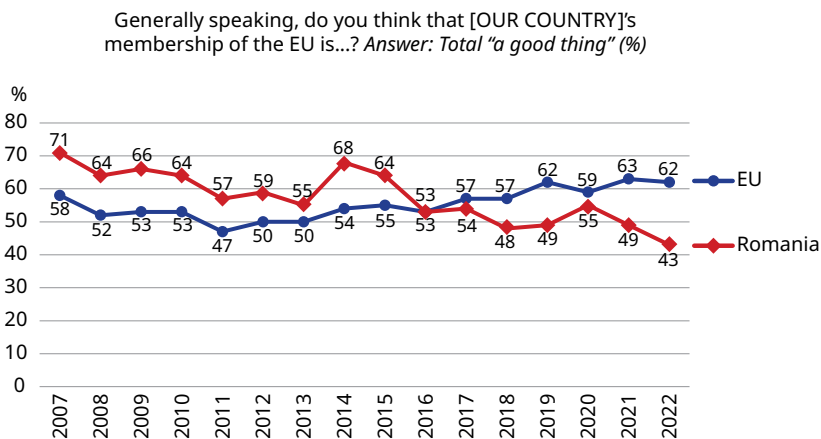


Figure 3.1: Differences of opinion on EU membership between Romania and the EU average.

Data source: Eurobarometer Data Service.

2021; Toma & Damian, 2021). In this context, George Simion, leader of the far-right AUR, began to discuss more widely the hypothesis of ‘Roexit’ – the idea that Romania should exit the EU (Simion, 2023). In this context, we decided to focus on a more in-depth analysis of the disappointment around the Schengen topic in Romania not merely as a source of EU contestation or Euroscepticism in itself but as ‘an indication of a growing political salience of EU affairs in the public sphere’ (Bouza, 2013). The overall critical conceptualization of the EU’s inner periphery will be discussed in this context, especially in relation to the fact that Croatia (which became a member more recently, in 2013) has joined the Schengen area while Romania and Bulgaria have not – a situation which may explain a ‘centre–periphery’ reading of European dynamics by Romanian political elites.

*‘Romania as the EU’s Periphery’ Narratives in Recent
Public Debates*

Ilie Șerbănescu’s book *Romania: A colony at Europe’s periphery* (2016) is relevant for the increasingly salient debate on the country’s role and position in the EU. The author, an economist and former minister, intervened in a context of disappointment over how Romania changed after EU accession. Moreover, this argument has often been used in recent years in populist and Eurosceptic arguments to induce the idea that the West (and the EU) have treated Romania as a periphery in the past and will continue to do so in the future (in association with nationalist arguments of victimization). The feeling of frustration associated with this argument has been used by both right-wing and left-wing intellectuals, as we will illustrate further. Leonard Orbán, presidential EU affairs advisor and former EU Commissioner, has argued in the context of the Future of Europe debates that Romania opposes the idea of a two-speed Europe because it would position Romania as a ‘less developed periphery’ (Orbán, 2017); another former EU Commissioner and the current president of Renew Europe, Dacian Cioloș, presented a similar argument in a radio interview, mentioning that Romania suffers from a ‘periphery complex’ and that it needs to get rid of this by opposing a two-speed Europe scenario (Cioloș, 2017); and diplomat Andrei Țârnea has argued in an opinionated essay that Romania needs to ‘escape from the periphery’ (Țârnea, 2017) – a very similar argument to that presented by other liberal thinkers and analysts from

Romania or abroad (Popescu, 2013; Balasz, 2013). The narrative was relaunched in the public sphere in the context of the failed Schengen bid in 2022, when several intellectuals wrote essays associating this event with a confirmation that Romania lies in the EU's periphery (Comănescu, 2022) and that the idea that it can escape the periphery is an illusion (Codiță, 2022).

This type of over-simplifying argument that the EU treats Romania as a 'colony' was debunked by the European External Action Service fact-checking platform EUvsDisinfo in 2018 as a strategy of disinformation, in the context of the massive anti-corruption street protests at the time (EEAS, 2008). This narrative had been taken up by the leaders of the Socialist Democratic Party, who criticized the European Commission for abusively intervening in Romania's domestic affairs. The same type of argument was again branded disinformation by a Romanian fact-checking platform in 2022 in the context of the criticism around the failed attempt to join the Schengen area, when the EU was seen 'as an imperial power that treats Romania as its colony' (Veridica, 2022).

This narrative was also explicitly used in public statements by a Romanian MEP, Eugen Tomac (EPP, the People's Movement Party, PMP), who decided to open an action against the Council of the European Union, at the Court of Justice of the European Union, in relation to the failure of Romania's bid to become a member of the Schengen area at the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 8 December 2022. Tomac explicitly made an association between this political decision and the idea of the EU periphery: 'we cannot accept for a single state to defy the Treaties of the European Union and the Schengen legislation and blocks, at the periphery of the European Union, a nation of over 20 million European citizens' (Agerpres, 2022). As we can see, the argument that Romania is in EU's inner periphery was presented not only in academic discourse connected to the metaphor of 'EU accession laggards' but also in national intellectual discourse and public debates in connection with moments of tension in Romania-EU relations. Being in the EU periphery was presented in these intellectual narratives as a negative condition that the country needs to overcome, either by its own will and decisions or by convincing others not to 'keep us' in the periphery, as was the context of the Schengen veto from 2022. We believe these elements of overall intellectual context are important in setting the scene before we discuss the findings of our research interviews.

The Ambivalent ‘Eurosceptics’: The Mixed Perspectives of Romanian Political Elites after the Second Schengen Rejection

The period 2020–2022 represented a critical point of conjunction for the EU and for many individual member states, including Romania. We began our discussions with politicians by commenting on this eventful period, marked by profound crises that affected Romania–EU relations in ambivalent ways: starting with the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly its devastating economic consequences but also the gestures of intra-EU solidarity in terms of both economic support for recovery and fast access to vaccines; and the beginning of Russia’s war in Ukraine, where Romania took a leading role together with Poland in the first months of the war by taking in Ukrainian refugees. The Romanian political elites, to the extent that the interviews provided insight into the meaning of the EU, seem to be ‘ambivalent Europhiles’. There are several attitudes that the interviews highlight. The most poignant characteristic is the ambiguous attitude of the Romanian politicians themselves, some of them directly involved either in accession procedures or in current European politics. To a large degree, the EU was not contested directly and the possibility of leaving the EU was not even a matter of theoretical debate. The advantages of being part of the EU, especially in economic terms, are, as many respondents argued, difficult to deny. We identified in three interviewees’ responses the ‘pragmatic’ perspective that associates the EU with cost–benefit calculations, and this became a source of ‘pragmatic Euroscepticism’ in light of Austria’s veto in December 2022, interpreted not only in terms of unfairness but also in terms of the very high costs that Romania had to endure for not being admitted to the Schengen area.

This ambiguity was not lost on the respondents, who resorted to power politics, national interest, or geopolitical explanations of the situation. The same explanations were also the hallmark of projections about Romania’s expected future development. The ambiguity is also illustrated by a rather common view among respondents: while the European project was not directly criticized, Romania was seen as punching below its weight, a rather subservient and not proactive member of the EU, incapable of living up to its own expectations. The periphery thus becomes more a political than a geographical one.

The peculiar position of Romanian elites on the nature and dynamics of European integration is, to a significant extent, a reflection of

its peculiar status within the EU: while a full-fledged member of the organization, Romania was until recently subjected to the impact of the CVM (European Commission, 2006) as well as being a candidate state for accession to the Schengen area and under the obligation imposed by the accession treaty to eventually adopt the euro (Official Journal of the European Union, 2005).

In the case of our study, several responses are relevant in demonstrating the paradoxical assumptions of the respondents. IN7, for example, argued that these conditions were discriminatory in relation to Romania, seen as 'almost a full member of the EU'. IN1 argued that 'for us, geography was an advantage and a disadvantage', remembering being taught in school that Romanians are 'a drop of Latinity in a Slavic Sea', whereas IN6 called the country an 'oasis of Latinism and peace'. The discrete geopolitical connotations remain therefore a part of political discourse – it is highly relevant that in this geopolitical framework, Balkan identity also features prominently: IN7, for example, sees Romania's post-accession failures as an expression of the incompatibility between the Balkan 'customs and influence' and the 'Western-type value system'.

Combating corruption therefore became not only an effort to devise policies and procedures meant to tackle the phenomenon. The elections of the 21st century, especially were dominated to a large extent by this issue, which became integral to the electoral divide between right-wing and left-wing political actors: the opponents of the SDP (Social Democratic Party), the main left-wing party, tried to portray it as the direct inheritor not only of the Romanian communist party but also of its corrupt practices and therefore inadequate to lead the fight against corruption. The fight against corruption became not only a matter of public policy but, symbolically, the expression of a self-performed ritual cleansing meant to ensure, in the end, full accession to the Western world, by joining NATO and the EU. The catchy title of a pop song captures the meaning of the process: 'We want a country like abroad'; IN5 argued, for example, that the Romanians of the 1980s were 'savages'. On the other hand, the opponents of several figures and measures associated with corruption-combating efforts, which remains on the public agenda and which resulted in the sentencing of several prominent politicians, argued that the heavy-handed effort, as well as the direct involvement in this process of the secret services, served only political interests and was directed against the most prominent voices of the

opposition. Consequently, the elimination of the CVM was not a matter of policy pertaining to accession, meant to be devised by political debate and compromise and enacted by a civil service. Combating corruption became a litmus test and an electoral slogan: successive presidential elections (2004, 2009, 2014, 2019) were won by the candidate expressing a strong anti-corruption message.

The other parties prominent on the Romanian political scene are the NLP (National Liberal Party), the SRU (Save Romania Union), the AUR, and the DAHR (the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania). The NLP has historically embraced a centre-right position, with increasingly prominent conservative accents, building its identity on the 19th- and early 20th-century importance of the party in Romanian history, trying to portray itself as a pro-market centre-right alternative to the SDP. The SRU originates within the NGO (non-governmental organization) environment and was intended to be a grassroots citizen initiative, replacing the dominant parties tainted by corruption. It has a strong anti-corruption and pro-EU message. The AUR represents, in a sense, the extreme of the political scene, embracing a populist, nationalist, and Eurosceptic discourse. It is the latest of a series of catch-all parties trying to operate on the fringes of the Romanian political scene. The DAHR, on the other hand, a centre-right party, carries less electoral weight but is an indispensable partner in coalition-forming in the fragmented and extremely competitive Romanian landscape (no prime minister has managed to serve two full terms in post-communist Romania).

The benefits of joining the EU in economic terms were clearly highlighted by the respondents. IN3, for example, believed that joining the EU had largely solved the problem of Romania's sluggish economic growth, as the level of income per capita has increased from 34 per cent to 75 per cent of the EU average. IN1 argued that the benefits are tangible – GDP has increased fourfold or fivefold, and Romanian citizens have benefited from the freedom of movement offered by the EU. IN1 concluded that the benefits of joining the EU are not a matter of perception. IN7 similarly argued that a cost–benefit analysis would reveal that Romania has gained because of joining the EU, an opinion shared by IN2.

There was also a perception that the Schengen accession, as well as the lifting of the CVM, was politicized by Western European states. Blocking Romania's accession to the Schengen area on account of the

migration problem or because of entrenched corrupt practices was seen as simply pandering to domestic audiences (IN7) or even as a Russian power play within the EU (IN8). The Romanian politicization of the issue was also present – with the inability to join the Schengen area or overcome the CVM seen as an expression of the low degree of professionalism resulting from cronyism and corruption (IN4), or of the lack of reform within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IN6).

It is also relevant to underline the tendency we observed in certain interviewers' answers to connect the contestation of EU decisions (as a generic form of Euroscepticism) with a healthy and constructive behaviour that 'would make our country's voice heard in the EU' (IN3). This in fact coincides with Krouwel and Abts' (2007) arguments that Euroscepticism is not necessarily a negative trait of the European public sphere but rather is a constructive element meant to keep citizens and elites engaged and connected to current topics on the EU's agenda. From this perspective, we observed that some respondents were not worried by the rise of Euroscepticism in Romania but would rather see it as a positive sign, implying that Romanian representatives being more 'demanding' in Brussels (as IN6 put it) is proof of the country assuming its position as a 'full EU member state'. Related to this, some interviewees underlined the fact that after 16 years of membership, Romania should use its veto power to block certain EU decisions in the Council and that being more critical of the EU would mean that 'we know how to defend our interests and to act as "mature" member states, not as EU puppets' (IN8). In this context, it is important to note that several respondents believe that Romania has failed to live up to its potential as a member of the EU. The puzzling fact is that this opinion seemed to be shared across the ideological or political divides in Romania. The explanations offered were varied but tended to concur with the idea that Romania has no clear strategy within the EU and fails to achieve the expected results. IN5, for example, argued that Romania's position in the EU was a 'timid one'. Another opinion was that Romania has missed out on opportunities because it has failed to understand that the EU members are in a competition for resources and to manage the evolution in the Berlin–Paris dynamic (IN7). On the other hand, at the Eurosceptic end of the spectrum, Romanian Euroscepticism was seen simply as an expression of Romania's inability to play a more assertive role, defending its interests, within the larger scheme of European politics (IN8), a point of view shared by

IN1 (again, this opinion seemed to be shared across different ideological positions, from centre-right to left-wing political actors). Some were very categorical in their assessment: IN2 argued that Romania's foreign policy since accession has lacked consistence and coherence; IN3 emphasized that the conditions imposed on Romania can be seen as a result of a lack in diplomatic and negotiating skills, whereas the difficulty in overcoming the CVM and joining the Schengen area can be seen as the result of a 'poorly administered state' (IN5). IN6 was of the opinion that the negotiators lacked 'uprightness'.

In connection with the war in Ukraine and how it has influenced Romania's position in the EU, it is difficult to ignore the geopolitical interpretation, with some respondents highlighting that the proximity of Russia and the willingness of several EU members to cooperate with the Kremlin only enhances Romania's sense of vulnerability (IN7).

Next, the analysis will try to place the views expressed throughout the interviews into the categories of Euroscepticism discussed earlier. It is difficult to argue, for the most part, that the respondents fully embrace a coherent strain of Euroscepticism. Nevertheless, the variety in the discourse of the same politician and of the same party is relevant to identifying some of the dominant strains in the political discourse of the Romanian political elites, a discourse which is intersubjectively connected to the wider social trends.

IN1's opinions included which fit within the instrumental Euroscepticism category: 'I believe that in life the world treats you as you sell yourself. If you know how to sell yourself at your true value, the world will treat you the same.' Their perception of double standards sometimes veered towards Euroscepticism, as in Kopecký and Mudde's definition: 'Romanians feel like second-rate citizens. And then any such gesture somehow reinforces their perception that they are second-class citizens, that they do not have the same rights, that they are not treated the same, and that's it, it's normal to rebel and take a stand.' IN1 also concluded that the financial benefits of membership are paramount, fitting within Krouwel and Abts' Eurosceptic category: 'first and foremost it is about the economic dividends, the European money that entered Romania.'

On the other hand, IN2 highlighted the negative trade-off that integration has brought – characteristic of instrumental Euroscepticism ('In my opinion, I don't think that our country had very big advantages after joining the European Union; this does not mean that I am against

it, but I am simply making an analysis as objectively as possible') and veering sometimes towards Euro-distrust ('The only plus that I could still bring up is the fact that, indeed, the Roma people, as citizens of this country, were somehow allowed to enter the European Union') or even Euro-cynicism ('How come Hungary and Poland know how to pursue their national interest in the relationship with the European Union while Romania is practically non-existent?'). Other responses also highlighted an attitude of Euro-rejection: 'I feel as if I belong to a country on the African continent, where I am practically under Dutch rule or a colony of France, where all kinds of minerals are extracted, all kinds of resources are exploited.'

IN3 highlighted the economic benefits of belonging to the EU, in a manner consistent with instrumental Euroscepticism: 'As far as Romania is concerned, the European Union was considered a miraculous formula for solving the problems related to falling behind in the last decades. From a certain point of view, mainly economic, this expectation, objectively speaking, is fulfilled.' They nonetheless concluded, in a Eurosceptic manner, that 'Romania and Bulgaria remained as a kind of buffer between an extended West with the Visegrad Group and the Soviet Union, respectively Russia later'. In relation to the third taxonomy, IN3's answers fell within the Eurosceptic category: he concluded, in a manner highlighting the relevance of liminality as an interpretive concept, that 'we still have the mentality of a country that wants to join the European Union, not of a member state of the European Union.'

There were instances where some form of Euroscepticism as highlighted by Kopecký and Mudde or by Krouwel and Abts coexisted with the most Euro-enthusiastic views: 'Unfortunately, according to the perception conveyed to me by representatives from many states, Romania tries not to have any kind of positioning, opting for the role of follower, that is, we are not dissonant, but initiatives are almost completely absent' (IN4). Even under these conditions, there is still room for Romania to act in a more transactional matter: 'Romania was in the big chorus, the correct position, but we did not monetize in a diplomatic sense this opportunity of geographical positioning that would have allowed us to have the role of the member states, of the Baltic states which are much more present in the subject.' IN5 shared the Euro-enthusiastic perspective of IN4: 'The biggest achievement of Romania in these 32 years of democracy is the accession to the European Union' – a point of view also shared by IN10: 'whoever speaks

ill of the EU does not do so based on evidence'. The evidence IN10 pointed to, however, consists largely of increasing economic indicators. IN5 also shared the views of IN4 regarding playing a more prominent role in the EU: 'I think we had a timid approach, let's not disturb, let's not upset. We had no strategy and no vision.'

Sometimes, Euroscepticism (as defined by the first and third taxonomies) accompanied Euro-enthusiasm and this was the major source of ambivalence that we observed in almost all interviews. IN6, for example, complained that 'this perverse game that Austria has played now, I don't know if on its own or in combination with someone else, has endangered European cohesion'. The implicit hint is that Austria's decision to vote against Romania's access to the Schengen area is a favour to Russian discourse in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. The development of the EU was nevertheless not a cause of excitement: 'Beyond Austria's arguments, there is already a reluctance regarding what was happening in Brussels because of these acute bureaucratization [sic] that the EU is registering.' IN6 pushed the transactional view to its logical extreme: 'beyond sitting with our hand outstretched to the EU, we must wait to play on an equal footing, because sitting at the boot of the Russian or at the hand of Brussels is not a correct attitude.'

IN7 also made clear a Eurosceptic perspective and instrumental Euroscepticism: 'Because the European Union ... should have taught us two very clear things: the benefits are obvious and overall, the cost-benefit ratio we reached is an obvious plus; on the other hand, we should have been a bit more realistic, should have understood that the power games and the competition for development resources, also represent things that we weren't used to or that we wouldn't have thought of'. Ambivalence regarding the EU was made quite clear by IN7: 'the European Union is an elite club, but unfortunately, as we discovered, it is not necessarily a club of angels'. IN8 also highlighted that a more assertive perspective is needed: 'I think we've got used to this reactive way of ours, nothing proactive. Yes, reactive, if you look in general at the way in which we express ourselves, in general, on foreign policy, on discussions about the European Union ... Romania also supported this, Romania also did this, Romania also supports what I support.'

IN9 articulated perhaps the solitary arguments of Euro-rejection and political Euroscepticism: 'There is a catastrophic Europe, there is a Europe of lights, and there is a Europe of material civilization that we see.' He added, in a Euro-cynical manner, that the future needs

'a Europe of nations, not of populations,' concluding that 'the United Nations of Europe, this is how we will disappear. By will and conscience.'

Looking at Tables 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5, where we have positioned all interviewees in relation to the main three taxonomies of attitudes towards the EU as defined in the theoretical section, several conclusions can be drawn. While the picture painted by the interviews is a complex one, most respondents espoused either Euro-enthusiastic or Eurosceptic points of view, as per Kopecký and Mudde's taxonomy. Additionally, the transactional view of the EU of several respondents seems to fit better within the instrumental Euroscepticism category. It is also important to highlight that even though overall, the opinions expressed during the interviews covered quite a range in Krouwel and Abts' categorization of the brands of Euroscepticism, the Romanian voices were predominantly in a range stretching from Euro-confidence to Euro-cynicism.

Table 3.3: Taxonomy 1, based on Kopecký and Mudde's (2002) 'Typology of party positions on Europe'

Euro-enthusiasts	Eurosceptics	Euro-pragmatists	Euro-rejects
Support both the idea and practice of European integration	Support the idea but oppose the practice	Oppose the idea but support the practice	Oppose both the idea and the practice
IN4, IN5, IN6, IN8	IN1, IN3, IN4, IN6, IN8, IN10	-	IN2, IN9

Source: authors' construction based on Kopecký and Mudde (2002, pp. 302-303).

Table 3.4: Taxonomy 2, based on the categorization of Krouwel and Abts (2007)

Political Euroscepticism	Instrumental Euroscepticism
A preference for national over EU prerogatives in certain, if not all, key policy areas	Cost-benefit terms, with its adepts emphasizing the negative consequences of EU membership
IN1, IN4, IN5, IN9	IN2, IN3, IN6, IN7, IN8, IN10

Source: authors' construction based on Krouwel and Abts (2007).

Table 3.5: Taxonomy 3, based on Krouwel and Abts' (2007) 'Sliding scale of European discontent'

Euro-confidence	Euro-scepticism	Euro-distrust	Euro-cynicism	Euro-alienation
IN4, IN5	IN1, IN3, IN4, IN5, IN7, IN10	IN2, IN6,	IN2, IN9	IN9

Source: authors' construction based on Krouwel and Abts (2007, p. 261).

Inasmuch as the peripheral dimension is concerned (part of the last question in all interviews), the perspectives were mixed. During the interviews all respondents had strong reactions (mostly negative) to the concept of an 'EU periphery', and almost all of them asked for a definition of the term. Then they were asked to provide their own understanding of the term, and they all associated it with negative aspects of inferiority. Even for those who were very critical of Romania's own positions and problems, the associations of the term 'periphery' seemed to be something that created discomfort. When it came to Romania's role in the EU as connected with the perspective of the 'periphery', perceptions were mixed. On the one hand, pleading for a more proactive role, IN8 argued that 'Romanians have got accustomed to being treated as peripheral members of the EU', and in some way this position was 'normalized', meaning that 'we are a periphery, so we are treated as a periphery'. IN1 conceded that Romanians 'feel as second-rate citizens', whereas IN2 believed that Romania's position in the EU was marginal before entering EU and remained thus even after joining. The same opinion was voiced by IN4, who decried the fact that while Romania joins the 'right positions' within the EU, it tends to do this more as a reflex rather than as a matter of conviction. Alternatively, Romania lacks vision (IN5) or 'is not taken seriously' and 'doesn't play any cards at the moment' (IN6). More emphatically, IN6 argued that the country seems to confront a 'handicap that makes you keep your head down, makes you servile and lacking a backbone and dignity in international negotiations'.

On the other hand, the geopolitical discourse can be turned on its head, especially when connected to Romania's role during the war in Ukraine. It is precisely because there are so many geography-related challenges in the region that Romania cannot be peripheral (IN7),

especially not at NATO's eastern flank. IN7, IN6, and IN10 were all keen to say that Romania needs to live up to its potential of becoming 'a regional hub', especially in terms of providing security in the current context. Moreover, IN4 believed that Romania's geographical position needs to be 'monetized' in more visible ways, including in the EU, not only in NATO. Almost all respondents defined the periphery as a negative place, attached to its negative connotations, and argued that Romania needs to 'escape' that position. At the same time, most of them took an ambivalent position, criticizing the fact that others treat Romania as an 'EU periphery' and considering that this is unfair, but also criticizing Romanian representatives for 'acting' like the country is a periphery and not defending its interests in the EU.

Conclusions

The first 15 years of EU membership were marked by only a few clashes and striking disagreements between EU officials and Romanian authorities. With some exceptions, there were no conclusive signs of Euroscepticism, within wider public opinion or among the political elites. However, the most recent Eurobarometer data shows that starting in 2020, the first signs of Euroscepticism are visible in a striking decline of citizens' trust in the EU. The views of the political elites matter, because they reflect the shifts of public opinion in each member state. While EU topics are often portrayed as secondary or irrelevant to Romania's domestic politics, Eurobarometer data shows a 'diffuse discontent' with EU institutions and EU membership over the last three years (Krouwel & Abts 2007), the sources of which have not been investigated in scholarly debates. In this chapter we aimed to investigate whether we are witnessing more visible forms of Euroscepticism and contestation of the EU in Romania. We argue that Romania's failed Schengen bid in December 2022, together with the disillusionment stemming from previous EU crises and the more active presence of a populist far-right party (the AUR) starting in 2020, have created a favourable symbolic space for discursive representations that enforce Romania's image as one of the EU's inner peripheries. The analysis of the interviews highlights that the political, rather than geographical, peripherality of Romania has in recent years become a political issue, and it is connected to a 'diffuse discontent' with the EU that became

much more visible in the public sphere after the rejection of Romania's second attempt to join Schengen.

In the aftermath of this second failed attempt, and one year after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Romanian elites are far from the image of enthusiastic and open supporters of the EU and of further integration. Representatives from the major four political parties highlighted that perceptions of the EU among Romania's elites are fragmented and ambivalent. The picture painted by the interviews is representative of a more nuanced view of the EU and of the integration process than was present at the onset of Romania's path towards the EU or at the onset of EU accession. Further research is needed to deeper explore the sources of this disaffection with the EU and EU integration. The analysis highlights that the change is connected with the deception manifested in relation to the failures to pass the internal hurdles of the EU, such as accession to the Schengen area or the Eurozone. Furthermore, it is just as relevant that the political views of the interviewees do not form part of a consistent body of ideas and policies regarding these issues: it is not inconsequential that representatives of the same political party or even a single respondent can sometimes embrace two conflicting ideas. Moreover, it is noteworthy that a significant proportion of the respondents, across the political spectrum, adopt a highly transactional view of the EU and EU politics, seen as a competition for funding, visibility, respect, and influence, sometimes disparaging Romania's lack of success in pursuing a bolder course of action. The specific nature of the transactional course of action that Romania should take is far from clear from the interviews. Nonetheless, several of them call for a more assertive role to be played by the country, and by the elites as well. The tone and the specifics of the interventions is also noteworthy: while calling for a more national-oriented and smarter policy within the EU, many of the respondents blame political elites or systems in a manner strikingly like the media discourse, disregarding their own position of power and influence: elite discourse thus overlaps with the regular discourse on the EU. The Romanian elites have positioned themselves as legitimate representatives of a wider social trend which reflects not only the experience of EU membership but also the benefits and the disillusion associated with it. Responding to the major questions this book seeks to answer, it can be ascertained that the peripheral status of Romania and its implications are at the same time acknowledged and

contested – in a sense, their social consequences exist, and Romanian politicians want to overcome them.

The proximity of the 2024 elections, the shifting discourse on Romania's status in the EU, and the existence of a dedicated populist actor are aspects which require further research and investigation. It remains to be seen whether these dynamics will feed a downward spiral from a healthy dose of Euroscepticism to a more diffuse feeling of discontent akin to Euro-cynicism. Future research, if the Schengen veto persists, is needed in order to see whether these 'ambivalent Eurosceptic' attitudes in Romanian politics might become more extreme forms of contestation such as the Euro-alienation Krouwel and Abts (2007) discuss, and whether a 'Roexit' scenario, marked by a principled and ideological opposition to the European integration, becomes more than a new discursive theme.

Notes

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Appendix

Table A3.1: Interviews with Members of Selected Political Parties in Romania, organized by the Authors in Person in Bucharest

Interview code	Gender	Age bracket	Political party affiliation	Political ideology	Date
IN1	F	21–40	Socialist Democratic Party (PSD in Romanian); governing party	Left wing	01.02.2023
IN2	M	41–60	PSD; governing party; former member of the European Parliament	Left wing	02.02.2023
IN3	F	21–40	Save Romania Union (USR in Romanian); opposition party; former minister	Centre right	03.02.2023
IN4	M	41–60	USR; opposition party; former minister	Centre right	07.02.2023
IN5	M	41–60	National Liberal Party (PNL in Romanian); governing party	Centre right	07.02.2023
IN6	M	41–60	The Roma Party (Partida Romilor in Romanian)	representative of ethnic minority	07.02.2023
IN7	M	41–60	Socialist Democratic Party (PSD in Romanian); governing party; former minister	Left wing	07.02.2023
IN8	M	over 61	Former member of PSD; former minister; retired	Left wing	08.02.2023
IN9	M	21–40	PNL; governing party	Centre right	13.02.2023
IN10	M	over 61	Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR in Romanian); opposition party	Right wing (with elements of far right)	01.03.2023

PART II

The Peripherality of EU Accession Candidates

CHAPTER 4

Cha(lle)nging Peripherality

‘Critical Expectation Gaps’ and EU–Ukraine Relations in the Post-Euromaidan Perceptions of Ukrainian Political Elites

Roman Kalytchak

Ivan Franko University, Lviv

Andriy Tyushka

College of Europe, Natolin

Abstract

Drawing primarily on political elite interviews, this chapter enquires into Ukrainian parliamentarians’ discourse and framings of EU–Ukraine integration dynamics over the past three decades and their joint response to the continued Russian war of aggression since 2014, as well as the handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Analytically framed using the ‘critical expectation gaps’ approach, this study explores how wide or narrow the perceived gap is between Ukrainian political elites’ hopes and expectations of EU engagement and the actual dynamics

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of the EU's performance – and why. To determine whether and how the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 has impacted strategically critical issues (Ukraine's EU accession and defence against Russian aggression) and Ukraine's hopes and expectations of the EU's performance, this research also incorporates insights from Ukraine's official discourse and relevant scholarly analyses.

Keywords: EU–Ukraine integration, strategic marginality, Russian war of aggression, EU war response, critical expectation gaps

Introduction

Ukraine's pro-European drive has long been a truism, born out of the country's three democratic revolutions since regaining independence. The 2013–2014 Euromaidan revolution cemented this position as a widely accepted belief among policy-makers and academia alike. However, the political elites' stance on the matter has remained less straightforward and certainly under-researched, which is unexpected given that EU integration has always been an elite-driven process. Prior to the onset of the full-scale Russian aggression and Ukraine's fast bid for EU membership, it was often assumed – if not taken for granted – that there was a political consensus on Ukraine's European integration. Despite the constitutionalizing of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations in mid-2019, the political scene in Ukraine's parliament has displayed indications of anything but solid consensual pursuit of the charted integration course. Partly, this can be attributed to the country's vibrant political pluralism and internal power struggles; partly, and arguably, this ambiguity and suspicion (if not contestation) vis-à-vis EU institutions and their politics has been the result of mounting challenges (from Russian hybrid aggression to the COVID-19 health pandemic) and the 'critical expectation gaps' (or 'hope–performance gap', as put by Chaban & Elgström, 2022) that has opened up, stemming from the mismatch between Ukraine's EU accession ambitions and the EU's hesitant (if not reluctant) reaction. Seeing Ukraine as part and parcel of Europe, one of its many centres, Ukraine's political elites found it difficult to remain on the political and institutional periphery of the EU for long, while strongly manifesting identitarian centrality. The more Ukraine had to struggle on its way to the cherished EU membership, the less EUphoric – and more Euro-realist (if

not Eurosceptic) – would become their stance vis-à-vis EU institutions and politics.

Drawing on this observable hypothesis and the edited volume's overall focus on changing perceptions of the EU and a reconceptualization of the 'EU periphery', this chapter enquires into Ukraine's elite perceptions of the EU, the wider Europe, and Ukraine's place within them over the past decade following the 2013–2014 Euromaidan revolution. Using the concepts of peripherality and marginality as reference points in discourse analysis, the chapter pursues a qualitative narrative enquiry into the official political discourse in Ukraine since 2014, also drawing on 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of the full spectrum of political forces in the then-current parliament of September 2021 to February 2022. Particular attention will be paid to possible discursive and narrative shifts since 24 February 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion of the country began, followed within a matter of days by Ukraine's EU membership bid. This dynamic perspective is intended to capture the evolving and undoubtedly challenging – or cha(lle)nging – peripherality status of the country, as well as related shifts in patterns of contestation-during-integration on Ukraine's way from peripherality to centrality in EU integration (geo) politics.

In what follows, the chapter first presents the analytical and methodological framework and contextualizes Ukraine's political scene, focusing on the post-Euromaidan parliamentary forces and their manifestos on the country's European integration. Then, after conceptually rethinking the notions of peripherality and marginality, the chapter provides a parliamentary discourse analysis of Ukraine's place in Europe (including its stance on the idea of being an EU/European 'periphery'). Finally, the concluding part of the chapter contrasts Ukrainian MPs' discourse on the country's hopes/expectations and the EU's performance in three critical cases: Russia's continued war in Ukraine; the COVID-19 crisis; and Ukraine's EU accession.

Analytical and Methodological Framework

Our analysis of Ukrainian political elites' post-Euromaidan perceptions of the EU, the EU's relations with Ukraine, and crucially, the Union's performance in responding to various crises – and the Russian continued war of aggression against Ukraine – is designed as a

qualitative study framed by the ‘critical expectation gaps’ approach, which essentially draws on political elite interviews and discourse analysis, as presented below.

‘Critical Expectation Gaps’: Hope, Performance, and the Perceived Gap In Between

The (hi)story of the EU’s relations with its Eastern neighbours centres on the discussion of (persisting, even if sometimes false) expectations, (mis)perceptions, and (dis)enchancements. More than in any other ‘EU periphery’, the EU’s engagement is often expected – even invited – by its Eastern European neighbours, especially at the level of civil society. At the political level, too, Eastern European elites (especially in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia) often expect EU engagement, especially in crisis or conflict situations – that is, (regional) security matters in the broadest sense (see, for example, Chaban & Lucarelli, 2021; Delcour & Wolczuk, 2021; Maurer et al., 2023). Bilateral EU–Eastern neighbours’ relations, and EU–Ukraine relations in particular, are also fraught with many expectations, some of which arise from misperceptions and not always rational (pragmatic) endeavours (Molchanov, 2004; Vieira, 2021). Hopes and expectations, on the one hand, and performance, on the other, define much of EU–Eastern neighbours dynamics and can also form a seminal (synthetic) analytical approach for the current study. Having added the focus on the ‘gap’ (between hopes/expectations and performance) as a bridging element and a variable on its own, Chaban and Elgström (2022) developed a compound analytical framework that captures this ‘trinity’ of factors. In their ‘critical expectation gaps’ approach, which is a twist on (or shaping of) the famous ‘capability–expectations gap’ advanced by Christofer Hill in the early 1990s (Hill, 1993), Chaban and Elgström (2022, pp. 3–5) conceptualize critical expectation gaps as a cumulative ‘indicator’ of the depth and intensity of the rupture between hopes/expectations and the perceived performance of the EU, also fine-tuning thereby an understanding of external actors’ perceptions vis-à-vis the EU – that is, self-perceptions and those of the EU as part of their ‘we’ or indeed their significant ‘Other’. This compound perceptual approach to foreign policy analysis and discourse analysis fits perfectly with the research agenda of this chapter, as it allows the disclosure of Ukrainian political elites’ self-perceptions (ideas of Ukraine’s Europeanness, belongingness to

European/Western civilization, and eagerness for political inclusion in Europe's political union), those of the EU, and EU–Ukraine relations at large (Ukraine as the EU's 'periphery', neighbour, or member in the making) as well as in more specific contexts (Ukraine's hopes for/expectations of EU accession perspective as well as the EU's crisis/war response). In what follows, this chapter will probe for the existence of 'critical expectation gaps' across the dimensions mentioned.

Methodology: Political Manifestos, Elite Interviews, and Discourse Analysis

Methodologically, the study draws on a qualitative research strategy involving content and discourse analysis of manifold primary sources, including Ukrainian political parties' electoral programmes or manifestos, publicly available interviews, and op-eds by Ukrainian elite representatives, as well as representative semi-structured interviews with members of the Ukrainian parliament (MPs). Political discourse analysis and narrative enquiry are deployed as key methods for text processing and mining data from the recorded interviews. On selected (quantifiable) aspects of the study, content analysis also involved the use of CAQDAS (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software), namely Atlas.ti, to enable both computer-assisted coding of the text and primary analysis of the quantitative data mined from the studied texts.

We conducted 14 semi-structured interviews¹ with identical questions, with a purposive and largely representative sample of parliamentarians from all of the political parties represented in the ninth parliamentary convocation: Holos ('The Voice'), Sluga Narodu (SN, or 'The Servant of the People'), Yevropeyska Solidarnist (YES, or 'European Solidarity'), Opozytsiyna Platforma – Za Zhyttia (OPZZH, or 'Oppositional Platform – For Life'), and the All-Ukrainian Association Batkivshchyna ('Fatherland'). This sample allowed us to capture the views of elites that have largely (except the newly formed Sluga Narodu) remained in power as Ukraine's lawmakers since the 2013–2014 revolution, albeit some of them entered the new term of the parliament under renamed party-political forces. Therefore, our sampling method is purposive in that we sought to (1) interview three members of each political party from both the ruling and the opposition forces (thereby controlling for bias and divergent views of party members),

and (2) include in the sample only those Ukrainian MPs who are directly involved in European and Euro-Atlantic affairs *ex officio* (as chairs or members of respective parliamentary committees, including EU–Ukraine joint bodies, or wider European inter-parliamentary formations).

All interviews were recorded from 24 September 2021 to 7 February 2022, shortly before the start of the full-scale Russian invasion on 24 February 2022 (for the detailed list of interviews conducted, see Appendix, [Table A4.1](#)). Evidently, the war factor has altered both domestic and international constellations, affecting not only the views of MPs but also their presence, as some factions (namely the OPZZH party) were ousted from political life. Ukraine’s status vis-à-vis the EU also formally changed, as the country applied for EU membership immediately after the outbreak of the war and was granted the status of ‘EU candidate’ on 23 June 2022. Thus, there has been a noticeable shift in both Ukraine’s domestic environment and its relations with the EU. Nonetheless, or perhaps particularly because of this swift change of the milieu and the increasing politicization of the issues at stake, the rhetoric and positions adopted by Ukrainian MPs before the start of the full-scale war are a valuable source of information on whether EU membership was a consensual (or contentious) matter in Ukraine, whether there was any predisposition to Euroscepticism in the country, and whether all this was related to how the EU responded to manifold crises and the war it faced.

In other words, the wealth of qualitative primary data collected through elite interviews provides valuable insights into the state of political perceptions, hopes, and expectations of the EU and EU–Ukraine relations among Ukrainian lawmakers before the war drums sounded and wartime electoral dramas began to unwind.

Political discourse and narrative analysis were also used, to uncover political elite perceptions (attitudes, hopes, expectations, evaluative assessments) of the EU, Ukraine’s European integration dynamics, and the EU’s crisis/war responses to date. Not only interviews but also party manifestos and publicly available interviews with or publications of Ukraine’s wider political elites (president, government, foreign ministers) served as primary sources for discourse and narrative inquiry. Recent analyses showed that parties’ political manifestos are a good starting point for studying discourse on Europe and European integration (Kiratli, 2016; Raunio & Wagner, 2020). CAQDAS-based analysis

helped to reinforce the discourse and narrative inquiry by quantifying qualitative textual data, allowing for original insights into cross-interview political positions, as well as comparative and clustered analyses of inter- and intra-party views on the issues studied herein.

Ukraine's Post-Euromaidan Political Landscape through the Prism of European Integration

Ukraine's dynamic and pluralistic political milieu (Way, 2015) has garnered widespread recognition for its role in sustaining the country's functioning democracy. The Ukrainian parliament is largely credited for this achievement. Despite Ukraine's semi-presidential form of government (shifting between president-parliamentarism in 1996–2005 and 2010–2014 and premier-presidentialism in 2006–2010 and since 2014; for details, see Tyushka, 2018), the parliament has been instrumental in maintaining the legitimacy of power during some of the country's most turbulent times. Its dedication to legalism was crucial in ensuring free and fair presidential elections in 2004. It acted as a resolute defender of legal and institutional continuity when President V. Yanukovich fled the country and Russia seized Crimea, followed by the hybrid invasion of Donbas. Even amid Russia's ruthless aggression, the parliament ensured the state's smooth functioning and cemented its role as a safeguard of democracy.

The vibrancy and dynamism of the political landscape, characterized by the participation of a wide range of political parties in regular parliamentary elections, are considered key factors contributing to the robustness of the democratic governance system and the emergence of a pluralistic society (Karmazina, 2020). This dynamic has been seen as an essential component of Ukraine's European path, setting it apart from many other post-Soviet states. While the European choice has, until recently, been loosely and variably defined, its core element has consistently been the pursuit of full membership in the EU.

Importantly, the matter of European integration has not been a contested subject in Ukraine, in contrast to the issue of NATO membership (Larrabee, 2007; Lieven & Trenin, 2013). There has been a broad consensus among the major political parties, except for the Communists, on the need to foster closer ties with the EU and on Ukraine's eventual accession to it. Moreover, President V. Yanukovich and his political force, the Party of Regions, played an instrumental role in preparing

and completing the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU. The Party of Regions articulated its clear stance on Ukraine's accession to the EU in its 2010 election manifesto, and it maintained this position until the autumn of 2013 (Party of Regions, 2010).

The AA, while seen by the EU as an alternative to full membership, was perceived in Ukraine as a significant step towards EU accession. This development provoked an aggressive response from Russia, which saw it as a point of no return for Ukraine's participation in any of the post-Soviet integration projects. The Kremlin resorted to pressure tactics which resulted in President V. Yanukovich's decision to back out of the EU–Ukraine Agreement in November 2013, triggering a fierce backlash in Ukrainian society that eventually coalesced into the Euromaidan revolution, a resounding rejection of post-Soviet authoritarianism and a definitive choice for Europe (Zelinska, 2017; Oliynyk & Kuzio, 2021).

The 2013–2014 revolutionary period marked a critical juncture in Ukraine's history and left a deep and lasting impact on the country's subsequent development, as evidenced by the 2014 and 2019 parliamentary elections. Despite having over three hundred political parties, Ukraine is dominated by a relatively small number of political forces that have managed to pass the electoral threshold, the number of which changes over time. For example, in the 2014 parliamentary elections, only six political forces passed the 5 per cent threshold. As Klymenko notes, the then swiftly formed parliamentary coalition 'declared itself as being pro-European, pro-Western, and reform-oriented' (Klymenko, 2018, p. 444).

One of the features of the post-Euromaidan period was the dominance of centrist political parties supporting EU membership (Gardner, 2014), with a conspicuous absence of far-right or far-left factions in the legislature. The omission of the Communist Party was particularly notable, as it was the only parliamentary force that consistently opposed European integration (Tost, 2014) and advocated Ukraine's participation in Russia-led integration projects.²

The 2019 parliamentary elections marked a significant moment in the country's history, as Ukrainians decisively rejected the traditional political elites by supporting a new political force aligned with President V. Zelensky. Of the five parties that secured parliamentary representation, four became opposition parties. The Holos faction emerged as the smallest among the parliamentary parties, with representation

of just 5.83 per cent. The faction pledged its unconditional support for Ukraine's eventual membership in the EU, stressing the tangible benefits of such a step for development and modernization (Politychna Partiya Holos, 2019). YES, led by former president P. Poroshenko, became the fourth-largest force (8.11 per cent). The party emphasizes its contributions to signing and implementing the AA, facilitating visa-free travel with the EU, and enshrining provisions on EU membership in the constitution (Politychna Partiya Yevropeyska Solidarnist, 2019). Batkivshchyna, led by the iconic figure of Y. Tymoshenko, Ukraine's first female prime minister, secured the third-largest number of votes (8.19 per cent). Like the two previous factions, the party strongly supports the European integration agenda, with a particular focus on social policies, citing European standards (Vseukrayinske Obyednannia Batkivshchyna, 2019). The OPZZH emerged as the sole force to oppose European integration, securing second place with 13.06 per cent of the votes. Its electoral base was mainly located in the industrial cities of the south east, where it attracted a diverse conglomerate of voters, including former president Yanukovich's supporters, communists, and pro-Kremlin sympathizers. This inclination is reflected in the party's ideology, which revolves around a confluence of populism, ambiguous Euroscepticism, and pro-Russian sentiments. Although a significant number of its members had been affiliated with the Party of Regions, which had previously supported EU accession, the party's ideology shifted fundamentally towards Euroscepticism (Politychna Partiya Opozytsiyna Platforma – Za Zhyttia, 2019). The true winner of the elections was the political force of President V. Zelensky, Sluga Narodu or SN. With a majority of the votes (43.16 per cent) in most regions, it secured the ability to unilaterally form a government. The party was formed shortly before the elections and has a rather nebulous and vague ideology, making it difficult to classify, but it can be regarded as a centrist political force (Chaisty and Whitefield, 2022). Its pre-election manifesto offered limited information on European integration, mentioning the need to implement the AA and expand cooperation with the EU (Politychna Partiya Sluga Narodu, 2019). However, the party has since adopted an explicitly pro-European stance.

Overall, the issue (and promise) of European integration is positively framed – albeit with varying degrees of prominence and salience – in the political programmes of all but one of the current political forces in parliament (see [Figure 4.1](#)).

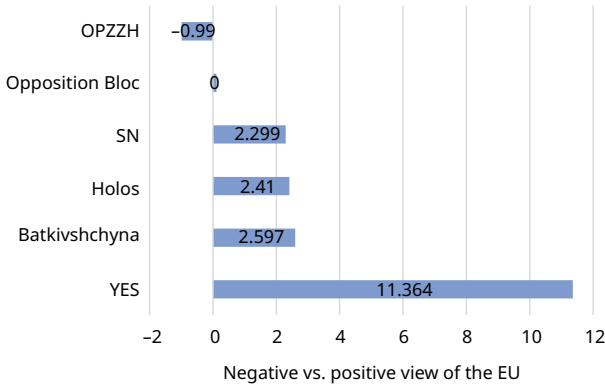


Figure 4.1: Ukraine's Political Parties: Perceptions of the EU in 2019 National Election Manifestos

Source: Authors' illustration based on data from Manifesto Project (<https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu>).

The only ambiguously 'Eurosceptic' party in the Ukrainian parliament, therefore, was OPZZH, the offspring of the former Party of Regions and its ex-leader/ex-president V. Yanukovych. Following the start of Russia's aggression, the faction dissolved amid allegations that some members had committed acts of state treason favouring Russia, while others simply fled Ukraine.

Russia's full-scale military invasion in February 2022 substantially, slowed down, if not completely halted, the previously vibrant and sometimes turbulent political life in Ukraine. All political forces, including some members of the OPZZH party who had stayed in Ukraine rather than fleeing to Russia, united in their efforts to defend the nation from Russia's threats. The Ukrainian parliament began its work under martial law, and the current members are expected to remain in office until the state of war is lifted, during which time parliamentary elections are forbidden.

Defining and Defying 'Peripherality'

The notion of 'periphery' is both deceptively simple, as it is intuitively comprehensible, and analytically complex, as it denotes various constellations and forms of interrelationships, often also being

normatively loaded. As Özçelik et al. posit in [the introductory chapter](#) to this edited volume, ‘periphery’ is a multidimensional and multifaceted concept which, moreover, finds itself in flux in times of significant political shifts and shocks of various sorts, including crises and wars, and can entail core–periphery relationships (economic peripherality), insider–outsider relationships (political peripherality), differences in development more generally (politico-economic or developmental peripherality), and, more conventionally, the symbolic belongingness to a geographic area or entity – that is, core/margin/otherness relationships (geographical peripherality). Using the EU as a reference point for identifying and assessing the state of ‘peripherality’, it is quite challenging to speak of fixed meanings and understandings, not least as the political and economic dynamics shift within the EU (as does the centre of gravity and power, moving from west to east, thus changing the perception of peripherality), and the EU’s borders or margins have also seen changes in the past few decades and is expected to see more in the future. Thus, what is classified as a periphery in the present or past may not retain that classification in the future.

Though they are often used interchangeably, there is a slight, often neglected, difference between the notions of ‘periphery’ and ‘margins’. Whereas a ‘periphery’ can be both inside and outside a larger political entity or a (geo)economic formation (in Wallerstein’s sense of world-systemic core–periphery relations), ‘margins’ usually connotes the idea of belongingness to an entity or formation, be it a state or a regional organization, albeit at the external borders or ends of that entity. The term ‘margins’ (or ‘marches’) has been used to denote highly militarized regions at an empire’s frontier, or territories ‘from whence various shadowy dangers threatened a feudal order’ (Parker and Armstrong, 2000, p. 7). In this sense, the notion of margins resonates well with the contemporary idea of a ‘frontier state’ or an outpost. It is increasingly relevant in border(land) studies, where both territory-bound social-constructivist and socio-economic approaches have emerged to describe, on the one hand, the state of differing – but mutually constitutive – power relationships between the centre and the periphery within a given political entity, and, on the other hand, the (more objectively assessable) disparity in socio-economic power and development levels (Cullen & Pretes, 2000, p. 217). In this reading, peripheries-as-margins can be found in domestic (national), regional, and wider international relations, as even continents (not only countries or regions) can be

perceived as margins. The notion of margins also allows us to better analyse within-entity relations, as, for example, Dooley (2019) does in his take on the Eurozone crisis in the ‘European periphery’, primarily comprising South European countries such as Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. The idea of peripherality, thus, describes a factual situation of (power and development) asymmetry and ‘exhibits features arising passively from being on the edge – dependency, perhaps, or feelings of inferiority’, while marginality implies the possibility of ‘autonomous [and] active effects beyond the marginal space’ (Parker, 2008, p. 9). Recent studies focusing on the European integration dynamics of Ukraine and Georgia, for example, also show the utility of ‘margins’ thinking when analysing the countries’ asymmetrical – but evolving – relationships with the EU, as they attempt to ‘reshape’ power and identitarian relationships with the EU by moving from being a periphery of Europe to becoming part of it (Kakachia et al., 2019).

Not least importantly, imagining the periphery is also a (social-constructivist) process of mental mapping – not just an exercise in geographical or economic measurement and line-drawing. It takes courage, time, and turning points to configure mental maps – and even more so to reconfigure them. Ukraine’s former ambassador to Austria, O. Scherba, laments that, while attending many public debates on post-2014 Ukraine, Russia, and security held in the diplomatic heart of Europe, he was ‘stunned to realize how many people did not see Ukraine as a part of Europe in the political and cultural senses of this word’, ‘[l]et alone a part of Europe inhabited by the same kind of people wanting the same things in life as the rest of the continent: peace, freedom, prosperity, democracy, justice, respect’ (Scherba, 2021, p. 37). Not all the blame can be placed on the Russian propaganda in the region that promoted the post/neocolonial narrative and imagery of Ukraine – ignorance, arrogance, and misconceptions about Ukraine and the idea of Europe certainly played a role. On the other hand, the perceptions of Ukrainian publics and political elites of the country’s place in Europe, including in EU-Europe (i.e., EEurope), present a contrasting picture of a firmly articulated civilizational and identitarian belongingness under conditions of (temporary) political and institutional exclusion from Europe.

Given the potency of the notion of ‘margins’ in capturing both negative and positive features of being-at-an-edge, as well as in better

accommodating the identitarian dimension of a studied relationship, this chapter tightly embraces the reading of ‘periphery’ as a ‘margin.’

Whose (and Who Is) Periphery Anyway? Ukraine and Its Place in Europe and the European Union

The relationship between Europe, the EU, and European identity is truly multifaceted and multidimensional. When Schilde (2014, p. 650) examined the first Eurobarometer surveys in 1997 measuring citizens’ identification with ‘Europe’ in the acceding Central and Eastern European countries, he found that, contrary to conventional wisdom and expectations, the results were puzzling, as ‘more people, not less, identified with Europe [in EU-acceding CEE countries] than in existing EU states. Similarly, it might be ‘surprising’ that many people outside the EU identify themselves with Europe. When it comes to public support for the EU and European integration in general, Ukraine is in many ways – and especially in the eyes of the Ukrainian public – the epicentre, rather than the periphery, of sensing and making Europe.

Nowadays, Ukraine’s, Georgia’s, and Moldova’s drive towards Europe is triggered not only by their decolonial turn away from Russian hegemony but, more importantly, by their own ideational orientations, with Europe as their civilizational choice, in that ‘Our’ feelings vis-à-vis Europe are much stronger than perceptions of the EU as their significant ‘Other’ (Vieira, 2021). The evolution of Ukraine’s European identity discourses and the ‘restructuring of belonging’ among political elites are well captured in Minesashvili’s (2022, pp. 163–250) comparative study. Faced with accommodating their European identity discourses in a highly contested identity space, which is also a space of incremental great-power competition, Ukraine and Georgia found themselves in a position where self-assertive (nativist) identity formation appeared possible only in the European (geo)political context, even if the EU meant a certain loss of sovereignty, a struggle both countries have faced since regaining their independence.

While citizens, elites, and scholars from both Ukraine and Georgia are confident about their countries’ Europeanness³ and thus their identitarian and soon-to-be-accomplished political belongingness to Europe,⁴ questions of what constitutes Europe and where its boundaries lie keep boggling minds in wider academic debates (see Triandafylidou and Gropas, 2023, p. 129).

Amid ongoing scholarly discussions about what defines Europe – and what does not – it is striking to discover a remarkable unity (save a few cases – that is, ‘unity in diversity’, to use the well-known EU slogan) among the interviewed MPs from across the political spectrum as to how they see Europe and Ukraine’s place within it. First and foremost, Europe is recurrently seen as ‘home’, Ukraine’s ‘native home’ (Interviews YES_1; YES_2; SN_3):

It’s home. Home. Well, look, I think that Ukraine *is* Europe – no matter how banal it sounds; and I firmly believe that we belong to the European space given all our historical, mentality-related, and cultural characteristics. (Interview YES_2)

From that perspective, a certain axiom emerges among the MPs: ‘Europe is Ukraine’ and ‘Ukraine is Europe’, respectively (Interview SN_1).

Europe is also perceived as a ‘certain cradle of civilizations’, with Ukraine being part of it: ... for me, Europe is a certain cradle of civilizations ... the cradle of the world that I know, that I like, that I feel comfortable living in and that I see myself a part of. (Interview SN_1)

Third, and related to the above, from the MPs’ point of view, Europe is associated with certain standards of civilization that Ukraine already cherishes (or, in the view of some, still aspires to), a certain way of life or lifestyle:

Europe for Ukrainians is the highest standard of life and interaction, to which we still have to strive. (Interview YES_1)

Hence, these shared ways of life and standards extend far beyond mere grandiose declarations, as they are intertwined with the everyday life of Ukrainians-as-Europeans (Interview SN_2).

Fourth, there is a widely shared understanding⁵ among the interviewed MPs that Europe is essentially a historically formed space of shared values, European values, including all of the freedoms, as demonstrated here:

For me, Europe is about European values, for one, all the freedoms, starting with the freedom of movement of people, services, capital, and the quality of democracy. (Interview Batkivshchyna_2)

Fifth, there is a clear view as well that this area of shared values in Europe is today governed institutionally and politically by the EU:

[Europe is] ... the space of certain values, beliefs, and views, which are already expressed in a certain system of structure, regulation, priorities, activities, and so on. (Interview Holos_3)

Finally, and perhaps of lesser importance, Ukrainian MPs perceive Europe as a distinct geographical entity with conceivable contours. Except for two interviews with OPZZH members, geographical associations with Europe did not feature prominently in interviewees' takes. Notably, in the eyes of the interviewed OPZZH MPs, Ukraine is primarily considered part of 'Europe as a continent', Europe as a 'territory', rather than as a community of values (Interviews OPZZH_1; OPZZH_2).

In EU-versus-Europe juxtapositions, however, there is a consensus that the notion of Europe extends beyond the borders of the EU, particularly as some European states (like Norway or Switzerland and now the UK – but also Ukraine and Moldova) are outside the EU.

Definitions and understandings of the EU vary, depending on which face(t) of European integration the interviewed MPs value most. Quite a few refer to the EU as a (super-)structure, a political institution, or a bureaucratic entity; sometimes the EU is even seen as a 'crazy bureaucracy' (Interview YES_1). Others relate to the EU as a harbinger of peace (Interview YES_1), a 'super-club that managed not to fight for more than 70 years' (Interview SN_2), a prosperous association of states, and, in fact, the 'most successful project' in the history of Europe (Interviews Batkivshchyna_3; YES_1) – some even dare to say, 'in the history of humankind' (Interview SN_3):

The EU is, above all, a unique phenomenon in world history, when, in fact, after World War II, European countries realized they had much more in common than what divided them ... In my opinion, the creation of the EU was the most successful project in the history of Europe in the 20th century. When the EU as an institution, as such a specific subject of international law, was able to unite countries not only politically, but mainly economically, and to give a very serious drive to the development of countries that were trying to recover after World War II. Later, it gave a unique chance to achieve a high standard of living for the countries of the post-Soviet space that became EU members, some of

which were even part of the Soviet Union as Baltic states. I think that for these countries the EU has become a place for increasing their wellbeing and economic growth, but also for strengthening their statehood. Thus, for me, the strategic goal of EU membership for Ukraine means, first, the preservation and strengthening of Ukrainian statehood, but also a significant increase in the economic development of Ukraine and social standards for Ukrainian citizens. (Interview Batkivshchyna_3)

It is quite telling that, according to the conviction of the interviewed MPs, the success and prosperity of the EU as an integration project are intrinsically linked to the opportunities for state-building and national development within the EU. This aspect is often overshadowed by the ‘sad story’ of the transfer of sovereignty from nation states to EU institutions.⁶

the EU is the Maastricht Treaty, the Copenhagen Criteria, and these are all things that, in my opinion, give both the market and the community of EU member states the opportunity to develop and move forward. (Interview Batkivshchyna_2)

it is a geographical union of different states, a geographical, political union, where they give up part of their sovereignty for the sake of some common goals, common priorities, for the sake of some harmonious, balanced development of their states, societies, people, and improvement of their wellbeing, quality of life, security, well, and many other areas. (Interview Holos_3)

Finally, when it comes to characterizing the EU – in contrast to Europe as a more inclusive concept – the interviewed MPs could not help but lament the geographical and political-institutional limits of the EU – that is, EU-Europe (or EUrope), as here:

The European Union is a concrete political entity, and it is somewhat limited now, especially after Brexit. But this [Brexit] does not unmake Great Britain as part of Europe. (Interview Batkivshchyna_1)

Given the above rather coherent (save for sporadic deviation in one or two cases) conceptions of Europe and the EU among Ukrainian MPs, it comes as no surprise that there seems to be general inter-party agreement as to what Ukraine’s place in Europe and the EU is (and should be): Ukraine is/should be part of – not apart from – EUrope. Significantly, this stance is almost unanimously shared by all of the

interviewed MPs, including those from the opposition party OPZZH. Some of the more illustrative takes on the matter follow below:

I believe that we've never ceased to be part of Europe, and that we have a deep history together, one that is connected by blood, and this is no joke. The most famous, known father-in-law of Europe was Yaroslav the Wise, who married his daughters to the ruling dynasties of the West at that time. To this day, a small part of this European blood still flows in the monarchies of Great Britain, Norway, and in the former monarchies of Europe. Thus, in this context, historically, I believe we've never been anything other than Europe. The other thing is that we didn't articulate this well. Secondly, for too long we've allowed ourselves to be the object of, let's say, *a slightly different narrative*. Thus, for me, *Ukraine's place is not simply in Europe. I can't imagine Europe without Ukraine. In a sense, we are part of one organism.* (Interview SN_1)

Ukraine is a part of Europe in terms of values, mentality, as well as in historical, cultural, and geographical meanings. As for the EU, I think that we have every reason to apply for membership in the EU there, in order not only to follow the rules that someone worked out before us but to be able to influence those rules, which are already being formed for the future. (Interview YES_2)

In my opinion, Ukraine was, is and will be in Europe. Both geographically and politically. (Interview OPZZH_1)

The historical, system-related value, and to some extent political unity, of Ukraine with Europe, as perceived by Ukrainian lawmakers, all but negates any contemplation, from the Ukrainian standpoint, of its alleged peripheral role or status in European affairs. Consequently, the subsequent section delves into the peripherality hypothesis.

Ukraine as EUrope's Periphery?

Even though Ukraine – like other Eastern neighbours of the EU – is in marginal constellations, the geostrategic relevance of Georgia and Ukraine, in particular, allows the countries to somehow mitigate and leverage their 'peripherality', as they are at the epicentre of strong geopolitical and geo-economic contestation. Ukraine and Georgia's long-sought integration into the EU, too, encompasses a strategy of defying their 'marginality' while becoming politically and institutionally part

of Europe (Kakachia et al., 2019). Thus, Ukraine's strategic efforts to *deny* and *defy* peripherality can be observed both in its foreign policy practices and in relevant (albeit scarce) scholarly analyses. This was largely confirmed by the interviewed MPs – at a time when Ukraine's EU candidate status was not even on the agenda.

The interviews reveal a truly varied and colourful palette of MPs' views on the very notion of peripherality or marginality and its applicability to Ukraine's relations with the EU. Outright rejection and conditional acceptance (in terms of 'periphery' connoting different levels of development) are the most popular choices, with the opposite argument (that Ukraine is, instead, an emerging leader and not a periphery) also gaining a fair share of popularity.

All three Batkivshchyna MPs rejected the idea of Ukraine being perceived as an EU periphery; they were joined by one interviewee each from YES and Sluga Narodu. Given its status as the largest country in Europe and its huge population (Interview Batkivshchyna_2), its ability to also teach something to Europeans (Interview YES_1, 2021), and its closeness to European values that surpasses that of some existing EU countries (Interview Batkivshchyna_1), Ukraine cannot be regarded as a periphery of Europe. Moreover, when discussing the EU – and not Europe – as a point of reference, it is crucial to consider a foundational principle of the Union that all member states are equal; accordingly, Ukraine's position as a membership-seeking state is that of a partner aspiring to join a community of equals (Interview Batkivshchyna_1). The perspective taken – locally or more globally – also seems to matter, as topics such as the 'periphery of the EU' do not even appear in global discussions. They might appear in 'local' discussions where more powerful states take pride in their authority and ability to influence others. If one considers a more global realm, such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Ukraine is seen as part of Europe, not as its margin:

To be sure, they see us as a part of Europe and, also, they do not distinguish between us and Portuguese, for example, or us and Italians and Spaniards, as we are very close, we are close, we share the same religion, and so on and so forth. For them, we are that piece of Europe in the world as seen on the map. (Interview Batkivshchyna_1)

Moreover, in the opinion of Ukrainian lawmakers there seems to be a serious problem with notions or framings, such as those of marginality or peripherality, that, according to them, seem to connote 'the end of

something', deceptively suggesting that Ukraine would arguably not be a part of Europe, which is both untrue and subjective (Interview Batkivshchyna_3). Instead, if a label were to be applied to Ukraine's position towards the EU, some MPs suggest that it should be the notion of a 'frontier' (that is, being at the edge of distinct patterns of interaction or transition rather than at the end of something) (Interview SN_1).

Yet another group of the interviewed MPs (mainly from the SN and one from the OPZZH) firmly perceives Ukraine as an emerging leader and a new centre of gravity in Europe, the centre of 'New Europe', and rejects the idea of seeing the country as an EU periphery. Such a vision rests on the most recent apparent shift in power within the EU from Old Europe, that is, Western Europe, eastwards. As such, Ukraine – along with Poland, the Baltic states, and Czechia – is emerging as part of the 'New Europe' (Interview Batkivshchyna_1), as the geopolitical divide between New and Old Europe gets inevitably etched (Interview SN_2). While sharing the premise that Ukraine has such potential, one opposition MP laments that the train has already left, and that Ukraine may no longer be able to play such a leading role:

in any case, from the point of view of Ukraine's geographical position, from the point of view of resources, from the point of view of the level of education, the number of people, the potential of the country, we could be such a serious powerful regional leader. The post-Soviet countries and the nearest candidates for the EU and NATO could have revolved around Ukraine, and Ukraine could have acted as their centre of gravity and leader. But we lost this chance after 2005. Unfortunately. (Interview OPZZH_1)

On the other hand, YES and Holos MPs are more inclined to agree that the core–periphery distinction is quite relative and depends on one's point of view and understanding of 'periphery' in the first place:

It depends on one's point of view, whether [Ukraine can be seen as] a margin or not. I think that someone might want us to be on the margins, on the fringes of Europe, but at the same time, I believe that without considering the interests of those countries that are in the east of Europe as a continent, in the south of Europe as a continent, there cannot be a successful and progressive development of the European project as such. I believe that it is wrong to talk about margins, and it is right to talk about an *outpost*. And, if you want, there are outposts of this

Europeanness and European civilization as such all along the borders of the EU. (Interview YES_2)

The matter of who invokes the discourse of peripherality, too, seems to be of importance, as this may be acceptable in some cases but not in others:

But who says it?! Some European politicians? Well, I understand that they can do that and such, you know, arrogance occurs, and I have come across it repeatedly ... (Interview YES_3)

Importantly, while some MPs have been exposed to the discourse of the periphery by their European counterparts, others appear not to have been part of such a situation, which also casts doubt on how widespread – and officially used (if at all) – the rhetoric of the periphery is:

[The term] periphery may indeed sound somewhat offensive to some. I haven't heard that exact notion being applied, at least, well, in any of these formal, or even informal, relations. But we understand very well that it is impossible to claim the same role played by powerful European countries, EU member states, which act as the main unifying nations in this political union. (Interview SN_3)

This conditional acceptance of peripherality is mostly rooted in an understanding of the periphery as an expression of difference in the level and speed of (socio-economic, technological, and political) development (Interviews SN_3; Holos_3). Thus, a core–periphery relationship is seen not as something alien to the EU's own functioning or offensive but indeed as a strength that unites diverse states with diverse potentials, all within the so-called 'multi-speed Europe':

One of the strengths of the EU is precisely that this format can unite different peoples, different countries with different levels of economic development. It is not surprising that there are differences in how certain European countries develop economically and how their institutions are built, how long it takes for a country to fully build the institutions required by the EU accession treaties. So, we do understand that this is the reality that has developed today, that there are more developed countries and there are less developed countries. Thus, relations are built accordingly – both [external] between [more and less developed countries themselves] and within the EU in general. The notion of a multi-speed Europe can well be recalled in this regard. (Interview SN_3)

Most interviewees in this cohort agree that the fact that Ukraine was held back in its development for a long time can be explained by the fact that the country was cut off from Europe for a long time and is now a ‘traumatized,’ temporarily ‘sick’ relative of Europe:

[Ukraine’s current lower level of development and issues like corruption] do not mean that we are on the fringes/margins of Europe, because a thousand years ago Ukraine was one of the most culturally developed countries, then it could be called Kyivan Rus, if you look at the princely era and Anna Yaroslavivna brought culture to France, not the other way around. Therefore, Ukraine cannot be called a margin, it is, let’s say, a temporarily sick relative. (Interview YES_3)

More critical voices, while agreeing that who is and is not a periphery is relative and conditional, argue that it is not position or location that counts but performance:

Well, it’s all relative, really. In truth, the position of the country in no way affects the attitude towards it. The attitude towards the state, regardless of its, let’s say, territory, and population, is determined exclusively by how it behaves, whether it commands respect or not. It’s possible to be a member of the EU and not be a country that is treated with, let’s say, excessive respect, or at least with sufficient courtesy. It’s possible to be a country that is not formally part of any union and still be a country that is reckoned with, whose opinion is considered ... But in truth, formal tangentiality or non-tangentiality to this or that union is not so important. A country is only peripheral if it perceives itself as a periphery and behaves with other countries as a peripheral, provincial country. If a country commands attention and respect, it will not be treated as a periphery. (Interview Holos_2)

Remarkably, out of all interviewed MPs, only two – one from Holos and another from the OPZZH – perceive their country as a clear-cut periphery of the EU. The reasoning behind this and the actual understanding of what it means to be an EU periphery differed between these two accounts, however. While the OPZZH MP doubted any possibility for Ukraine to be a non-periphery (citing its location as a periphery to both Europe and Asia, ‘the most Western of the Eastern and the most Eastern of the Western countries’; Interview OPZZH_2), the Holos deputy called for an acknowledgement of the reality (that Ukraine is at

the edge of Europe) without invoking any normative meanings of the term:

Well, it's clear why that is the case, isn't it? Because Ukraine is a geographical margin of Europe. Here, obviously, there are dividing lines, including those related to values, yes. And this map of values tells us about it, and everything else. That is, here the element of margins is not in the normative sense, but in the factual sense that it is indeed margins, and that it is the edge of Europe. Well, this must be admitted. Obviously, this is one of the reasons why we fall into the role of those who protect this border because we are on it. The border passes through us, by and large. (Interview Holos_1)

Thus, all in all, a genuine pluralism on the issue at stake defines the views and positions of the interviewed MPs. Whereas some normatively loaded and pejorative associations with peripherality, such as being 'Europe's backyard' or a 'buffer' between the EU and Russia, were overwhelmingly rejected, and the idea of Ukraine being the EU's periphery also lacked large-scale support, a fair share of middle-ground takes on the matter (that is, conditional acceptance of the term, in developmental aspects) crystallized. These call for coming to terms with a multifaceted reality that reflects such a peripherality constellation. Unconditional acceptance of the peripherality argument is all too seldom and sporadic. Overall, the political elites' discourse has it that whether Ukraine is or is not (to be seen as) EU's periphery essentially depends on the meanings vested in the term, the reasons for invoking it, and, finally, its uses and abuses in both the rhetoric and the practice of the EU–Ukraine bilateralism.

Finally, it should be added that after the start of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the EU's political and intellectual elites, as well as its citizens in general, also saw a change in their perceptions of Ukraine. As Vermeersh (2023) neatly observes:

The perception of Ukraine has changed a lot across the EU. Though it is hard to generalize, Ukraine was largely unknown as a country before the invasion. It was a faraway piece of Eastern Europe – or, perhaps more clearly, the western edge of Eastern Europe. However, since the escalated invasion a lot of Europeans, and specifically Belgians, have started perceiving Ukraine as the *eastern edge of Western Europe*.

Looking beyond Peripherality: Asymmetry as an Issue in EU–Ukraine Relations

A recurring topic in ‘peripherality’ discussions, the problem of asymmetry in EU–Ukraine relations seems to be more central to the discourse of the MPs interviewed than the peripheral status per se. This topic also recurs in scholarly discussions of the EU’s relations with its wider neighbourhood, where a ‘top-down’ rather than ‘eye-level’ relationship has been practised (Happ & Bruns, 2017), or in particular with the six countries that are part of the EU’s Eastern Partnership, where there seems to be a lot of European rhetoric about ‘partners’ but still scant evidence of everyday ‘partnering practice’ (Tyushka, 2022a, p. 270).

As the interviews with MPs revealed, the EU–Ukraine asymmetry (and the problem of it) comes in all possible shapes, including a substantial difference in power potentials, bargaining positions, normative hegemony/subordination relationship, and, not least importantly, expectations.

Hence, admitting that there is a problem of asymmetry has two sides: the realists and the fatalists. While the former point to the obvious and enumerate examples that illustrate such a disparity in practice (Interviews Holos_3; SN_1; SN_1), the latter cannot help but point to asymmetry as the ‘default’ fate of Ukraine in relation to a big player like the EU (Interview Holos_1):

Yes. I have discussed this asymmetry many times, and it seems to me that it is one of the key and critical factors in Euroscepticism as a trend in Ukraine. (Interview SN_1)

Yes, I completely agree. Absolutely asymmetrical relations, unequal. We talk a lot about us being partners and friends, but ... it is not so. For example, the NorthStream2 showed that the EU doesn’t treat us as an equal partner. Moreover, sometimes they don’t treat us even as a younger brother, they treat us as someone in the room with whom it isn’t worth discussing at all. (Interview Batkivshchyna_1)

Well, it would be naïve to deny it. It would be naïve to say ‘no, we are equal partners’ and so on. We depend on the EU geopolitically. (Interview Holos_1)

A fine line seems to run through the words/deeds asymmetry, or (un) ethical approaches to promises and commitments:

I rather agree. I see this as a problem ... there is a certain distance between declarations and real actions. Therefore, it is necessary to watch one's hands very carefully and one would understand, which of those declarations correspond to reality, and which remain only declarations. (Interview Holos_3)

By contrast, a decent-sized group of interviewed MPs hold the view that, like many things in a socially constructed world, asymmetry is what states make of it. This is to say, asymmetry might or might not be a problem, depending on whether one comes to terms with the reality out there that rarely, if at all, features symmetrical relationships in international affairs:

Well, it's logical that [this relationship] is asymmetrical, as, first, the EU is a multi-state structure; Ukraine is just one country. The EU is a financially powerful structure; Ukraine isn't a financially powerful state. The EU itself, as an institution, has a lot of leverage and pressure; in turn, Ukraine doesn't have much leverage and pressure on the EU. Yet, it seems to me that we can take more from the EU than we expect. So, for me, the asymmetry is entirely normal, Ukraine needs to evolve. (Interview YES_1)

I don't understand what it is about. I'll explain because the term 'asymmetrical' itself can be perceived in different ways. I would tell you that the relations between some countries that are inside the EU are also asymmetrical ... Is this a problem? In my opinion, it isn't ... Symmetrical relations between countries ... don't exist in nature. All unions are political formations, all countries are asymmetrical in their actions, they can't be identical or symmetrical. (Interview Holos_2)

More narrowly, with the EU–Ukraine association relationship in focus, asymmetries of sorts abound in how the agreement was designed (after all, it was an EU template agreement offered to Ukraine for negotiations) and is implemented (with the EU regularly pressing for effective execution). As some MPs underscore, there are many dimensions to this asymmetry: in lawmaking, Ukraine is obliged to approximate its legislation to the EU's legislation, not the other way around; in the economy, Ukraine displays a negative trade balance with the EU; the

EU retains full control over the quotas set out in the AA, while Ukraine does not set any; finally, Ukraine is a state seeking EU accession, not vice versa, and this already predefines who has the upper hand (Interview Batkivshchyna_3). This asymmetry, this MP continues, could be reversed if the EU were more interested in Ukraine's accession than Ukraine was in joining the EU (Interview Batkivshchyna_3).

Importantly, some MPs – rightly – see the EU–Ukraine AA as an ‘equalizer’ of this apparent and default asymmetry between the EU and Ukraine: first and foremost, the AA is meant to bring the two parties closer to each other, to approximate Ukraine's and the EU's regulatory standards; it also provides for dialogue and joint decision-making (Interview SN_3). Recent studies on the power and performance of joint bodies formed under the EU's bilateral agreements (Tyushka et al. 2022), and the ‘association bodies’ operating under the EU–Ukraine AA (Tyushka 2022b) in particular, unveil that such joint institutions do indeed allow for the ‘levelling up’ of asymmetries in bilateral relations, not least as the parties enjoy parity status in decision-making and agenda-setting more generally. The decisions adopted by the EU–Ukraine association bodies are binding for both Ukraine and the EU and they become part of both actors' legal systems.

As with peripherality, the issue of asymmetry may or may not be seen as a problem depending on how the EU uses it in its relations with Ukraine, as stated by four interviewed MPs. Honesty in the relationship and the ethical component of asymmetry, too, appear to play a role – not just the factual state of disparity in power potentials or the like:

No, [it's not a problem per se] – it's natural, because there, the European Union is a union of many countries, and financially, organizationally, institutionally, they are, of course ... stronger and more powerful than Ukraine. So, this asymmetry is natural, there is nothing bad or good about it. It is such a natural story. The only question is the honesty of the relationship in this asymmetry. (Interview OPZZH_1)

Curiously, what is mostly seen in the academic world as an unfair (hegemonic) constellation of EU-favouring asymmetry – that is, the EU's conditionality principles (Sasse, 2008; Lavenex, 2008; Casier, 2011) – some Ukrainian MPs see as quite a fair and honest cooperation scheme:

There is this [conditionality] principle of ‘more for more’ meaning ‘greater performance – greater support’. I think, this principle is the [fair] answer. (Interview SN_2)

Moreover, emerging scholarly accounts confirm that, despite all the conditionality-inherent asymmetry in EU policy design vis-à-vis particular neighbours, such as Ukraine, or the Union’s neighbourhood at large, in practice enforcing conditionality is not always feasible for the EU (Burlyuk and Shapovalova, 2017). At the same time, EU-associated neighbours, first and foremost Ukraine, dispose of multiple diplomatic and joint institutional possibilities to offset the negative effects of asymmetry in bilateral agenda-setting: whether through negotiating the modalities of compliance with the dictum of legislative approximation under the EU–Ukraine AA (Rabinovych and Pintsch, 2023), or through joint decision-making on both strategic and operational issues within the EU–Ukraine association bodies (Tyushka et al., 2022).

Finally, and rather surprisingly, the interviews with Ukrainian MPs reveal an unexpected aspect: asymmetry that may arise from Ukraine’s own insincerity towards the EU and the commitments undertaken, which may then push the EU to exercise asymmetrical power. This effectively presupposes that there is no default asymmetrical relationship in principle – it just becomes such under certain conditions, not necessarily EU-driven ones:

No, I don’t believe it’s an asymmetrical relationship ... However, asymmetry arises when corruption, bureaucracy, imitation of integration with the European Union, and so on, arise on the Ukrainian side. This, in my opinion, is the only real reason for possible asymmetries or asymmetry as such in relations with the European Union. Insincerity, unprofessionalism and, in some places, corruption that arises from the Ukrainian side. That’s about it, in short. (Interview Batkivshchyna_2)

To sum up, there is hardly any unity among the interviewed MPs on whether asymmetry exists as such, and if so, whether it is a problem by default. While the majority agree that an asymmetrical relationship may be problematic, they also admit that it is more about the uses (or abuse) of asymmetry than about power differentials per se.

Ukrainian Hopes, EU Performance as Crisis/War Responder, and ‘Critical Expectation Gaps’: The Importance of Perception Checking

In international psychology and communications, perception checking is a strategy and tool to help one ascertain whether one’s interpretations of situations, events, or the actions of others are accurate – all for the sake of managing impressions or expectations. Framed by the ‘critical expectation gaps’ approach, this study further probes into three cases of critical situations (crisis, war, and strategic foreign policy choice) in order to find out whether there is a case for closing, or indeed widening, the gap between Ukrainian political elites’ hopes/expectations and the EU’s performance in responding to: (1) Russia’s continuing aggression against Ukraine since 2014, (2) the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and (3) Ukraine’s lasting (tri-decadal) striving for EU membership.

The EU’s Ukraine ‘Crisis’/War Response in 2014–2022 and the Narrowing of the Hopes/Performance Gap?

In his address to the people of Europe, delivered on the second day of Russia’s full-scale invasion, President V. Zelensky stated that it was ‘not merely Russia’s invasion of Ukraine’ but ‘the beginning of a war against Europe’, and called for a decisive response from the EU:

I know Europe can see this. But what we do not see – at least not fully – is what you are going to do about it. How are you going to protect yourselves when you have been so slow to protect Ukraine? (Zelensky, 2022a, pp. 57–58)

Thereby, Ukraine’s president lamented the largely unfulfilled hopes and expectations for a swift and decisive EU response to Russia’s (first covert and later increasingly overt) aggression against Ukraine since February 2014. In academia, too, the EU’s ‘crisis’ response since 2014 had largely been seen as too slow and too soft (Nováky, 2015).

The EU’s war response following February 2022 massively differed from the previous stance vis-à-vis the qualification of the conflict itself, the strategic stance against Russia, and the responsibility it embraced to act in support of Ukraine and the restoration of the violated rules-based order. As Europe’s ‘9/11 moment’, the brutal Russian

war of aggression against Ukraine awakened the EU's sense of 'collective responsibility to act' (Maurer et al., 2023).

In the first week of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine's foreign minister D. Kuleba acknowledged the EU's forceful response against a bleak prospect of NATO engagement:

Before the [full-scale] war with Russia, Ukrainians considered NATO to be a real force, and the EU to be weak and undecided. After the start of the [full-scale] war, the Ukrainian people saw that everything was the other way around. (Kuleba, 2022)

The introduction of massive sanctions, the deployment of the European Peace Facility to finance Ukraine's arms purchase and military assistance, and other unprecedented steps taken by the EU represented a divergent break from the Union's past posture and politics of hesitant response to Russia's first hybrid, then full-scale and overt aggression in Ukraine, which had continued since 2014. Indeed, until the early 2020s, the EU referred to Russia's war in Ukraine as the so-called 'Ukraine crisis', as did a vast share of international players. This created fertile ground for ambiguous perceptions among Ukraine's political elites of the EU as a security actor, as the EU seemed to misread the war (treating it as a sort of domestic but internationalized 'crisis') and, even more worrisome, the perception emerged that 'the EU does not understand Ukraine properly' either (Chaban & Lucarelli, 2021, p. 182).

The conducted interviews largely confirm the ambiguous stance of Ukrainian political elites towards the EU as a crisis/war responder in 2014–2021. On the one hand, a good share of the MPs expressed the view that the EU could and should have provided more to support Ukraine to end the (armed, albeit hybrid) conflict with Russia. Thus, not only the deterrence of Russia is mentioned as a priority, but also the provision of military aid to Ukraine (some even go as far as to suggest that the EU's military contingent should have been considered, with a Common Security and Defence Policy mission in Crimea and Donbas), swift(er) and sharp(er) sanctions, the closure of the Nord Stream II gas pipeline project and less of a 'business as usual' politics towards Russia:

The [EU's] response was weak, very weak. I think the EU should have acted more decisively against Russia, at least in self-defence. (Interview Batkivshchyna_3)

I would say [the EU scored] three on a scale of ten. In other words ... sanctions were imposed, but they were not such as to give the most real effect in a short time. Declarations of support for Ukraine were made, but real actions showed that, while supporting Ukraine, 'business as usual' [with Russia] continued. (Interview YES_3)

Yes, I think [the EU response] should have been different. I think that in matters of military support, the EU should have done more. Even if they cannot provide their military (well, it was clear why it was impossible, and so on), but the logistical support of the army, the immediate imposition of sanctions [on Russia] ... I think the EU could do more. And we would expect that they could do more. (Interview Holos_1)

On the other hand, nearly an equal share did not hold high hopes for the EU's engagement, emphasizing the manifold weaknesses of the EU as a (security) actor that had 'tamed' their expectations. Many responses channelled an understanding of the EU's constraints in decision-making (slow, complex, bureaucratic) and security policy-making (the dictum of unanimity, fear of Russia, and an unclear stance on Ukraine's relevance and future in the European context):

First, I think that it was not an adequate a response. Second, given the complexity and specificity of the functioning of such a structure as the European Union, it could not be otherwise. Everything is simple here. (Interview Holos_2)

the reaction was commensurate with the capabilities that the EU had at that time. (Interview SN_3)

Ukraine's expectations of the EU's engagement were based not only on the assumption that the EU *could* help but, more importantly, on the conviction that the EU *should* help, as Russia's war against Ukraine was part of a wider geopolitical struggle.⁷ It is striking that 9 out of 14 MPs (or around 65 per cent) defined Russia's war against Ukraine as part of the broader Russo-Western conflict, of which the EU was a part or a party. Yet the other three MPs defined the war as a manifestation of Russia's renewed imperial (neocolonial) gambit. One Holos MP even saw it as part of the unfolding World War III, whereas one OPZZH MP

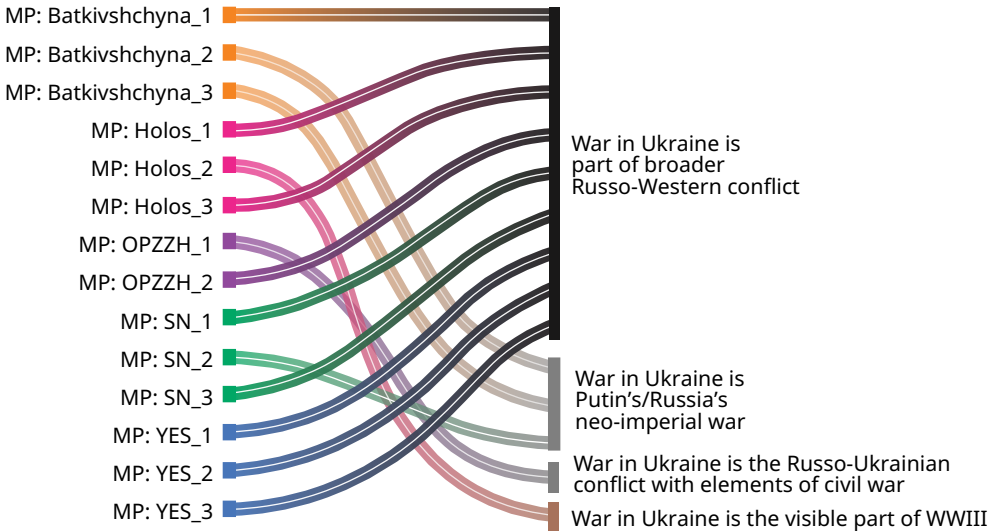


Figure 4.2a: Definitions of the continued Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014–2021, by individual members of parliament (MP).

Source: authors' illustration based on [Atlas.ti](#)-supported content analysis of elite interviews.



Figure 4.2b: Definitions of the continued Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014–2021, by political party (PP).

Source: authors' illustration based on [Atlas.ti](#)-supported content analysis of elite interviews.

classified it as a bilateral conflict with ‘elements of civil war’ (see Sankey diagrams in Figures 4.2a and 4.2b).

A handful of takes were also presented that appreciate and praise what the EU had been able to provide – against all odds – as part of its response to Russian aggression:

I think [the EU] has done a lot. I’ve talked about sanctions; I want to mention them again. But we also did a lot ourselves. I believe that the response is adequate ... One can always do more, but I don’t agree with those who say that nothing was done. Sorry, but the EU is not NATO, and we are not members of any of these organizations; so yes, we relied on our own strength. But I think that the EU has done a lot. (Interview SN_2)

Rather surprisingly, just a single lonely voice among the interviewed MPs embraced an inward-looking criticism, stating that it was challenging for the EU to act together when contradictory signals were coming from Ukraine, including the failure to call – at the legal level – Russia’s war what it was (rather than naming Ukraine’s defensive efforts in Donbas as an ‘anti-terrorist operation’) (Interview Holos_3).

All in all, there was hardly a consensual stance – either positive or negative – regarding the EU’s Ukraine ‘crisis’/war response from early 2014 up until late 2021. While quite a few elite representatives had high(er) expectations in this regard, it is notable that many more had rather hopes for the EU’s engagement in principle. In a way, the gap arose from both.

The EU’s COVID-19 Pandemic Response and Ukraine: No Hope, No Sorrow – Or Solidarity by Surprise?

While the COVID-19 pandemic shook the entire world, assessments of the EU’s handling of the coronavirus crisis were more pragmatic, albeit concerned. First and foremost, there was a realization that this kind of global crisis returns the international community towards the stage of ‘everyone for themselves’ thinking, which hugely surpasses the confines of European politics alone. In Ukraine, however, there was great hope for EU-made vaccines, not least as the country legally banned the registration of Sputnik V in February 2021, calling it a ‘hybrid weapon of Russia against Ukraine’ (Euractiv & Reuters, 2021), and faced difficulties in accessing Chinese vaccines due to a diplomatic

spat. A few months earlier, Ukraine's President V. Zelensky had said that '[b]y the way, the EU confirmed it would help Ukraine receive the true vaccine once it is released and will not raise any suspicions among scientists' (Zelensky, 2020), explicitly stating that the country trusted the EU. In general, the official Ukrainian discourse was supportive of the EU's health diplomacy, although there was no shortage of criticism (Zelensky, 2021).

In May 2020, the EU approved a €3 billion aid package to support 'neighbouring partners'. The EU's 'COVID-19 Solidarity Program for the Eastern Partnership', as of January 2021, included, for instance, €202 million for Ukraine alone; Ukraine was even invited to join the EU's Health Security Committee as an observer in pursuit of closer cooperation in the context of the fight against the virus (Tyushka & Schumacher, 2022, pp. 247–249). In May 2021, the EU's health diplomacy was not extensive, and vaccine support was just beginning. Once more, there was a sense of 'too little, too late' among the Ukrainian public and political elites, but with the understanding that solidarity could not trump everyone's survivalism, including the EU's. This ambiguous duality is well captured in the interviews.

On the one hand, it is evident that there was little consideration for the perspectives of others in this situation, both within the EU and in its external relations:

No, of course there was no solidarity, and they understand it perfectly ... during the pandemic, I believe that the European Union showed itself very selfishly, but they behaved selfishly, let's say, egocentrically, in relation to each other as well. You remember how they closed each other's borders and intercepted each other's medicine. And the vaccine. So, the pandemic is not at all the moment when humanity shows great solidarity ... Everyone for themselves. (Interview OPZZH_2)

Despite the harsh criticism, chiefly coming from among OPZZH MPs, some parliamentary voices also raised the issue that, rather than the EU's 'so-so' COVID-19 response itself, a bigger concern for Ukrainian elites was that because of the pandemic, Ukraine fatigue grew: 'Europe has become a bit out of our way [*Yevropi bulo ne do nas*]' (Interview Holos_2), and 'we became some issue no. 10 on the EU's agenda list' (Interview Holos_1). Rather unorthodox (due to its straightforward and blunt framing) and singular opinion 'normalized' the self-help constellation in international affairs, thus urging against naïve hopes

for some external problem-solver, as Ukraine needed to solve its problems – naturally – on its own:

You know, I wouldn't say that, in my opinion, relations between Ukraine and the EU have changed in connection with COVID-19 ... In principle, I would not say that they often burdened themselves with solving our problems. This is not surprising, because we must solve our problems ourselves ... It's just that Europe has a little bit more problems because of COVID, and Ukraine has moved even lower on the agenda than it was. Everything is natural, there is nothing unusual about it. (Interview Holos_2)

A much wider shared perspective, however, turned out to be a moderate and pragmatic view that the EU's COVID-19 response entailed both (natural or 'healthy') selfishness and (some) solidarity, which was, of course, hoped for but not rationally expected:

It is difficult to talk about excessive solidarity at a time when countries are facing problems at home ... Therefore, one should not expect that someone owes something to someone, and someone should always be a magician or benefactor. I think that when you are faced with something of force majeure, as it happened with COVID, it does not guarantee that you will think about yourself half the day, half the day about your neighbour. It's a bit of ... influence of the circumstances from the outside ... Thus, I do not overestimate expectations here. I cannot say that this is something that can be called selfishness, and so on, because selfishness is also healthy. (Interview Holos_3)

Quite quickly, the European Union mobilized funds that were used primarily to help those EU member states that needed that help. Ukraine received substantial assistance, both financial and technical. And the main thing that managed to be preserved, despite the scepticism that existed both in Ukraine and in the European Union, was to preserve these basic freedoms – freedom of movement, people, capital. (Interview SN_3)

we must give credit to the European Union for it positively and repeatedly helped Ukraine and Ukrainian citizens with vaccines. (Interview Batkivshchyna_2)

Notably, while looking back on the pandemic crisis, there seem to be other positive sides of the EU's response beyond its support for vaccine

procurement. The EU's will and skill to maintain trade in goods with Ukraine is also noted by a Ukrainian MP:

But it seems to me that now [after the pandemic], many countries are on their knees economically, and the economy comes before politics. We must always remember this. Despite this, Ukraine managed, with the support of some EU customs instruments, to exceed the budget in the third quarter of the current fiscal year due to new verification technology – we did not expect this, it is very positive. (Interview SN_2)

Overall, despite the serious threat posed by the coronavirus pandemic and the challenges arising from the unfolding 'vaccine geopolitics', the EU has generally managed to maintain a moderately positive attitude among Ukraine's political elites, marked by pragmatism in assessing the situation, minimal expectations of EU support, and surprising displays of solidarity.

Ukraine's European Dreams, War Drums, and EU Accession Dramas

Ukraine's European dreams have a long history, with the first signs of a willingness to 'return home' emerging over three decades ago when the country regained its independence. Ukraine's 'return to Europe', albeit an axiom, has seen varied interpretations and policy formulations, but it has remained one of the key foreign-political and state-building endeavours to date.

The 2003 Athens European convention sought to chart new contours of an enlarging Europe and, as Ukraine's foreign minister (1990–1994 and 2000–2003) A. Zlenko argues, it 'succeeded in giving conclusive answers to nearly all pending questions but the Ukrainian one' (Zlenko, 2021, p. 135). The 2004 Orange revolution reconfirmed Ukraine's popular drive towards Europe, but after 2007, it fled into an unwinding, half-hearted story of 'association' with the EU rather than wholehearted, full-fledged accession to it. Nor did the 2014 Euro-maidan revolution change the course of action, even after Ukraine signed the unprecedentedly encompassing AA with the EU in 2014. A clear and explicit European perspective for Ukraine was absent in the text of the Agreement and subsequent declarations. At the same time, the implementation of the AA and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) imposed profound domestic reforms

on Ukraine, including far-reaching legislative approximation with the EU. Quite aware of the fact that such European-style state-(re)building in Ukraine is a result of a voluntary bilateral agreement with the EU and, most of all, the direction in which the Ukrainian public increasingly wanted to see the Ukrainian state(hood) developing, domestic political elites in Kyiv had not all too overwhelmingly subscribed to such an idea or its implementation. The opponents' key argument had consistently been 'What for?' as the country repeatedly failed to receive a credible membership perspective from the EU. This 'mildly negative dynamic' in Ukraine's elite perceptions of the EU (Chaban & Knodt, 2021) emerged shortly after the positive upheaval of the 2013–2014 revolutionary times and can also be seen as a confounding effect of the EU's perceived underperformance in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent hybrid war in Ukraine's Donbas since mid-2014. The perceived dim prospects of EU membership have not, however, weakened the popular and political drive towards European integration. For example, a corpus-based discourse analysis of debates in parliament from 2000 to 2017 reveals that the collocation of 'desire'/'aspiration'/'striving'/'path' with 'European integration' saliently (consistently and incrementally, albeit irregularly) feature in parliamentary discourse, peaking in 2004, 2008, 2011, and 2013–2014 (Kryvenko, 2018, pp. 65–69). As the issue of Ukraine's 'European perspective' remained intact in Brussels' official speech, Ukraine's political elites' own growing hopes and narrative of 'Ukraine's European path' opened a 'critical expectation gap', fraught with recurring moments of disenchantment and resentment while still maintaining a firm pro-EU foreign policy course.

The interviews with Ukrainian MPs of the ninth convocation revealed this ambiguous (love/hate) dynamics in several respects.

First, and as discussed earlier in this chapter, there is quite a consensual understanding of Ukraine's belonging to the European space and the vision of its future as an EU member state. Approaches differ, however, as to when, how, and under what conditions this should occur. When asked about the existence of a tacit or explicit consensus on Ukraine's EU accession, most MPs agreed that there is one – although only four firmly stated that there is an unequivocal and uncompromising explicit consensus among political elites and within society, whereas five attributed it to the 'majority's position' *now*, the current domestic constellation, also noting that this consensus is essentially

public-driven in Ukraine. Another group of three MPs subscribed to the view that consensus exists but felt that the nuance – the difference between words (declarations) and deeds (implementation of EU integration-driven reforms) – needs to be taken into account as to how workable or effective such a consensus has been so far. Unsurprisingly, two OPZZH MPs expressed doubts about the existence of a consensus, with one questioning whether there is a real agreement even within those parties that declare a pro-EU stance (Interview OPZZH_1) and another stating that such a more tacit consensus could be said to exist only ‘if there is such an understanding that is popular among most citizens’ (Interview OPZZH_2). On the other hand, the interviewed MPs also noted that even among opposition forces that publicly criticize – though they do not refuse to support – Ukraine’s EU integration course, there is no united ‘anti-EU’ stance or front:

This issue is [simple but] also complex at the same time. Because, mostly, many Ukrainian politicians understand European integration as the way forward. That is, they hold somewhat different attitudes, there are nuances in the acceptance of the very phrase, the very definition of European integration. But, if we are talking about consensus, I think that with a high probability we can say that ... even representatives of the elite who deny it and criticize the EU, in fact, they’re ready to embrace it ... It’s just, let’s say, from a political perspective, it’s not advantageous [for them] to talk about it out loud. Well, for example, the only political force, the parliamentary one, that allows itself to critique the course towards the EU and, even more so, towards NATO, is the OPZZH, even within this force – at least within the party-political faction and its leadership – a large number of people lean towards the EU. With their nuances, with a slightly skewed attitude, however, they want to join the EU. Surprisingly, they support a certain set of demands presented by the EU. So, we can talk about the almost complete consensus of the elites today. (Interview Holos_2)

Second, given that there appears to be both tacit and explicit consensus about Ukraine’s EU membership even before the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, the constellations of EU–Ukraine association naturally seem to be too insufficient and do not meet the expectations of the majority (nine) of the 14 interviewed MPs. When asked whether the AA-based format of the relationship with the EU was suitable for Ukraine, nine MPs stated that it was not, justifying such a stance by the

Agreement's unfit as an EU accession tool, the insufficient rewards offered in exchange for Ukraine's already compromised sovereignty, or the failure to account for growing trade dynamics (not least due to the imposed tariff-rate quotas); for example:

No, no, no, of course it is not [sufficient]! Again, going back to what I already voiced, a very strange thing happened in 2014. We, an independent sovereign state, willingly agreed to the fact that a structure outside our territory makes decisions that are binding on us, and we, in return, don't participate in the discussion of these decisions. That is, I could call it – and I will call it – a partial concession of sovereignty ... If we're talking about a clear understanding of the date of [Ukraine's] accession to the EU, then fine, I'm ready to consider it all [i.e., the obligations under AA], I'm ready to give it a go. But announce the date first. Thus, if we don't understand the end-state, and we continue to play the 'you pass the legislation first, and then we'll see' – well, sorry, but why do we need all of this? ... At the same time, we don't receive systematic, regular assistance, financial or institutional, as Poland did. (Interview SN_1)

No, of course, I consider it insufficient ... Yes, of course, I believe that this is not enough, that these [especially economic] conditions must be revised, they must be substantially revised. (Interview Batkivshchyna_1)

While agreeing that there might be a need to revise and update the AA, a handful of interviewed MPs, nonetheless, consider it to be 'just the right tool' for Ukraine's European integration, as well as corresponding to the reality on both sides in terms of the EU's enlargement fatigue and Ukraine's institutional (in)capacity to handle, at the moment, the greater challenges and requirements that are applicable for an EU candidate state:

In my opinion, and this is actually the policy of the Ukrainian government today, the association – the Association Agreement that we have – is an excellent tool for the full integration of Ukraine into the EU. (Interview SN_3)

Frankly speaking, I think that now [the AA] is such a signpost that tells us where to go and what to do. Can we talk about deepening cooperation? Well, I'll tell you honestly, I'm not sure whether the Ukrainian state, with its capacity – be it institutional, political, or the like – could achieve a deeper level of integration. With this Ukrainian inability to

implement any difficult decisions or make difficult reforms if they are not popular ... Any deepening of cooperation implies additional obligations on the part of Ukraine. Is Ukraine ready to implement them? Well, frankly, I have a lot of questions here. It's not so much an issue from the side of the EU, as it is much on our side, whether we are able to do something more difficult. (Interview Holos_1)

You understand that it is more than 600 pages ... it is an agreement that is spelled out clearly. The challenge is to implement it and then move on to another stage – as I earlier said (that is, to the Copenhagen Criteria). Until we have done our homework on the association (and there, I understand, there is still a little more than half left to start and finish), we cannot talk about anything else. (Interview YES_3)

Just as with the varied party reasonings above about why the format of EU–Ukraine association was the only feasible option back then (even if not the most desirable one), little agreement exists even among the single-party representatives – that is, the OPZZH – as to how to assess the EU–Ukraine AA in the wider context of EU–Ukraine relations. Whereas one OPZZH MP points to economic imbalances and the AA's insufficiency as 'the most effective tool for our European integration' (Interview OPZZH_1), another MP presents the following perspective:

First of all, if you do not endow this agreement with what it cannot be, that is, an instrument of Ukraine's direct accession to the EU (and it was never supposed to be such an instrument), ... [then] from a technical point of view regarding the implementation of technical regulations, food safety, European production standards, it is a good document. (Interview OPZZH_2)

Furthermore, and related to the above, at least five interviewed MPs mentioned that the lack of clarity about the 'point of destination' or a credible EU membership perspective for Ukraine impacts both the perception and the implementation of EU- or AA-'imposed' reforms in Ukraine:

Yes of course [the EU-imposed reforms are not fully legitimate]. We aren't ashamed to say that it isn't fair to Ukraine, when the lack of a clear [EU accession] perspective becomes, among other things, a challenge for any ruling team that pursues the path of European integration, as it is politically difficult to explain to voters the need to adopt certain

European standards, which to a certain extent will burden Ukrainian business ... That is why we seek clear recognition [of Ukraine's European perspective] and here, on the example of the last of these events that we mentioned today, the Ukraine–EU Summit, we see a willingness to go to meetings and speak more clearly about Ukraine's European perspective. (Interview SN_3)

This is not even [*ne parytetno*]. (Interview SN_1)

On the other hand, at least four MPs explicitly stated that the perspective on reforms is relevant, pointing to the constellation in which Ukraine's society – not the EU – is a key *demandeur* of European-style reforms and saying that it is Ukraine's political choice for Europe as a model of state-building and development:

But whose desire has been to accede to the EU? Was it our very own desire or is it the European Union that is pushing us there?! We wanted to be in the European Union! ... Therefore, I think that we simply have no option to meet those expectations if we are serious about joining the EU. (Interview YES_2)

It's all very simple: the EU is an already established community ... In my professional opinion, integration into such a community means changes – – real, sincere changes within the country. Without them, it's impossible to become a member of the EU. Therefore, I consider it a disingenuous and unprofessional position to say that 'the EU prevents us from integrating into the EU'. Moreover, it sounds like such a Moscow narrative. (Interview Batkivshchyna_2)

Thereby, and overwhelmingly so, the interviewed MPs agreed that nuances – that is, differentiation between various reforms rather than generalizations – matter. As an ironic take on these – apparently mutual for the EU and Ukraine – gaps between hope/expectation performance gaps has it:

You know, I'd like to joke here that we implement these requirements, that is reforms, just as good as they give us the prospect of membership. There is such an element of mutual deception here ... Well, if you are serious, then look: Ukraine has made a commitment by signing the commitment and Association Agreement. Europeans take signed agreements seriously. Ukrainians should also take this seriously. We have to say that, yes, this is part of our commitment. The fact that someone from

the outside must remind us that we ourselves have taken on those obligations, promised something is actually a shame. But I'll tell you frankly that I have been working in the administrative and political sphere of Ukraine for some time, I don't believe that there are any things that we will do without a magical push from the outside. (Interview Holos_1)

Third, Ukrainian MPs are also split regarding why Ukraine has not joined the EU yet and whether it should have done so by now. While some cited (1) lost opportunities and time (Interviews YES_1; YES_2; OPZZH_1), especially during the Yanukovich period (Interview SN_2), and (2) domestic political and economic obstacles (Interviews SN_1; YES_3; Holos_3; Batkivshchyna_2; Batkivshchyna_3), including Ukraine's 'multi-vector' foreign policy (Interview Holos_3), others were keen to appeal to Ukraine-exogenous factors – that is, the (3) Russia factor (namely, the EU's fear of Russian reaction to Ukraine's EU accession) (Interviews SN_1; YES_3; Holos_3; Batkivshchyna_3), including (4) Russia's continued aggression in Ukraine as a deterrent factor (Interviews SN_2; SN_3), (5) the lack of a coherent position on the issue among EU member states (Interview SN_1), and (6) fear of the greater competition between 'old' Western and 'new' Eastern Europe that would ensue with Ukraine's accession to the EU (Interview SN_1). Several MPs agreed that there was what one interviewee termed an 'element of artificial deterrence' of Ukraine from EU accession (Interview YES_3).

Fourth, and most significantly, despite divergences in parliamentarians' perspectives on the issues and challenges regarding Ukraine's EU accession, most of them remained hopeful of the prospects thereof, not least because of the positive assessment of the progress made by Ukraine on its European integration path.

Well, it is certain that Ukraine is gradually, progressively, albeit very difficult, becoming closer to the EU than it was before. (Interview Batkivshchyna_3)

Look, if we get to act together and 'plough' persistently for 10 years, then 10–15 years is a realistic timeline [for Ukraine's EU accession]. (Interview Holos_1)

Rare pessimistic accounts of the infeasible 10–15-year time horizon for Ukraine's EU accession were also identified – and not only from among the OPZZH members:

I don't think we can say anything about prospects and their dynamics. We can only say something from the point of view of the rhetoric indeed: from the EU side, just as 20 years ago they talked about the 20-year perspective of Ukraine in the EU, and now, in the latest statements, it is again a 20-year perspective. (Interview OPZZH_1)

There is no prospect of Ukraine joining the EU. I talk enough off-the-record with our colleagues from European countries to know that in the next 15 years ... they won't consider Ukraine's accession to the EU. They've also closed themselves off so much that they won't even think about it, they don't want to increase the members of the EU and enlarge. This is their policy; this is their mistake. (Interview Batkivshchyna_1)

Nonetheless, when asked directly whether they would support Ukraine's EU accession if the EU granted Ukraine the status of candidate, the interviewed MPs unanimously confirmed that they would. Ten MPs expressed a resolute yes, and a further four stated they would 'rather support' such a move (see the cumulative result on the Likert scale in Figure 4.3).

A similar unity, save one compromising (and quite literally compromise-based) response, can be observed in Ukrainian MPs' responses to a provocative question on whether they still would hold pro-EU accession views should the EU fail to grant Ukraine candidate status within the next five years (see the cumulative result on the Likert scale in Figure 4.4).

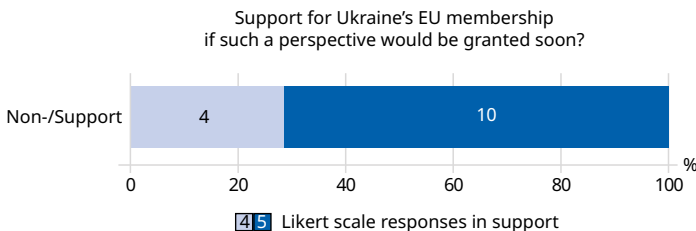


Figure 4.3: Ukrainian MPs' stance on Ukraine's EU accession if the EU were to support it in the coming years

Source: authors' illustration based on interview data.

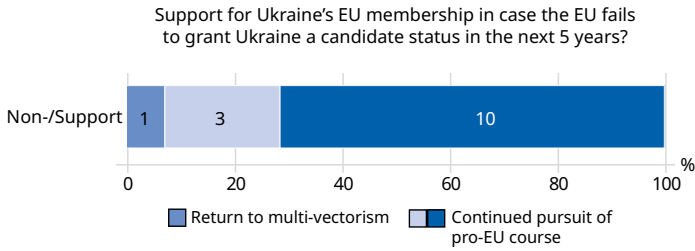


Figure 4.4: Ukrainian MPs' stance on Ukraine's EU accession should the EU fail to grant Ukraine candidate status in the next five years

Source: authors' illustration based on interview data.

These focused survey results vividly confirm the repeated assertions of the interviewed MPs about the existence of a consensus on Ukraine's European integration and EU accession course – despite sporadically differing approaches of parliamentary political forces on how to pursue it. The disagreements centred mainly on whether Russian interests should be accommodated at all. When asked whether they would prioritize Ukraine's EU accession even if it risked making it impossible to normalize relations with Russia, 12 MPs (86 per cent) cast no doubt this was the way forward, with just two (14 per cent) – notably both OPZZH MPs – opining that both EU accession and normalization of relations with Russia should be pursued simultaneously (albeit with one of them doubting any normalization is possible at all given the conflict in Donbas).

Finally, fifth, and perhaps most importantly, many of the issues raised by the interviewed MPs regarding the ills and challenges of managing Ukraine's EU membership dreams and the Union's policy solutions were 'solved' by Ukraine's bold action. On the fifth day of Russia's full-scale invasion on 28 February 2022, Ukraine submitted its EU membership application. This unprecedented move was met with an equally unprecedented swift and positive response from the EU. On 23 June 2023, Ukraine was granted the status of EU candidate. Although there has been a considerable narrowing of the critical expectation gap (at least in this context), it is uncertain whether this gap will not widen in the future, given Ukraine's massive suffering of war and sacrifice in the name of Europe. Naturally, new hopes and expectations will emerge. For now, Ukraine's EU accession talks

are progressing swiftly. In his statement on 1 July 2022 at the signing ceremony of the joint declaration of the president, the prime minister, and the speaker of the parliament on Ukraine's strategic course towards full-fledged EU membership, President V. Zelensky expressed his appreciation for the handling of Ukraine's application for membership by the EU in a record 115 days and was expressly hopeful that 'Ukraine's path to full-fledged membership in the EU should, too, be rapid rather than lasting for years or decades' (Zelensky, 2022b). With new hopes and expectations, there is naturally a risk of a performance gap (re)opening in EU–Ukraine integration dynamics.

Conclusions

There is a truism in the making that the Russian war in Ukraine changes everything. It has undoubtedly altered the perceptions of both Ukraine – its strength, resilience, and ability to resist Russia's brutal (if not barbaric) invasion – and those of the EU as an actor, including in the security and defence areas. Remarkably – and paradoxically – the war has changed the depth and dynamics of EU–Ukraine integration, which now proceeds at an unheard-of pace despite the war (as some analysts are inclined to believe, thanks to war too). Importantly, Ukraine's course on 'European integration 2.0' commenced shortly before the war, as in 2020 Ukraine started preparing an evaluation of AA implementation as a step towards opening its EU accession negotiations. Thereby, Ukraine's role and status have gradually transformed: from a junior partner and an associated country that was expected to download EU rules and procedures (especially in DCFTA matters) to a co-shaper of certain EU policy undertakings (such as the European Green Deal). With this, Ukraine has begun to accomplish a firm move away from the position of a symbolically perceived 'EU periphery' to the both symbolically and substantially practised status of a partner and EU member in the making. Thereby, it attempts to alleviate not so much the periphery issue but, more importantly, a much more bothersome (and perceived as existing) asymmetry challenge in Ukraine–EU relations.

The interviews conducted with Ukrainian MPs, as well as other primary sources and secondary literature, revealed that critical expectation gaps exist(ed) in several issue areas, revolving chiefly around Ukraine's lasting – but moderately successful – pursuit of EU mem-

bership and the EU's response to Russian aggression in Ukraine since 2014, with the EU's performance in managing the COVID-19 pandemic being an area with narrow and short-lived critical expectation gaps.

Ukraine is *not* a Eurosceptic country by any account (or measurement approach). However, the EU's more than three decades of not acknowledging Ukraine's membership perspective gave rise to – marginal – voices that have sporadically employed anti-EU and anti-reform rhetoric. A certain credibility–expectations gap is also engrained in broader frameworks of Ukraine's perception of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its relations with the EU's aspiring Eastern neighbours. Furthermore, the EU's perceivably insufficient engagement in crisis and conflict resolution in and around Ukraine since early 2014 has also left its mark on the public and political perception of the EU's credibility as a partner and a geopolitical power.

The interviews also demonstrated that a political elite consensus has emerged regarding Ukraine's EU accession – and did so well before the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This is an important added value of the study, as this issue had been (and still is now) highly politicized, and the swift developments on both the battlefields and Ukraine's EU accession trajectory only amplify such politicization and mythification of the process. This, in turn, risks fostering the proliferation of misperceptions and skewed expectations and, as a result, widening the gap.

Notes

- 1 The 15th interview (with an OPZZH party member) was cancelled due to the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion.
- 2 Electoral Program of the Communist Party of Ukraine in 2010, <http://www.kpu.ua/programmaku/>
- 3 Importantly, this 'ideational choice for Europe' is not only a publicly shared view but also a stance widely shared by political elites in both Georgia and Ukraine (Kakachia et al., 2019, p. 457).
- 4 Hnatiuk (2017) neatly captures this state of mind and hope in Ukraine (among both regular citizens and political and intellectual elites) as a 'waiting for Europe' kind of condition.
- 5 For instance, in Interviews SN_2; SN_3; YES_1; YES_3; Holos_1; Holos_3; Batkivshchyna_1, etc.
- 6 The scholarly literature on European integration and state-building reflects on the similarity between the state-building processes of EU members and those of their neighbours, where the adoption of EU rules complements rather than

contradicts the building of European-style societies and public institutions in countries that identify themselves as part of Europe (whether inside or outside the EU); see, for instance, Tyushka (2017; 2020) and Wolczuk (2019).

- 7 The EU was not blamed for the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014. Eight MPs attributed the blame to Putin's 'sick mind' (Interview SN_2), Russian elites' chauvinism, and post-Soviet Russia's neo-imperialism. Six MPs blamed Yanukovich and 'all pro-Russian and Russian forces in the country' (Interview Batkivshchyna_2).

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Includes only political parties that won in the 2019 elections and are currently legislative parties in the Ukrainian parliament

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*Interviews (anonymized, as cited in text) with Members of the
Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine*

Interview SN_1: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, SN Party.
 Interview SN_2: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, SN Party.
 Interview SN_3: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, SN Party.
 Interview YES_1: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, YES Party.
 Interview YES_2: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, YES Party.
 Interview YES_3: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, YES Party.
 Interview Holos_1: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Holos Party.
 Interview Holos_2: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Holos Party.
 Interview Holos_3: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Holos Party.
 Interview Batkivshchyna_1: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Batkivshchyna Party.
 Interview Batkivshchyna_2: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Batkivshchyna Party.
 Interview Batkivshchyna_3: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Batkivshchyna Party.
 Interview OPZZH_1: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, OPZZH Party.
 Interview OPZZH_2: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, OPZZH Party.

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Appendix

Table A4.1: Interviews with Members of the Ninth Convocation of the Ukrainian Parliament. Interviews were conducted jointly by Roman Kalytchak and Nataliya Shalenna from the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy at the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (IFNUL) between 24 September 2021 and 7 February 2022.

No.	Inter- view date	MP	Party	Position(s)
1	24.09.21	Mezentseva, Mariya Serhiyivna (Мезенцева Марія Сергіївна)	Sluga Narodu (SN)	Deputy chair of the Committee, and chair of the Sub-Committee on Approximation of Ukrainian Legislation to EU Legislation of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Ukraine's Integration into the European Union; member of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); head of the Permanent Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe ¹
2	05.10.21	Ariev, Volodymyr Igorovych (Ар'єв Володимир Ігорович)	Yevrope- yska Solidarn- ist (YES)	Member of the Permanent Delegation of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to the EU-Eastern Neighbors Parliamentary Assembly (EURONEST PA); member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Digital Transformation ²
3	12.10.21	Krulko, Ivan Ivanovych (Крулько Іван Іванович)	Batkivsh- chyna	Head of the Permanent Delegation of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to the EU-Eastern Neighbors Parliamentary Assembly (EURONEST PA); first deputy chair of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Budget Issues ³
4	18.10.21	Fedyna, Sofiya Romanivna (Федина Софія Романівна)	YES	Deputy head of the Permanent Delegation of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to the EU-Eastern Neighbors Parliamentary Assembly (EURONEST PA); member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Humanitarian and Information Policy ⁴
5	18.10.21	Sovsun, Inna Romanivna (Совсун Інна Романівна)	Holos	Member of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Energy and Housing and Communal Services ⁵

¹ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мезенцева_Марія_Сергіївна

² https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ар%27єв_Володимир_Ігорович

³ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Крулько_Іван_Іванович

⁴ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Федина_Софія_Романівна

No.	Interview date	MP	Party	Position(s)
6	27.10.21	Halaychuk, Vadym Serhiyovych (Галайчук Вадим Сергійович)	SN	First deputy chair of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Ukraine's Integration into the European Union; chair of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); member of the Permanent Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe ⁶
7	08.11.21	Lozynskyy, Roman MukhaILOvych (Лозинський Роман Михайлович)	Holos	Member of the Permanent Delegation of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to the EU-Eastern Neighbors Parliamentary Assembly (<i>EURONEST</i> PA); deputy member of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); first deputy chair of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on the Organization of State Power, Local Self-Government, Regional Development and Urban Planning ⁷
8	09.11.21	Nalyvaichenko, Oleksandr Valentynovych (Наливайченко Валентин Олександрович)	Batkivshchyna	Secretary of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Ukraine's Integration into the European Union; member of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC) ⁸
9	13.11.21	Voloshyn, Oleh Anatoliyovych (Волошин Олег Анатолійович)	Opozytsiyna Platforma – Za Zhyttia (OPZZH)	Deputy chair of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Ukraine's Integration into the EU; deputy chair of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); deputy member of the Permanent Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe ⁹
10	20.11.21	Shkrum, Alyona Ivanivna (Шкрум Альона Іванівна)	Batkivshchyna	Member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Finance, Tax and Customs Policy; international law specialist ¹⁰

⁵ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Совсун_Інна_Романівна

⁶ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Галайчук_Вадим_Сергійович

⁷ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Лозинський_Роман_Михайлович

⁸ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Наливайченко_Валентин_Олександрович

⁹ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Волошин_Олег_Анатолійович

¹⁰ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Шкрум_Альона_Іванівна

No.	Interview date	MP	Party	Position(s)
11	24.11.21	Klympush-Tsynt-sadze, Ivanna Orestivna (Климпущ-Цинцадзе Іванна Орестівна)	YES	Chair of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Ukraine's Integration into the European Union; First Deputy Chair of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); member of the Ukraine-NATO Inter-Parliamentary Council ¹¹
12	25.11.21	Pavlenko, Yuriy Oleksandrovych (Павленко Юрій Олексійович)	OPZZH	Deputy member of the Ukrainian Part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); deputy chair of the Counting Commission of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine of the Ninth Convocation ¹²
13	09.12.21	Rakhmanin, Serhiy Ivanovych (Рахманін Сергій Іванович)	Holos	Chair of the Temporary Special Commission of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on the Formation and Implementation of State Policy Regarding the Restoration of Territorial Integrity and Ensuring the Sovereignty of Ukraine; member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on National Security, Defense, and Intelligence; member of the Ukrainian part of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania and of the Sejm and Senate of the Republic of Poland; member of the Permanent Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe ¹³
14	07.02.22	Natalukha, Dmytro Andriyovych (Наталуха Дмитро Андрійович)	SN	Chair of the Committee on Economic Development; deputy member of the Permanent Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; co-chair of the Parliamentary Group on Inter-Parliamentary Relations with the UK and Northern Ireland ¹⁴
15	Cancelled ¹⁵	Kachnyu Oleksandr Stalinolepovych (Качний Олександр Сталіноленович)	OPZZH	Member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Humanitarian and Information Policy

¹¹ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Климпущ-Цинцадзе_Іванна_Орестівна

¹² https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Павленко_Юрій_Олексійович

¹³ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Рахманін_Сергій_Іванович

¹⁴ https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Наталуха_Дмитро_Андрійович

¹⁵ The interview was confirmed but was eventually cancelled due to the onset of Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine.

CHAPTER 5

Republic of Moldova

The Challenges of a Periphery's Shifting Identity, from the Russian Federation's Sphere of Influence to EU Accession

Nicolae Toderaş

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest

Daniel Pascal

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest

Abstract

In this chapter, Moldova's EU path is analysed from a historiographical perspective, emphasizing recent developments. A hypothesis about the political elite's view of Moldova's irreversible EU accession process was explored in nine structured interviews with political leaders. The discussion revolved around seven core elements, including their perception of the EU and the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Moldova–EU relations. The analysis reveals that Moldova's intensified EU relations result largely from shifting regional contexts rather than

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being driven by internal political elites. For Moldova, the EU is seen as a peace guarantor and internal policy standard. While the EU alignment appears irreversible, reservations exist about the pace of reform during EU negotiations, particularly if the government changes. Overall, internal political determination is key to overcoming Moldova's peripheral EU status.

Keywords: Republic of Moldova, EU accession process, Eastern Partnership

Introduction

This chapter presents the evolution of deepening relations between the Republic of Moldova (RM) and the European Union over the last two decades, focusing on the last ten years, especially following the application of the EU–RM Association Agreement (AA). We present the idea of in-depth cooperation with the EU within the limits of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) for the post-Soviet space where, at the time of the AA, accession to the EU was not certain. The evolution of events related to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia brought radical changes in the sense of Moldova obtaining the status of candidate and the initiation of the pre-accession screening and negotiation process, which had not been foreseen at all in the former Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework. The main geopolitical events are presented and analysed in the chapter, with a focus on the main turning points in Moldova–EU relations.

The analysis examines the gradual change of Moldova's geopolitical identity in the last decade, within the theoretical perspective of renegotiations of centre–periphery relations, with Moldova going from the status of a peripheral country under the influence of Russia to one under the influence of the EU. Thus, we present the gradualness of this process from the perspective of centre–periphery relations of an economic and political nature. The paradox is that if the process of EU expansion to the East is carried out to the end (in the sense of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine becoming member states one day), then, from a geographical point of view, the Republic of Moldova will no longer be a peripheral state of the EU but will be located at the limits of the geographical centre. The paradox of changing the geographical nature of the periphery is in line with the consideration specified by the editors of this volume in the conceptual chapter: ‘in the context

of the EU integration process, each enlargement wave has changed the meaning of “EU periphery” (see [Chapter 1](#)). From this point of view, it is important to periodically assess how the perceptions of political leaders change once the processes of EU enlargement towards Eastern Europe advance. In this regard, the analysis focuses on how the vision and aspirations towards EU accession of the Republic of Moldova are promoted by the political parties and the main political actors from the government and the opposition. Thus, the analysis aims to capture and interpret aspects of politicians’ perception relating to the evolution of things in the last period (especially war, but also other overlapping crises). The interviews target both political actors involved today in the European integration process and also those who were involved in the process of rethinking the development vector of Moldova in the past.

The analysis is divided into two parts. The first part is dedicated to a brief literature review over the last decade. This is undertaken considering the main conceptual elements specific to this volume. In the second part, the analysis focuses on the main issues specific to the Republic of Moldova’s trajectory in relation to the EU. While all steps since 1991 are reviewed, the focus of the analysis is on the last decade. This combination of the historical approach and analysis of the perceptions of current political leaders builds on the results of structured interviews during the fact-finding period.

Literature Review on the Prospect of Moldova’s EU Accession

The literature on the European path of the Republic of Moldova has been quite diverse in recent times. In the 2000s, the topic was rather dealt with by internal epistemic communities and rarely by external ones. However, since 2010, the level of interest of external epistemic communities, especially in the EU, has increased considerably. The number of monographs, articles, chapters in thematic volumes, and grey literature analyses focused on the evolution of the European pathway of Moldova has multiplied.

The Republic of Moldova was initially treated as a peripheral area, at the confluence of Russia’s ‘crepuscular’ influence but also of the attractiveness of the EU, where it experienced a prevalent identity confusion that kept it stuck between the Soviet heritage and aspirations to get closer to the EU (Schmidtke & Chira-Pascanut, 2008; Harbo, 2010).

Due to the lack of domestic political will to take decisive steps towards the EU, but also to the limited willingness of the EU to give it a definite prospect of accession, by 2009 Moldova was seen as a blocked country, caught between two poles of influence (Korosteleva, 2010; Danii, 2011).

However, over time, analyses and studies have also diversified and focused on specific issues relating to the regulatory, economic, and social changes taking place in the Republic of Moldova as a result of the deepening of relations with the EU, both in the EaP and in the implementation of the AA (Nizhnikau, 2019; Bușcăneanu, 2021). These analyses focus either on a generalist treatment of transformations or on specific areas or issues.

Another particularity of the specialized bibliography consulted is the fact that the Republic of Moldova is being treated as a package with other EaP countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, or Belarus (Korosteleva, 2012; Bruns et al., 2016; Davies & Vági, 2023). Most analyses focus on how the EaP produces transformative effects in each country in the region, notably through AAs after their entry into force in 2016. For example, the most common analyses of the ENP cover the following areas: border control and migration management (Merheim-Eyre, 2017; Nizhnikau, 2019); internal legislative adjustments to implement EU law (Khvorostiankina, 2014; Tofan, 2016); environmental protection (Nizhnikau, 2019); democratic consolidation (Nilsson & Silander, 2016); education (Toderaș & Stăvaru, 2018; Makarychev & Butnaru Troncotă, 2022; Toderaș 2022); raising awareness around deepening relations with the EU (Torres-Adán, 2021; Burluyuk et al., 2023); strengthening security in the region following the second invasion of Ukraine by Russia (Kaunert & de Deus Pereira, 2023); and the regulation of secessionist conflicts in the region (Albulescu, 2022). It is often stated in these analyses that there is a need to streamline or adjust institutions, approaches, and instruments applicable to ENP countries to their domestic aspirations, needs, and capabilities (Kostanyan, 2017), including by changing the strategic approach for the region (Kaunert & de Deus Pereira, 2023). As some opt for deeper and accelerated rapprochement with the EU, including becoming EU members, others simply diversify their economic relations. Recent analyses also focus on how Russia uses pressure tactics including economic blackmail against EaP countries (Samokhvalov, 2021), especially in the context of the implementation of AAs (Bușcăneanu, 2021) or in the particular

situation of the Republic of Moldova (Vardanean, 2018; Deen & Zweers, 2022). Pressure or blackmail tactics are applied by Russia to keep these countries within its sphere of influence and to counter their rapprochement with the EU.

The literature reviewed shows that the change in political discourse is dependent on the evolution of the external context but also on the preservation of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova. Namely, during the first years of independence the focus of said discourse gradually shifted from democratization and preservation of indigenous ethno-cultural values towards liberalization and ownership of European identity. The literature in question recurrently addresses this shift, considering the following key phenomena in shaping the political discourse on the European integration of the Republic of Moldova. The first phenomenon is the establishment of a concurrent ambivalent narrative: integration into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and, more recently, into the Eurasian Economic Union, but also into the EU (Tofan, 2018). For the period 1990–2009, the political elites' concept of ambitious integration was dominated by public discourse. On the one hand, this created stability in relation to the old cooperation arrangements with Russia, which are still a centre of attraction for the Republic of Moldova (Hagemann, 2013; Dragneva, 2018); on the other hand, this was a chance to seize the new opportunities offered by the EU, as well as by certain member states. The EaP has contributed to the gradual unravelling of dependencies on Russia but also hesitation over whether to accept being part of other alternative economic integration structures such as the Eurasian Economic Union (Tofan, 2018; Kobayashi, 2019; Bușcăneanu, 2021).

The second recurrent phenomenon in the literature refers to the fact that, as in other states of the region, Moldova is driven by a dichotomy between the left and the right on the definition of the foreign policy vector (Prisac, 2015; Turco & Moșneaga, 2021). Talk of social mobilization in support of the aspiration of European integration has been shaped since the mid-1990s by the political elites of the opposition parties at the time. Thus, political elites located on the centre right chose to strengthen the vector of the Republic of Moldova's enhanced relations with the EU, while those on the centre left chose to maintain relations with Russia and step up cooperation within the CIS.

Some analyses also point to the fact that the ideological dichotomy is reinforced by the cleavage between the majority and the minority.

Most of the population is Euro-optimistic and supports centre-right or moderate left parties, and ethnic minorities are prone to be Euro-sceptic and to show support for left-wing parties or those that promote the narratives propagated by Russia (Kosienkowski & Schreiber, 2014). Some authors argue that the source of Euroscepticism for ethnic minorities, being predominantly Russian-speaking, is the mass media supported by Russia, leading to anti-EU or anti-Western sentiment (Deen & Zweers, 2022).

The formation and adjustment of ideological concepts conducive to the European integration of Moldova is also seen in terms of external influences, from both the EU and Russia. Thus, on the side of European political families the most influential impact in the case of Moldova was the European People's Party (EPP), and the congruence of Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) with the ideologies of internal political parties was rather weak (Shagina, 2017). From Russia, significant political influence is exercised through political parties or leaders challenging Moldova's rapprochement with the EU (Nizhnikau, 2016).

Since 2000, the Public Policy Institute of the Republic of Moldova has instituted the Public Opinion Barometer (POB). As the main instrument for measuring public opinion, this also contains a few items from which the dynamics of popular support can be inferred in the process of the Republic of Moldova's European integration. The European integration of Moldova is supported by a significant share of the population of the country (Turco & Moşneaga, 2021). Carried out every six months, spring and autumn, the POB is identified in the literature as the most credible and consistent source of primary data on the societal state of the Republic of Moldova. In our analysis, we use POB data to present the dynamics of public opinion in favour of possible EU membership.

Methodological Approach

The chapter focuses on the question of whether, at this stage of the EU accession process, from the perspective of domestic political elites, the integration of the Republic of Moldova is irreversible, assuming that it was an external factor that enabled the granting of candidate status. The hypothesis is justified by the fact that, although by the time of the Russian Federation's military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022

there were several opportunities to create the conditions for application for EU membership, the Moldovan authorities were reluctant to take the necessary actions in order to maximize these opportunities. As the history of EU enlargement shows, the progress of rapprochement, deepening relations, and subsequent pre-accession oscillates between acceleration and deceleration. In this respect, irreversibility focuses on the fact that what has been achieved in relation to the Copenhagen Criteria is maintained regardless of government alternatives or other internal or foreign policy contexts. It is in this light that this chapter aims to analyse just how irreversible this process is, based on the commitment of the political elite to strengthening relations with the EU and in a context of Moldova's self-representation as being an EU periphery.

The analysis is based on data collected from semi-structured interviews with representatives of the political elites and on secondary sources. We conducted nine online interviews, in spring 2023, with key political leaders in Moldova about the process of European integration. The aim was to ensure the representation of a diverse demographic, including age, political background, membership in political parties, and ideological leanings (Appendix, [Table A5.1](#)). All interviewees chose to have their responses and identification anonymized.

The interviews were structured on seven key questions – five common within the book framework and two adapted to the country. The variables used to define the key questions as well as the analysis criteria and perception indicators are:

- perception of the EU;
- major problems or critical circumstances experienced which have led to the deepening of relations with the EU;
- major achievements or failures of the Republic of Moldova with the EU;
- consequences of the military invasion of Ukraine by Russia for relations between the Republic of Moldova and the EU;
- the irreversibility of Moldova's EU accession process;
- the existence of alternatives to accession to the EU, if things went wrong in the future;
- what the EU should do to make Moldova more attached to, integrated into, or aligned with EU values.

The main limit of the qualitative methodology was the need for balanced representation of political parties in the 2021–2025 parliamentary term. While necessary steps were taken, the study encountered limitations as members of the Action and Solidarity Party were most receptive to the interviews; members of the other three parliamentary parties strongly refused to be interviewed.

The First Steps of the Republic of Moldova towards the EU

The first step towards the EU was undertaken in 1994 when the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, which entered into force only in 1998, was signed. The entry into force of this agreement allowed for an opportunity to assume European identity between February and November 1999 by establishing the Republic of Moldova's assertion of its advancement to cooperation with the EU as its foreign policy driver. The first courageous steps were taken to move away from Russia's sphere of influence and to move closer to the EU, by initiating a structured dialogue with the EU institutions (Interview 2). Thus, the governance programme proposed by the Sturza cabinet focused on initiating and intensifying the steps ahead of European integration.

As a result of the change in the narrative of the political elites in the late 1990s, a change in perceptions of European integration also occurred in society. The Public Opinion Barometer carried out in 2000 by the Institute of Public Policy indicated that for 38 per cent of respondents, the Republic of Moldova's external orientation had to be towards the EU, for 32 per cent it had to be towards the EU and the CIS, while 20 per cent opted for the CIS alone and 10 per cent were unwilling or uncertain how to respond (IPP, 2000, p. 53). That year's barometer also indicated that Moldova's European integration should focus most on the economic sector (77 per cent), followed by the regulatory sector (47 per cent), education and science (44 per cent), and politics (43 per cent).

After the fall of the Sturza government (December 1999), a moderate stagnation in relations with the EU began. The subsequent government displayed another view on the relationship with the EU:

At the time in the Republic of Moldova, there were other things to consider in relation to cooperation with the EU such as asymmetric trade,

benefits it could obtain from the EU, etc. Also, throughout the 2000s, the Republic of Moldova was not ready to separate from the Eastern area, from its relations with Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, the CIS space. (Interview 8)

In this context, from March 2001 to November 2003, with the acquisition of power by the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova, relations with the EU were frozen while those with Russia intensified.

The rejection of the implementation of the Russian Draft Memorandum on the Basic Principles of the State Structure of a United State in Moldova (November 2003) was a decisive turning point at which the Republic of Moldova's dependence on the Russia came to an end. All political leaders interviewed identified this moment as a critical step in establishing Moldova's dependence on the option of the path of European integration, though there was no unanimity as to the reasons for this turning point: several political leaders interviewed, especially those who had been involved in political activities at the time, considered that the rationality of the decision springs from the desire to safeguard the political power of the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova, rather than from any potential benefits of European integration (Interview 6). Most of the political leaders interviewed considered that the danger of the disappearance of Moldova as a state persists and has even increased since 2014 (in the context of the hybrid warfare established by Russia after the first invasion of Ukraine and the signing of the AA). Examples include following reasoning:

When the Republic of Moldova is in an area of influence of Russia, it is crucial for us, as government, to escape these influences. The threats related to Transnistria, and the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) of Gagauzia, including those risks of overturning the situation in the Republic of Moldova, are dangerous for us. (Interview 4)

In the opinion of the political leaders interviewed, this danger will be eliminated with Moldova's effective accession to the EU.

From December 2003 to the end of 2007, Moldova's cooperation with the EU gradually intensified. Some flagship results were achieved during this period on the irreversibility of the deepening of Moldova's relations with the EU, according to interview findings:

- The signature of the EU–Moldova Action Plan (EUMAP) in February 2005;

- The adoption by the Moldovan parliament of the Declaration on the European Integration of the Republic of Moldova on 24 March 2005; the fact that the Declaration was voted for unanimously by all the political factions of that parliamentary term was of considerable symbolic significance in the firmness of the path of European integration of the Republic of Moldova (Interview 8);
- The initiation of market economy reforms to gradually move the Moldovan economy towards compliance with the second EU accession criterion.

The decision of the political leaders in 2005 to change the foreign policy path by taking on Moldova's wish to join the EU was legitimized by clear public support. For example, the Public Opinion Barometer of December 2005 (IPP, n.d.) shows that 64.3 per cent of people questioned would have voted for Moldova's accession to the EU if a referendum had been held. Only 8.5 per cent of respondents indicated that they would have voted against and 19.5 per cent were not decided to opt for accession, while 3.2 per cent would not have taken part in a referendum on such a subject and 4.8 per cent chose not to respond.

Public legitimacy was initially used by political leaders to implement the provisions of the EUMAP, which was reflected in the reforms needed to strengthen the rule of law and economic liberalization. However, between 2007 and 2009 the implementation processes of the plan's provisions slowed down and inter-institutional cooperation diminished. Most interviewees pointed out that the slowing down and subsequently stagnation of the implementation of EUMAP provisions is one of the main failures of the Republic of Moldova in relation to the EU. For example, the lack of alignment with EU single market rules and standards maintained sectoral dependencies on the CIS market (Interview 5), while Russia used blackmail tactics with the Republic of Moldova because of the change in foreign policy vector.

As a result of the slowdown in the implementation of EUMAP-specific actions, the pressure on the political elite aspiring to intensify relations with the EU has increased considerably compared with previous periods. The degree of social appeal against decisions to slow down Moldova's rapprochement with the EU has also increased massively, which has fuelled those in opposition to call more actively and publicly for reforms to deepen relations with the EU. Data from the Public Opinion Barometer show that the peak of public support for

the possible accession of Moldova to the EU was in November 2007, when records showed 76 per cent support; in the following two years the share was 71 per cent (2008) and 66.5 per cent (2009).

The transformations that took place in the 2000–2009 in establishing the external vector of the Republic of Moldova towards EU accession were perceived by interviewees in the 30–40 age group as a longitudinal country project with a strong identity attachment. The consideration that ‘EU integration has always been a high priority for the Republic of Moldova, and most people supporting this priority considered themselves to be European by law’ (Interview 7) is illustrative of this change of political reasoning. A clear finding of our research is the refrain that there is no civilization model for the Republic of Moldova other than a European one being engraved in the collective consciousness.

The Challenges of the Reopening of Moldova’s relations with the EU: The Disappointment Decade

The period following the change in government in 2009 was one of both political change and also the reopening of Moldova’s relations with the EU, as well as with most member states. As a result, the processes of rapprochement with the EU intensified significantly, in both bilateral and multilateral cooperation relations. The initial period of cooperation on the EaP platform, therefore, coincided with the period of change in the political orientation of the Republic of Moldova, which coincided with the desires of society.

The first years of the cooperation of the Republic of Moldova on the EaP platform are evaluated a success story, which culminated with the signing of the AA on 27 June 2014 in Brussels. On 1 July 2016, the AA began to be fully applied. Before signing the AA, the parliament of the Republic of Moldova voted for a declaration in support of the European integration process, in Article 1 of which it was stipulated that ‘The accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union is a strategic objective and an irreversible process’ (Parliament Decision no. 274 of 14 November 2013). The declaration represents an additional guarantee regarding the determination to exit from the zone of influence of Russia and complete all the necessary steps for joining the EU.

From an economic point of view, the main success of the 2009–2019 period was the change in direction of Moldova’s trade balance with the EU. There is a decline in the intensity of economic disputes with Russia (Bușcăneanu, 2021, p. 638). The use by Russia of economic blackmail tactics by imposing import restrictions on sensitive agri-food proved to be misjudged. The effect of these tactics was to diversify markets, but also to step up the adoption and implementation processes of quality standards in line with EU standards – the same approach taken for more than three decades also in terms of gas supply to the Republic of Moldova.

The most emblematic results of this decade, as confirmed by most of the interviewees, relate to visa liberalization; stepping up macro-economic assistance; diversification of market outlets; and the gradual reduction of economic and energy dependency on Russia. Thus, it can be said that in this decade the EU’s transformative power over domestic public institutions and policies was exponential and the EU was ‘the most important motor energizing the modernization of the country’ (Interview 8). The political leaders interviewed highlighted that this manifested itself in areas such as rule-of-law reform (despite major setbacks); countering organized crime; adjustment of administrative practices based on the principles of good governance; convergence of production standards with those of the EU internal market; upward convergence issues; and territorial reintegration (as the EU became part of the 5 + 2 negotiating format on the settlement of the Transnistria conflict). The following consideration is illustrative: ‘The EU was the first partner that solved any problems we have faced in the last decade’ (Interview 8). Although the EU exercises transformative power over the Republic of Moldova, the view emerged that the scale and consistency of the changes depend largely on administrative capacity but also on political understanding and will (Interview 3; Interview 9). On upward convergence, the EU’s transformative power focused on adjusting internal axiological landmarks specific to a society’s patriarchal values and unfriendly to the environment and diversity to be closer to those of the EU. This highlighted the gradual improvement of the situation in horizontal objectives of the EU, such as gender equality, sustainable development, and reduction of social exclusion and discrimination.

The positive dynamics of the evolution of relations between the Republic of Moldova and the EU, as well as the history of Moldova’s

success in the Eastern Partnership, were quickly replaced by radically different characteristics. The corruption of the highest echelons of power and the withdrawal of a billion dollars from the banking system of the Republic of Moldova created an unprecedented situation and caused significant damage to the economic and political stability of the state. This led to the undermining of the confidence of European partners. It had a negative impact on the popularity of the European foreign policy vector of the country's development and served as an impetus for an even stricter delimitation of Moldovan society along the East–West principle (Stercul, 2021, p. 92). The political leaders interviewed validated these failures, in which the Republic of Moldova departed from the Copenhagen Criteria. Phenomena such as state capture by oligarchic interest groups; perpetuating and amplifying corrupt practices; degradation of legal institutions; erosion of political culture and media freedom; and the weakening of administrative capacity in various areas have led to stagnation in the harmonization of internal legislation, concepts, and regulations with those of the EU. According to the opinion of the political leaders interviewed, the causes of failure lie in the political class, which did not have the ability to understand the implications of deepening relations with the EU and left them under the grip of oligarchic interest groups. Thus, the causes of failure related to administrative capacity but also to political will opposed to the normative nature of the EU.

Symbolically, it is clear from the analysis of the above-mentioned refrain that a fundamental failure of this decade is about discrediting the label set out in 2012, seeing the Republic of Moldova as a part of the success story of the EU. The following considerations are indicative of the extent of this disappointment:

as a result, we have experienced, both as citizens who have European aspirations and as observers of European Union policies, a great disappointment with the result of bank fraud, several crimes that have affected not only Moldova's security but also regional security. (Interview 1)

with pro-European leaders in government, the whole political class is discredited internally and externally. Disappointment is still felt. (Interview 3)

In the context of the deterioration of the domestic political climate as well as relations with the EU, public support for the possible accession of Moldova has steadily decreased. As [Figure 5.1](#) shows, the negative peak was recorded in 2016 when the share of those who would vote for accession fell to 38 per cent, the lowest in the whole period since 2000. The decrease is due to the discrediting of political parties that had promoted the pro-EU message and the link between internal instability and insecurity regarding the situation in the EU. In these conditions, public opinion perceived that the national interest in joining the EU had been sabotaged by pro-European political forces. Against this background, the growth of Euroscepticism must also be associated with the intensification of narratives promoted by Russia through the Russian-language media, some political representatives, and even the Orthodox Church (Kosienkowski & Schreiber, 2014; Deen & Zweers, 2022). These narratives focused mostly on the fact that European integration would lead to an increase in corruption, the oligarchizing of society, the privatization of public services, and even the depravity of society. All of these narratives were presented in contrast to the stability and prosperity guaranteed by Russia in relation to the former republics of the USSR. On the other hand, left-wing political forces presented the alternative of deepening relations with Russia and joining the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU).

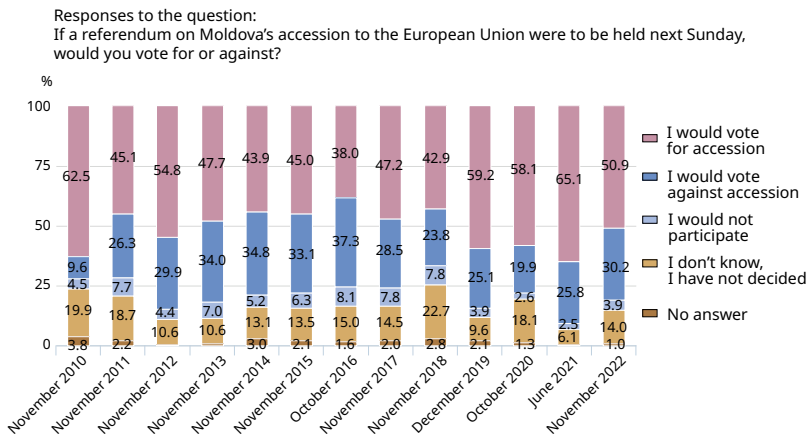


Figure 5.1: Dynamics of public opinion on the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU.

Data source: IPP (n.d.).

Against this backdrop of popular dissatisfaction, in November 2016, Eurosceptic political leader Igor Dodon won the presidential elections, which later established a tense climate between the leading pro-European parties and those opposing the intensification of relations with the EU. Against this background, even though the governments that succeeded from 2016 and 2020 were not Eurosceptic in their political configuration, no substantial steps were taken in deepening relations with the EU by implementing the provisions of the AA. As in the case of the EUMAP in the previous decade, there have been delays since the start of the implementation of the AA, particularly as regards the harmonization of legislation and standards (Interview 5).

A certain category of political elites which formed alternative political platforms, in particular young people with no political experience, worked to shape the social mobilization narrative towards European integration. They followed the aspirations of the Euro-optimistic public opinion quota and counteracted governments' intentions after 2016 to divert the European path of the Republic of Moldova: 'efforts were needed from society to prevent the creation of a state that hampers European integration' (Interview 7). As a result of this effort to recover the disappointed quota, there was a chain of remarkable results. The first came between June and November 2019, when a cabinet of ministers led by Maia Sandu was sworn into office. The second result was in December 2020 when Maia Sandu was elected president of the Republic of Moldova and the third result was winning the July 2021 parliamentary elections, resulting in the Action and Solidarity Party gaining a large majority. This sequence of events put the Republic of Moldova back on track for European integration and accelerated the implementation of the provisions of the AA.

Following the democratic changes of 2016, EU support increased and diversified, in terms of both macro-financial assistance and direct technical assistance or various forms of development or civil protection assistance. For example, from the perspective of civil protection assistance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the leaders interviewed appreciated that EU support had been substantial. On this topic, EU solidarity with the Republic of Moldova was noted not only in the speed with which help was given but also in the consistency and pre-emption of deliveries of medical products and preparations, personal protective equipment, and vaccines.

While this was a period of major opportunities largely missed, its events and achievements made Moldova resilient to major societal crises and challenges. As argued above, towards the end of the reference period the European course of the Republic of Moldova was restored. After Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, Moldova took a new step along its European path. In this context, the resilience resulting from the past decade's experiences has helped to overcome challenges much larger and more complex than those experienced previously (such as maintaining statehood and territorial integrity; resilience and counter-acting hybrid warfare, etc.). In this context, as of 24 February 2022, a new window of opportunity has opened for the Republic of Moldova, which has the potential to lead towards Moldova's accession to the EU.

A Window of Major Opportunities?

In addition to mitigating the immediate effects of the invasion of Ukraine through the EU's humanitarian assistance and civil protection instruments (effective management of refugee flows, supply of energy resources and related equipment, food and hygiene, etc.), support also targeted the protection of EaP platform states vis-à-vis Russia. In fact, the window of opportunity meant obtaining EU candidate status and starting negotiations on accession chapters. Given the state of play in meeting the commitments of the AA and the accumulated backlog over time, this strategic action was difficult to conceive in a counterfactual scenario based on pre-invasion data. However, considering the decisive step of Ukraine and also the calls for solidarity of some member states, the Republic of Moldova applied for EU membership on 3 March 2022. The request was endorsed by the European Commission on 17 June 2022, and the European Council of 23 June 2022 granted the Republic of Moldova the status of candidate country to the EU.

The political leaders interviewed indicated that the effective use of this window of opportunity was due to the domestic political context: the government's focus on addressing the accumulated backlog and speeding up the current period of action. A very successful overview of the context was set out in Interview 9:

Obtaining the status of candidate country was due to an accumulation of factors. The war has been a catalyst. This was clearly not the case for pro-EU governance, neither with war nor without. Efforts were also

made by the Republic of Moldova on the implementation of reforms and an enormous effort on the diplomatic side.

In this context, amplified by a high degree of emotion brought about by the military invasion, unanimous support has been generated among member states for offering the Republic of Moldova candidate status, leading to the start of negotiations on the 35 accession chapters. The current situation of broad political support from all EU countries looks completely different to 2014–2015 (Interview 3). One interview finding was that the implementation of the provisions of the AA has accelerated over the years 2020–2022. Other new actions specific to the application for membership have also been implemented at a rapid pace: such as the preparation of replies to the European Commission's questionnaire, the implementation of the measures proposed by the European Commission in its Opinion on Moldova's application for EU membership (nine recommendations), and the preparations for initiating the negotiation of accession chapters.

In support of the start of pre-accession negotiations, subject to the fulfilment of the nine recommendations put forward by the European Commission, on 19 April 2023 the European Parliament issued a resolution reaffirming its support for the Republic of Moldova in the context of attempts by external forces to destabilize the domestic political climate. The Moldovan authorities are also making use of the platform created by the European Political Community (EPC). Understood within a broader background, the EPC platform is identified as an opportunity to strengthen multilateral mutual structured dialogue, align internal public policies with those of the EU, and reduce asymmetries between member states and other candidate countries (Interviews 3 and 8). In recognition of this effort, the second EPC Summit took place in Chisinau on 1 June 2023. The nine recommendations were largely fulfilled over the course of 2023. As a result of this, on 14 December 2023, the European Council decided to open negotiations for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU.

In terms of the political mobilization message, the timeframe for effective EU membership is 2030, with negotiations to be completed in 2027, at the latest in 2028. The interviews showed that the deadline set by the country's leaders – specifically, Maia Sandu – is feasible and possible to achieve. The commitment to the 2030 term for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession should serve as a motivation not just

for the political class but also for the entire public administration and society as a whole. It was stressed unanimously that Romania is the EU member state which most undeniably supports the achievement of this goal by providing the necessary technical support for the conduct of the pre-accession negotiations: 'The Republic of Moldova has two EU ambassadors, one from the Republic of Moldova, and the second one from Romania' (Interview 3). Other member states mentioning that they can support this are the Baltic trio, Poland, France, and Germany. What is noteworthy is that no political leader interviewed made a decisive decision on member states potentially opposed to the next step to accession. However, among the member states that could make pre-accession negotiations more difficult are the Nordic flank, Denmark and Sweden; the Netherlands; Spain from the southern flank; and Austria and Hungary from the Central European flank (the latter two identified as being affiliated with the Russia). The leaders interviewed were aware that during the negotiations there will be additional conditions that will make the process more difficult, but there is optimism that through negotiation and effectively addressing the issues at stake, these situations will be overcome.

Interestingly, to achieve this objective, from a political point of view, the decoupling of the Republic of Moldova from Ukraine will also be taken into account if circumstances so require. This consideration is particularly shared by the category of interviewed political leaders who hold or have held a position as minister of a portfolio with a major impact on relations with the EU:

I do not believe that we can talk about joining the package with Ukraine, lacking comfort with each other, we can't come as a package. Thus, accession must be seen by each country separately. (Interview 2)

In fact, from the viewpoint of those interviewed, the package negotiation with Ukraine would be largely conditional on the evolution of the situation in Ukraine and the process of peace and reconstruction, which will take quite a long time and many resources. Thus, some of the interviewed leaders noted that if Moldova is to carry out its negotiation process in a timely and sound manner, then it is fully feasible, regardless of the situation in Ukraine, to address the issues and responsibilities deriving from the negotiation process. Such positioning can be said to indicate that there is ambition to reach the desired EU membership, regardless of the evolution of the situation in Ukraine.

However, some interviewees believed that 2030 would depend largely on the evolution of the situation in Ukraine.

It was noted that as a result of the overlapping crises (COVID-19, Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, exponential inflation, energy scarcity associated with very high costs, etc.), public opinion has been significantly affected. A key consideration in the interviews was that the EU was the first actor to offer and deliver support which is unconditional and delivered in time to mitigate the effects of these overlapping crises. However, even though the Moldovan authorities have made significant efforts to overcome these crises, the resilience of the population has been significantly eroded. Against this background, certain opposition parties (some led from the shadows by fugitive oligarchs from the Republic of Moldova) have explored citizens' grievances by organizing protests or sabotaging the authorities. As a result, the share of citizens supporting the European integration of the Republic of Moldova has decreased again. According to the data of the latest Public Opinion Barometer, in November 2021 only 51 per cent of interviewees would still vote for EU membership in the event of a referendum. As illustrated in Figure 5.1, the positive side of the picture is that the share of those who would vote against or are undecided has not increased significantly compared with the period 2013–2015. Through sensitive public policies, and also by involving the political elites in shaping the social mobilization narrative on European integration, the category of undetermined people may easily be recovered.

Steps have also been taken to strengthen attachment to the fundamental values of the EU to reduce the phenomenon of division and antagonization in society and to reduce ideological faults. For example, on 21 May 2023 the National Assembly 'European Moldova' was organized. A resolution was adopted at the National Assembly which contains in its first point the start of procedures to amend the constitution to definitively and irreversibly establish the accession to the EU. Parliament approved the resolution on 24 May 2023 (Parliament Decision no. 125 of 24 May 2023).

The political leaders interviewed unanimously considered that there was no alternative to the EU, regardless of the outcome of the situation in Ukraine or any internal political change. As the records of the choice of Moldovan citizens according to opinion polls show, EU membership is the only legitimate option for all political parties, even those that are Eurosceptic or anti-system. These considerations

support the idea that even if power is taken over the coming years by political forces opposing EU membership and promoting the deepening of relations with Russia or with other CIS member states, the European path of the Republic of Moldova will be not diverted but at most delayed or stopped for a short period of time. The following consideration is conclusive:

If the left-wing parties were to take power, the Republic of Moldova will remain in the EU. The war in Ukraine has led to the development of the USSR, CIS and EACU being forms of conserving USSR memories. (Interview 2)

It should be stressed that the attitude of all political leaders interviewed was optimistic and confident that, sooner or later, Moldova would become an EU member state.

Most of the political leaders interviewed considered that the country is already on the path to this irreversible conclusion, and spillover effects are a condition of the continuation along this path, even if this will fluctuate. A few minority positions focused on a prudent rather than an optimistic approach. In their view, the irreversible path depends very much on the situation in Ukraine: 'As long as Ukraine is pro-EU the risks for the Republic of Moldova are low. If something catastrophic occurs in Ukraine, the risks also increase for the Republic of Moldova' (Interview 6). Considerations relating to the irreversibility of the process were well argued, including the argument that the majority of Moldovan citizens already hold nationality of an EU member state (in particular Romania); that the share of remittances from the EU is overwhelmingly greater than that from the CIS; that the diaspora of the Republic of Moldova has become an important electoral actor; that the reforms implemented in recent years have produced wealth and trust in public institutions. At the same time, other considerations arise, such as 'We are ready to do everything we can to keep the European course paramount and irreversible' (Interview 4) or the need for 'Building institutions that will stand no matter who comes to government. It is much more complicated for any government coming to Chisinau to return course and reforms to 180 degrees' (Interview 9). Only a minority of interviewees took the view that the processes were reversible, particularly setting out arguments relating to internal political stability, but also to the rise of Euroscepticism within the EU (Interviews 5 and 7).

An endemic challenge for the next period is to improve control management over the whole territory of the Republic of Moldova. The main uncontrollable territorial area is the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) on the left bank of the Dniester, and the ATU of Gagauzia is partly controllable. The people of both ATUs stand against Moldova's accession to the EU and have strong affinities with the ideology promoted by Russia. In this respect, the political leaders interviewed recognized that mismanagement of this challenge could jeopardize negotiations on EU accession chapters. They were aware that, technically, accession negotiations will cover the entire territory of the Republic of Moldova. Therefore, serious steps will have to be taken to convince the people of those territories that Moldova's accession route is more advantageous than maintaining dependence on Russia.

As regards the role of the EU in strengthening attachment to EU values, most of the political leaders interviewed stated that while aid is visible, it is not sufficient. There is thus room for the EU to diversify its support to Moldova, mainly with a view to speeding up the fulfilment of the accession criteria and facilitating access to the EU's single market. According to the options set out, support must be targeted on various key aspects of empowerment or awareness, such as countering disinformation, supporting Russian-language media, informing farmers about agri-food rules specific to the EU single market, and promoting successful projects implemented in recent years. An important focus should be placed on projects to raise awareness of the various population groups, in particular the Eurosceptic population and the population in the aforementioned ATU areas. The following statement is evocative:

For the time being we are a divided society: due to the infiltration of the Moldovan information space by Russian propaganda, disinformation tools of Russia, the situation is still very divided. Every effort must continue to be made to inform citizens as much as possible. This is why the Action for European Moldova was launched. (Interview 4)

Also, increased funding from Erasmus, Horizon Europe, or Justice Program would certainly lead to stronger attachment to EU values. It should be noted that the choices made regarding the nature of the support did not reflect the meaning of sanctions at all, although at the time when the political leaders interviewed were often opposed to the

use of this form of support too, it was understood as a slowing down of the spirit of driving forward the reforms undertaken by the AA.

In conclusion, since February 2022 the Republic of Moldova has taken advantage of the window of opportunity generated by the military invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Despite the various challenges of the economic, social, political, and security nature of the state in the context of the hybrid warfare conducted by Russia against the Republic of Moldova, by the time of writing the Moldovan authorities had demonstrated that they are effectively managing all critical situations, as well as remaining alert in the implementation of the AA and the nine recommendations of the European Commission. It is expected that in the negotiation process on the accession chapters, Moldova will effectively address the challenge of formulating national ambitions on topics related to agriculture or territorial integrity. From this point of view, an evocative reasoning emphasizes that ‘the process is quite complex, a process which must take into account not only the specificities of the conditions imposed by the EU, but also the social and economic specificities within Moldova’ (Interview 1). Thus, the role of the ambitions of this country would be to generate ideological attachment among the other political forces in the event of their access to governance, in order to ensure continuity and irreversibility of European integration.

Conclusions

Three decades ago, the Republic of Moldova was considered by the EU a geopolitical periphery because of its ambivalent position toward Russia’s sphere of influence. This geopolitical source of peripherality has led, in our view, to Moldova being decoupled from the processes of European integration from which Central European states and Baltic countries benefited after the dissolution of the USSR. The positive dynamics of Moldova’s relations with the EU are mainly due to the specific measures adopted by the EU (the EaP, and more recently the European Political Community).

The analysis shows that the direction of Moldova’s relations with the EU has been mainly due to changing regional contexts rather than the determination of political elites. Overall, various regional conflicts (such as in 1999 in Serbia, 2008 in Georgia, and 2014 and 2022 in Ukraine) generated opportunities to set the country on the path of European integration, i.e. to accelerate processes that a decade ago

were considered ideal. The findings of our analysis justify the expectation stated in the conceptual chapter of this book, that ‘challenging circumstances arising from the war in Ukraine will lead countries such as Ukraine and Moldova to perceive the EU as their primary guarantee against Russian aggression. Consequently, these countries may view the integration process as their principal focus in foreign policy’ (see [Chapter 1](#)).

According to the perception of the interviewees in the current context, a peace grant, followed by a provision of welfare and normative reference for domestic public policies through its transformative power over member states or third countries, is seen as the main benefit of Moldova’s accession to the EU. The deepening of Moldova’s relations with the EU is therefore aimed at maintaining the existence of Moldova as a state and guaranteeing the security and integrity of the state as a counterbalance to the constitutional military neutrality. This is why we did not manage to identify open sources of criticism, contestation, and Euroscepticism in political elites’ discourses. We have observed that for the political leaders interviewed, before actual accession to the EU, the deepening of Moldova’s relations has the main purpose of accelerating the modernization of internal public systems and policies.

Most of the political leaders interviewed were of the opinion that the process of rapprochement with the EU has become irreversible, not only declaratory (as stated in the 2005 Parliament Declaration) but also de facto. However, there are some reservations as to the actual irreversibility of this process, and it can be said that the doubts and caution expressed by the elites is a testimony to the fact that in their view the process is not quite decisively irreversible. The arguments put forward shed light on the fact that the EU accession process is variable and oscillates from one political juncture to another, nevertheless considering the possible reversibility of this juncture. The fact that Moldova has become a candidate country provides a possible counterweight to a dominantly Eurosceptic government, thus reducing the risk of disruption to institutionalized arrangements in accession negotiations. At the very least, by virtue of the dependencies created by the application of the provisions of the AA and of the commitments made in the negotiation process in the accession chapters, legacies and structural relations will continue to function at an institutional level irrespective of the electoral dynamics. Thus, the EU’s transformative power will remain

long term, as some of the respondents saw it, which will frustrate any intention to stop the process or to render it reversible.

Regardless of the political and regional security changes that may occur in the coming years, Moldova's accession to the EU cannot be completely stopped, but may at most be slowed down. In this respect, on the one hand, public opinion will have an important say and will create clear pressure on political elites or parties, whether they are Eurosceptic or Euro-optimistic. On the other hand, in the event of a possible change of government with Eurosceptic political forces gaining power, as over the last two decades which saw the use of tactics of economic blackmail, political coercion, or military incursions, the financial incentives granted by the EU will ensure that Moldova's European route is maintained. Our analysis shows that, as those interviewed unanimously agreed, there is currently no viable and credible alternative for the Republic of Moldova to joining the EU, regardless of the outcome of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia or a possible change of government. Moreover, with the deepening of the negotiations with the EU on the accession chapters, and also the potential ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia, it is expected that Eurosceptic political parties in the Republic of Moldova will also follow through with debates on ideological positions on specific commitments in each chapter of negotiations. Following the interpretation of the results collected, our hypothesis was largely validated. However, the feasibility of the 2030 timeframe for the effective accession of Moldova to the EU remains questionable, and this remains a topic to be further researched.

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Appendix

Table A5.1: Interviews with Relevant Political Leaders

Interview code	Gender	Age bracket	Political function or previous political activity
Interview 1	M	21–40	Party president, former member of the Parliament
Interview 2	M	41–60	Minister and former chair of the Standing Committee of the Parliament
Interview 3	F	21–40	Chair of the Standing Committee of the Parliament
Interview 4	F	41–60	Chair of the Standing Committee of the Parliament and former minister
Interview 5	M	21–40	Leading position of Parliament, leading position in a political party
Interview 6	M	Over 61	Member of the Parliament with extensive leadership experience in political organizations since 1989
Interview 7	M	21–40	Chair of the Standing Committee of the Parliament
Interview 8	M	41–60	Ambassador, former minister, and member of the Parliament
Interview 9	F	21–40	Chair of the Standing Committee of the Parliament and former minister

CHAPTER 6

Rather Lukewarm

Shifting Perceptions towards the EU among Bosnia and Herzegovina's Political Elites

Hatidža Jahić

University of Sarajevo

Adnan Muminović

University of Sarajevo

Abstract

In 2019, the European Commission endorsed Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH's) EU membership application, seen as a significant step. However, subsequent progress stalled as the country failed to address the 14 key priorities outlined in the Opinion. In 2022, in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU granted BiH candidate status. Surprisingly, local political elites displayed lukewarm enthusiasm, prompting research to understand their evolving attitudes towards EU integration. Using the external incentives model, seven interviews were conducted with diverse members of parliament. Findings reveal a decline in political support for EU integration, with elites perceiving BiH as unwelcome in the EU and doubting the impact of local efforts.

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Geopolitical shifts are deemed crucial for accelerated integration, posing challenges to BiH's EU aspirations despite stable public support.

Keywords: EU, Bosnia and Herzegovina, EU integration, political elites, periphery

Introduction

In December 2022, the leaders of the EU unanimously decided to grant candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) – seven years after the country officially submitted its application for EU membership. Like many times before, the decision was made in the wake of geopolitical shifts leading to a readjustment of EU's policies and priorities (Dimitrova, 2016). A joint opinion published on the occasion by the EU Head of Delegation/EU Special Representative in BiH and the EU Heads of Mission in BiH stated that BiH 'has a special place in all our hearts', adding that the country has also been at the heart of European history (Sattler, 2022). While this was hailed as a historic moment and important milestone, the local reaction was nevertheless rather lukewarm. First, it was clear that the candidate status was a direct consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and completely unrelated to any actual changes and implemented reforms on the ground. Indeed, since the European Commission issued its Opinion on BiH's EU membership application in 2019, laying out 14 key priorities for the country to meet, little to no progress has been achieved to date. Second, Ukraine and Moldova had been granted EU candidate status six months before, thus once again heightening the local sense of being left out by EU decision-makers.

In this article, however, we explore whether the lukewarm response was also due to shifting perceptions towards the EU on the part of national political elites. Interviewing seven members of parliament (MPs) from the two main ethnic groups and so-called Others, belonging to the ruling majority and to the opposition, we investigate to what extent their views towards EU integration have changed over the last decade and explore potential antecedents of these changes. While the public support for EU integration has been rather stable over the last ten years (more on this below), potential shifts on the part of elected political elites might point to some important trends for the future. Thus, the main aim of this chapter is to examine and discuss the perceptions of BiH's political elites of this troubled and rather complex

periphery. Having in mind that the EU integration process has always been elite driven, the chapter also investigates the question of EU credibility in the national context and whether political elites deem that there is an alternative to EU integration.

Country Context: The Bosnian War and Its Consequences for EU Integration

This is not the place to discuss the Bosnian War from 1992 to 1995 in detail. We merely touch upon it because it helps to better understand the post-war dynamics within the country, as well as its relations with the EU. While one might question the relevance of these consequences given that the conflict ended almost three decades ago, it is by now well established that wartime experiences endure long after their formal end, and even after the historical, political, and economic conditions that generated them have disappeared (Bar-Tal, 2000; 2001; 2007; Guiso et al., 2008).

In the case of BiH, it left a country deeply divided, with three different and irreconcilable interpretations when it comes to the past (Mochtak & Muharemović, 2022), no shared vision of the future, and regular challenges regarding the state's very existence (Bieber, 2011; Džankić & Keil, 2019). Indeed, there is almost no aspect of life that remains untouched by the war, whether we talk about demographic changes (Kadušić & Suljić, 2018), economic development (Kešeljević & Spruk, 2021), human capital accumulation (Efendic et al., 2022), pro-social behaviour (Efendic, 2020), or peoples' attitudes towards risk and trust (Muminović & Efendic, 2022). The country remains in a state of frozen conflict (Perry, 2018), and all of these consequences ultimately also have a bearing on the political dynamics within BiH and its relationship with the EU.

Furthermore, we devote this section to the Bosnian War also because the country's constitutional set-up directly derives from Annex IV to the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), which created arguably one of the most complicated political systems in the world. In short, the DPA established a state with two entities, one district, ten cantons, and three constituent peoples (Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats), as well as a distinction between so-called Citizens and Others, all on top of the general malaise of the Western Balkans characterized by weak parliaments and judicial institutions (Bieber, 2018). According to Džankić &

Keil (2019), BiH presents a case of challenged nationhood and limited statehood. While this does not automatically mean that we are talking about a weak state (Fukuyama, 2004), BiH's state is nonetheless limited with regard to its strength and functioning (Bieber, 2011). As a result, it is unable to meet the requirements of EU integration when it comes to the adoption of the necessary norms and rules (Börzel, 2011; Daviddi, 2023). Finally, the DPA also legitimized acts of ethnic cleansing without putting in place a mechanism that would allow for reconciliation and a functioning state (Perry, 2018).

Europeanization as a Driver of Reforms in BiH?

About a decade ago, researchers still wondered if the EU could use its transformative power to successfully integrate the Western Balkans, as it previously had to integrate countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Freyburg & Richter, 2010). Today, however, the answer seems to be much more pessimistic. Indeed, compared with the countries from Central and Eastern Europe, the Europeanization of the Western Balkans and BiH has been slower, mired in repeated setbacks, and in some cases has even regressed (Börzel, 2011). As a result, not only is unconditional and sustained support for the EU no longer the norm, but there are increasing concerns about possible de-Europeanization (Gherasim, 2020; Müller et al., 2021).

According to Dimitrova (2016), the EU path is no longer viewed as having no alternative, as the following statement by the president of the Republika Srpska (RS), Milorad Dodik, from April 2023 makes clear (RTRS vijesti, 2023):

China is a significant partner ... I am preparing sometime during the year to go to China and try to develop even better relations ... The EU is not the only alternative ... Of course, we remain on the European path, but obviously that path is falling apart on its own as far as the European Union is concerned.

At least in theory, however, Europeanization was supposed to be the most promising way of overcoming tensions and promoting reforms (Uvalić, 2019), which prompts the question of why the region has largely been an exception to the success of previous decades.

There are many answers to this question, of course, but a lot has to do with the changed context (Džankić & Keil, 2019) and a combination

of ‘enlargement fatigue’ and ‘accession fatigue.’ More specifically, the Western Balkan countries undoubtedly face more serious challenges relating to EU accession than any of their predecessors, when it comes to both the content and the breadth of the required reforms (Dimitrova, 2016). In general, they face widespread scepticism with regard to their place in the EU, lower administrative capacity, and unresolved internal issues because of the turbulent 1990s (Zhelyazkova et al., 2019).

Indeed, if one investigates the case of BiH and its Europeanization, the reasons behind the lack of success are to be found on both sides, namely the political elites as well as the EU. With regard to local political elites, they misuse the institutional framework and the political system to block reforms and use the status quo to stay in power (Buriánová & Hloušek, 2022). The EU, in turn, believes that the current political elite is not genuinely committed to or interested in reforms (Daviddi, 2023). On the other hand, it is also true that the EU has not been an effective state-builder, being unwilling to use its conditionality for this purpose and ill equipped to deal with the Western Balkan countries, particularly BiH (Bieber, 2011; Börzel, 2011).¹ In the words of Perry (2018, p. 13), ‘the EU enlargement process was designed as a tool to prepare and integrate new members – it is not and was never intended to be a mechanism for state-building, let alone for resolving violent, territorial conflicts.’ So, to summarize, weak states, diverging identities, no shared vision, and the EU’s inconsistencies and lack of strategy are often offered as the primary explanations for the region’s slow progress on the EU path (Koneska, 2019).

Overall, the external incentives model (EIM) developed by Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier (2020) probably presents the dominant theoretical framework for understanding the EU accession process and is therefore used for our subsequent analysis. In short, it holds that successful Europeanization and the effectiveness of conditionally depend on four factors: (1) the determinacy and consistency of EU conditions, (2) the credibility of accession, (3) the capacity of candidate countries, and (4) domestic costs. We will not discuss each of these in detail but rather will focus on those factors that are found to be most important and relevant for BiH when it comes to internal perceptions of the EU, most notably credibility and the internal costs of reforms.

Credibility and Conditionality

Credibility is recognized as the crucial element in accounting for the success of EU conditionality (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020; Džankić & Keil, 2019). In short, it refers to a credible promise that the country will move forward if it meets the conditions set out. Indeed, Börzel (2011) has argued that even in weak states, Europeanization can advance provided there is genuine credibility coupled with significant financial and technical assistance. At least in theory, at the European Council meeting in Thessaloniki in 2003, the EU confirmed and reinforced the membership perspective for the Western Balkans.

In practice, however, its actual commitment towards the region is seriously brought into question. According to a high-ranking diplomat and former deputy head of the EU Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU seems to be experiencing a serious credibility problem in the country (Daviddi, 2023). Ever since the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent European debt crisis, the EU has been mired in various internal and external crises, including Brexit, the refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While none of these was caused by enlargement – at least not directly – the EU nonetheless became self-absorbed, and political and public support for the accession of new member states decreased (Bieber, 2018). According to Dimitrova (2016), declining public support for enlargement has been one of the primary reasons behind the EU's lower credibility. Unlike with the Eastern enlargement, there has simply been no consensus within the EU when it comes to the Western Balkan countries, the accession of which, according to Zhelyazkova et al. (2019), faces the lowest levels of credibility in the history of enlargement.

Another complicating factor is the EU's early decision to assess the accession of the Western Balkan countries individually based on merit, rather than as a group. This was meant to increase the credibility of the accession process (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020), yet in the case of BiH it may have had an adverse effect. To provide just one example, Džankić & Keil (2019) note that BiH remains a contested state, not only internally but also externally. For instance, and despite its continuous secessionist rhetoric, Serbia remains strongly supportive of the Republika Srpska (BiH's predominantly Serb entity) and its elites. The possible earlier EU accession of Serbia could thus cause

additional problems for the country, similar to those Croatia experienced from Slovenia during its accession.²

With regard to public perception in the EU, the Eurobarometer survey published in the summer of 2022 finds that almost six in ten EU citizens now support the enlargement of the EU – an increase of ten percentage points compared with the previous year (European Commission, 2022). While this could be seen as a welcome development, it is most likely due to the greater European solidarity in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine – hence it is questionable whether this positive trend will prevail in the coming years. Indeed, the latest survey already notes a decline in enlargement support of five percentage points (European Commission, 2023). During our interviews, we thus particularly decided to focus on the question of credibility and conditionality, exploring how credible local politicians deem the EU to be when it comes to the country's membership perspective.

Internal Costs

The greater the demands on the EU path, the higher the adoption costs for local elites (Dimitrova, 2016). In countries where European identity is a broadly shared value and goal, the political costs of reforms can potentially be overcome (Subotic, 2011). Yet once demands start touching upon identity-sensitive and constitutional issues, the adoption costs are deemed too high, so that any rational cost-benefit analyses become almost impossible (Freyburg & Richter, 2010). In this case, the EU's insistence on difficult reforms pertaining to national identity and competencies can even backfire and have an adverse effect on support (Zhelyazkova et al., 2019). As a result, political elites or certain groups within the country potentially cease any further cooperation.

Furthermore, demands of the accession process can sometimes even have worse unintended consequences and increase the chance of inter-ethnic conflict, particularly in unconsolidated and contested states such as BiH (Džankić & Keil, 2019). As a result, instead of defusing ethnicization and promoting cooperation, EU policies can tend to create a hostile environment (Koneska, 2019). In a country like BiH where the three ethnic groups have strong veto powers, this can lead, and in fact has led, to years of stagnation.

While it is conventional wisdom that every country that wished to join the EU had to reform its constitution in order to increase its

strength and functionality (Bieber, 2011; Perry, 2018), it is questionable whether any ethnic group in BiH would ever agree to give up its constitutional position and power mechanisms for the sake of EU integration. This is another important question that we consider during our interviews.

Determinacy and Local Capacity

With regard to determinacy and local capacity, the former refers to precise expectations about what it is that a country needs to do and whether these conditions are consistently applied over time, while the latter refers to the country's capability to meet the demands of EU integration. When it comes to determinacy and the conditions set by the EU, they vary significantly in terms of their precision and binding nature (Zhelyazkova et al., 2019). Indeed, the EU has at times tied progress on the BiH's EU path to human rights and constitutional matters, then switching to socio-economic reforms and then moving on to questions of rule of law and public administration. As a result, the EU's approach towards BiH has been deemed erratic, contradictory, and unsuccessful by one of its former employees (Daviddi, 2023). Concerning the country's local capacity, that of BiH is probably the lowest of all prospective members' states aside from Kosovo. This is particularly problematic if one has in mind that conditions have become more demanding over time (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020), inevitably leading to stagnation. However, we do not consider these two factors crucial for our exploration of shifting local perceptions towards the EU and do not discuss them any further.

External and Internal Perceptions

Who belongs to the periphery and who does not is not just a matter of objective economic indicators, but is rather a fluid, subjective, and intangible assessment that has shifted throughout history. While all countries considered in this book have their own complexities and peculiarities that complicate their relationship with the EU, BiH presents a special case on its own because of the specific constitutional setting and the political system described above. While geographically it is undoubtedly a part of Europe, the question has always been

whether this is the case culturally. Two things seem to complicate BiH's position.

The first has to do with BiH's multi-ethnic composition and the fact that it is one of few European countries with a majority Muslim population. While the open denial of Islam as part of Europe has become somewhat of a taboo, Huntington's (1996) popular notion whereby Western Christianity presents the European dividing line persists to this day, as can often be seen from statements made by the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán (Euronews, 2021; Aljazeera, 2021). As Todorova (2009) has noted, Ottoman elements – of which the most important is certainly Islam – are what is most commonly invoked in current prejudices and stereotypes about the Balkans in general, and BiH in particular.

The second – also shared with other countries in this book – is the simple fact that BiH belongs to the Balkans, which has historically served as a mirror image against which the idea of the West has been constructed. According to Žižek and Horvat (2013), the Balkans are seen as the Other of the West. The fact that the EU itself does not know what its cultural identity is and whether it exists in the first place (Meyer, 2004; Nida-Rümelin & Weidenfeld, 2007) is almost irrelevant here. What is important is that the Balkans are generally seen as something barbarian, lethargic, passive, lazy, and inefficient, and as a source of instability (Dimitrova, 2016).

Interestingly, however, these external perceptions are often shared internally. Even in the local languages, 'Balkan' has a derogative meaning, understood as something 'uncultivated' and 'backward' (Todorova, 2009). There is a good recent illustration of these views in relation to Croatia's accession to the Schengen zone and pending introduction of the euro. The country's most read media portal published an op-ed at the end of 2022 titled 'The Final Departure of Croatia from the Balkans'. The author triumphantly declares that, after 104 years, Croatia is returning to the group of countries to which it belongs in terms of civilization, reinforcing the image of the Balkans as something uncivilized and backwards (Vojković, 2022). A similar headline, 'Bye-Bye Balkans!', had already appeared in 2005 when accession negotiations between Croatia and the EU started (Žižek & Horvat, 2013). Indeed, the Croatian national identity is built upon a Balkan/European dichotomy which difficult political decisions, particularly those pertaining

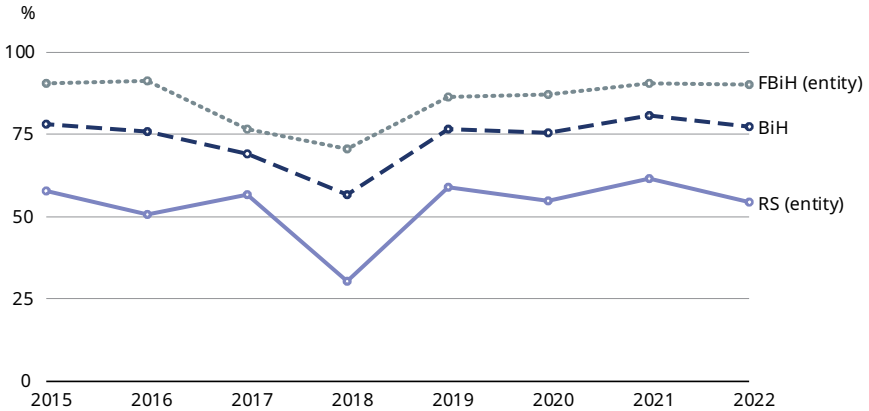


Figure 6.1: Share of BiH citizens responding 'in favour' to the question 'If tomorrow was a referendum for EU membership with the question "do you support BiH's entry into to the EU?", how would you vote?'

Source: authors' illustration based on DEI (2023).

to cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (Subotic, 2011).

Internal perspectives on the EU have been rather stable over the last decade, at least when it comes to the public. This can be seen from Figure 6.1.

Looking at Figure 6.1, few things are obvious: first, while there have been some variations over the years, support for EU integration is strong and relatively stable across the country (about seven in ten people would vote in favour of EU membership). Second, however, there are significant regional variations. While support in the FBiH entity (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, predominantly populated by Bosnians and Croats) is almost 90 per cent, in the RS (predominantly populated by Serbs) it is only slightly higher than 50 per cent, albeit still a majority.

In Figure 6.2 we look at the Regional Cooperation Council's annual Balkan Barometer survey 2022. The question asked every year is 'Do you think that EU membership would be a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad for your economy?'

Again, few things are clearly visible from Figure 6.2. First, the share of BiH citizens who believe that EU membership would be a good thing increased from 2015 onwards, peaked in 2020, and has

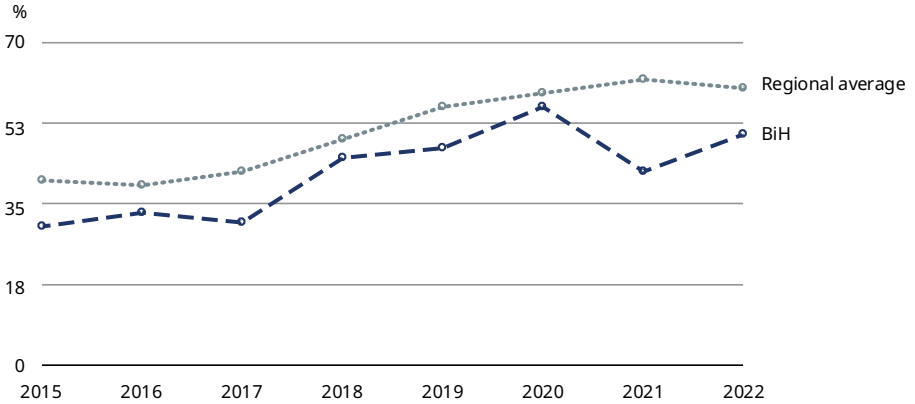


Figure 6.2: Share of citizens stating that EU membership would be a good thing

Source: authors' illustration based on Regional Cooperation Council (2022).

somewhat decreased since. Second, despite a positive trend, the share has been consistently lower than the regional average and is the lowest after that of Serbia. It is also worth adding that a third of respondents from BiH believe that EU membership will never happen, which is again the most pessimistic view after that of citizens from Serbia (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022).

Taken together, the two graphs beg the following question. How is it that just around 40 per cent of BiH citizens believe that EU accession would be a good thing, while 70 per cent would support it if asked at a referendum? While one can only speculate at this point about a possible answer, the most plausible one seems to be that citizens simply do not see any alternative. As Uvalić (2019) has noted and for geographical, historical, cultural, geopolitical, and economic reasons, the EU remains the only option for the Western Balkan region. Consequently, we are interested in whether these views are also shared by politicians and whether they see an alternative to the EU. This is of particular importance given that politicians and political parties have tremendous power in shaping and altering public opinion, even when their positions are contrary to citizens' previously held attitudes (Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021).

Methodology

To reiterate, we are interested in whether and to what extent the subjective perceptions of local political elites with regard to the EU have changed over the last decade. As a result, this article addresses the following research questions:

- How do BiH political elites perceive the EU integration process and BiH as an EU periphery?
- Do political elites contest the process of EU integration?

With the aim of addressing the defined research questions, we opted for a qualitative, single-case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009). Thus, we used several data collection techniques to ensure high construct validity through data triangulation (Eisenhardt, 1989, Yin, 2009). The first step of the analysis was desk research where relevant and most recent academic literature, studies, and reports on the EU and BiH were gathered. The aim of this was to identify key themes and developments in the current country policy context. We systematically organized and analysed this data, focusing on the features of EU integration processes in BiH, such as credibility, consistency, and the perceptions of the integration process among national political elites.

In the second step of the research process, primary empirical data was gathered by conducting interviews with seven politicians from the country (see Appendix, [Table A6.1](#)). The interviews took place after the general elections that were held in October 2022 and during the process of government formation, hence statements were more likely to reflect a genuine stance on the EU than short-term electoral interests. Given the country's ethnic and administrative divisions, it was important to ensure that the small sample was as diversified as possible, hence a purposive sampling method was used. We primarily targeted members of the BiH Parliamentary Assembly who are also participating in the work of the Joint Committee on European Integration, and we talked to representatives of the two main ethnic groups (Bosnians and Serbs) as well as those who identify themselves as Others. Finally, we included representatives from both the ruling coalition and the opposition.

The interviews were semi-structured and followed interview guidelines prepared in advance. We tried to encourage interviewees to talk as much as possible, minimizing the interviewer's involvement (Rubin

& Rubin, 2005). Inevitably, some implicit statements were made by the interviewees, which at times requires us to move towards a more latent or integrative level of our data. With regard to procedural ethics, all prior conditions for this research were obtained (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The relevant ethics form was approved and participants were assured of their anonymity and absolute confidentiality. The research team proceeded to identify the common themes and patterns in the gathered data, having in mind possible variations in perspective across the interviewees. As the last step of the analysis, the research team integrated the inductively formed first-order codes with the deductively formed primary codes (based on the theoretical framework and the concepts presented in [Chapter 1](#) of this volume) to explain the challenges of EU integration and the perceptions of BiH political elites.

Analysis and Results

A thematic analysis with the aim of identifying coherence and patterns of meaning from the data obtained was used to contextualize the conducted research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although perceptions of the EU varied across our subjects, we were nonetheless able to discern some coherence and the following patterns.

Lack of Credibility and Consistency

Almost all of the interviewed MPs do not believe that the country's EU perspective is genuine and credible and see several proofs of this. The first refers to a general lack of trust that the EU truly wishes to see BiH as a future member state. Islamophobia was also mentioned by one of the Bosnian MPs that we interviewed. Another MP noted that EU conditionality amounts to a constant raising of the bar, in full awareness that the country will never be able to meet it. Asked whether the EU would change its stance towards BiH in a hypothetical scenario where the country meets all of its conditions, the same MP stated that the EU would always come up with new and additional requirements, simply because there is no genuine commitment to the integration of the region. This sentiment was echoed by another MP:

They talk about 14 priorities for BiH. Even if we meet 114 priorities, they will never grant us status in the EU. (MP3)

However, the lack of credibility and consistency can be seen on the BiH side as well. High levels of corruption, lack of rule of law, and a weak judiciary system are areas in which the country does not fulfil the preconditions or pillars of the EU integration process. With regard to the reforms defined in the EC's 14 priorities, limited progress has been made, thus raising questions about the extent to which local political elites are genuinely willing to make changes. The progress over the years, across the country (two entities and Brčko District) and across policy areas, has not been consistent and comprehensive either.

At this point, it is difficult to overstate the devastating effects that France's blocking of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in 2019 had on the EU's credibility in the region. According to several MPs interviewed, this can be seen as a prime and symbolic example of the fact that even the most difficult and identity-sensitive reforms will ultimately not be rewarded by the EU. One of them took the fact that the EU supports policies that it would never tolerate in any of its member states – such as those strengthening the ethnic vis-à-vis the civic concept in the country – as a sign that it is not seriously considering BiH as a future member. From the perspective of Serb MPs, there is an additional layer of mistrust towards the EU. Some conditions are seen as undermining the constitutional position and competencies of the RS just for the sake of weakening its legitimacy.

According to one MP, the EU wished to alter the country's internal structure and demanded the centralization of certain functions, while similar conditions were never put in place for some existing member states which remain highly decentralized.³

Of the seven MPs that we interviewed, however, there was one who expressed no doubts that BiH would become a member state as soon as it met the necessary criteria. According to this respondent, the general critique regarding conditionality is just used as an excuse by those who do not genuinely wish to see the country move forward on the EU path:

In our country, many colleagues accuse the EU of hypocrisy in a sense that 'We will never become members [regardless of what we do]'. I really think that the pessimistic messages just hide the desire to never join the European Union. (MP7)

Another frequent grievance voiced throughout the interviews relates to the EU's erratic and arbitrary changing of the conditions put before

the country. This point is worth emphasizing, since consistent conditionality is seen as the main factor in the EU's credibility (Rollis, 2021) and since a lack of definitiveness of the conditions and procedures significantly lowers the chances of the desired outcome (Blauberger & Van Hüllen, 2020). Unsurprisingly, the constantly changing requirements are taken as yet another proof that the membership perspective is not truly credible. Words often used to describe the EU's conditionality towards BiH are 'arbitrary', 'inconsistent', and 'unwarranted'. To quote one of the MPs:

It's as if someone wakes up one morning and says 'Hmm, what could I set for those Bosnians?' and then comes up with several things. (MP1)

Yet, here again, the same MP quoted above (MP7) offered an alternative interpretation with regard to the EU's constant changing of requirements, seeing it as proof of a certain adaptability and creativity on the part of the EU when dealing with BiH, precisely because it wishes to see the country move forward.

Nonetheless, there is a shared understanding that BiH is simply not high on the EU's list of priorities any more and that people who have little or no experience with BiH oversee telling local politicians what to do.

I have the feeling that we are no longer on the high-priority list, on the radar. Europe has a lot of its own challenges and I have the feeling that second-, third-rate people are now dealing with us. (MP5)

However, local politicians seem to believe that this could change in the case of external geopolitical shifts, with either the abandoning of conditions altogether or at least a lowering of the bar. According to one of the parliamentarians, the EU would show greater commitment towards the whole region and BiH only out of fear that it could face a similar scenario to Ukraine and become a black hole in the middle of Europe, which would endanger its security and economic interests. This is an important argument raised by local political elites from all sides. Indeed, new global geopolitical developments such as the war in Ukraine have the potential to shift the dynamics of BiH–EU relations. Two statements make this point well:

The only one who can speed up that process [EU integration] is Putin, he is the accelerator of the EU path in general. If it wasn't for the conflict in Ukraine, we would never get the candidate status. (MP1)

Due to the current geopolitical situation, that is, the war in Ukraine and aggression against Ukraine, we received the candidate status as a favour or sign of encouragement, which we would have never received if we had followed the conditionality, that is, the conditions set for us by the European Union. (MP2)

To summarize, there is a widespread belief that the EU is not really interested in the region or its future membership, that nothing that the country does or does not do ultimately makes a difference, and that the only thing that could change this is external factors. Even one of the most optimistic and pro-EU MPs interviewed said that they were much more optimistic about BiH's membership perspective a decade ago than they are today. As a result, it is unsurprising that the general view towards the EU is rather lukewarm, and that if the current national political elites stay in power, BiH might remain a troubled periphery rather than becoming an empowered and more developed one.

Enthusiasm for EU Integration Is Waning

Although there is still widespread support for EU integration, there is a discernible waning of enthusiasm. One of two exceptions refers to the youngest MP we interviewed, who had also spent some time living in the EU and thus showed an appreciation for and understanding of what life in the EU potentially means for BiH citizens. Overall, however, as one MP put it, the country's EU path has ceased to be 'a project of the heart' (MP1) and is nowadays primarily supported out of necessity. Whatever commitment towards the EU is left seems to be due primarily to a lack of alternative rather than to a genuine conviction that this is the way to go. This is well illustrated by the following statements:

If there was any alternative, the EU would not be on the map as a foreign policy goal, so it is the non-existence of an alternative that still keeps the EU as something we can gather around. (MP1)

The very exit of the UK clearly showed that the EU is not as powerful a model any more as it is presented, because if it was truly something so good, the British would not have left it under any circumstances. (MP3)

If you ask citizens today, the euphoria for the EU has declined, that support is weaker than ten years ago, people are tired and to people this is further and further away. Basically, instead of Europe coming here, our people go to Europe and leave. (MP5)

While much hope was once placed in EU integration as something ‘powerful’, ‘great’, and ‘wonderful’, one of the MPs said that it has become a ‘pointless project’ (MP3). The same MP believes that BiH should develop bilateral relations with all powerful countries that could be beneficial for BiH when it comes to the economy and tourism.

Aside from the perceived lack of credibility and its relationship with the Western Balkans, we also noted a general disappointment in the way the EU has handled some of its crisis and instabilities, also seen as ultimately revealing its hypocrisy. Speaking about the allure of EU integration, several politicians made comments that illustrate this:

Ten years ago, I had much more enthusiasm, trust, and faith that it was really an organized and fair system, but unfortunately some things and actions refuted this. (MP4)

They closed their borders and then they tell us about human rights, they tell us how we should take care of migrants ... they want to be our tutors, mentors, professors, but don't know how to behave themselves. (MP3)

The refugee crisis and the war in Ukraine had a significant impact because xenophobic policies of certain political groups within several EU member states came to the surface, which, in my opinion, is unfavourable for Bosnia and Herzegovina as a potential EU member. (MP6)

Yet, while there is a general lack of enthusiasm for the EU, EU integration is still hailed for its transformative power when it comes to creating better and more functional societies. Asked whether their stance towards the EU had changed over the last decade, two MPs said the following:

I look at the European Union as a set of values, rules, procedures, and standards and this has not changed for a second. For me, the least important thing is what it means and when we will formally become

a member of the European Union. To me, the more important thing is when we will meet European standards ... It [an alternative to EU integration] does not exist. I don't see it. There is only one alternative, to be an isolated island that will remain empty in the heart of the Balkans where no one will remain. (MP5)

If my attitude has indeed changed, then I can say that I am even more committed towards the EU ... among other things because the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is rapidly deteriorating in the political, economic, demographic and every other sense ... I truly believe that the only solution for Bosnia and Herzegovina is membership in the EU, not just membership as such but the whole process that creates a better society. (MP7)

BiH political elites need to understand and use EU integration as a tool to develop and empower their societies and be the main and credible driver of these reforms. On the other hand, however, a recent observation made by Daviddi (2023) warns that the attractive power of the EU in the region is at best weak and possibly even transformable into some sort of Euroscepticism. Indeed, one of the MPs warned that there might be a new anti-EU movement in the foreseeable future driven primarily by increasing frustration, providing Montenegro as an example where broad support for the EU and NATO has turned into broad support for Putin.

External Negative Perceptions of BiH

Overall, there is a widespread belief in an unfavourable external perspective on BiH as a potential source of instability. As one of the MPs noted, the EU's first association with BiH is still the war. Consequently, and given the EU's obsession with stability (Bieber, 2018), the country is seen as something problematic and to be avoided, as can be seen from the following statements:

So, the entire Balkans, not just Bosnia and Herzegovina, is seen as some backward part, some savage tribes ... (MP1)

I generally think that, not only the EU but all representatives of the International Community who come to BiH, I think that they come with big prejudices, they say we are stupid, underdeveloped, small ... they look at us as an appendix ... I think that they see BiH, in every

respect, as an experiment, which is why I do not believe in their good intentions, neither the EU nor any foreigners. (MP3)

I think that they look at us as a country of problems. Listen, it's enough to type Bosnia and Herzegovina and you will get only negative things. The perception of the people who don't know us is that this is something strange, something bad, problematic, and tense. (MP5)

According to another MP, it is not so much that the EU has a negative perception of BiH per se but that, having made the mistake with the premature accession of Bulgaria and Romania, it is simply more cautious about accepting new member states that are not ready when it comes to meeting certain standards. This is an important point, since the current instabilities within the country are rooted primarily in the internal ethno-national divisions, constitutional challenges, weak rule of law, and widespread corruption. Only by addressing these issues comprehensively and inclusively prior to actual accession can BiH's peripheral status change and true and sustainable progress be achieved.

Conclusions

As one of the interviewees stated, BiH's EU integration has ceased to be a 'project of the heart'. Over seven interviews with MPs, we found much less enthusiasm for EU integration than a decade ago and identified several sources of increasingly contesting views of the EU on the part of local political elites. The first pertains to a local understanding that BiH is not truly welcome in the EU, in addition to a belief that the country is perceived as a source of instability and backwardness. Second, the overall impression is that there is nothing that local politicians could do which would ultimately change the stance towards the country and improve its membership perspective. Third, national political elites believe that only geopolitical shifts could speed up the country's integration into the EU and its dynamics. While Serb MPs coming from the ruling coalition appear generally more critical of the EU integration process, negative attitudes towards the EU mostly persist regardless of ethnic group and whether one belongs to the ruling coalition or the opposition. If these findings are truly shared by most politicians, this would mean that EU integration is no longer capable of incentivizing difficult local reforms. Faced with lower credibility and higher adoption costs of reforms, the EU consequently does not

seem to possess the reformative power it once had (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020).

Under these circumstances, the only alternative potentially becomes locally driven demand for reforms, yet this also appears highly unlikely given the current instabilities and divisions within the country, brain drain, and emigration rates. Addressing instabilities and divisions would require comprehensive country-wide reforms and consistent, sustained efforts by all policy-makers. Yet it remains questionable to what extent local political elites are truly motivated to move the country closer to the EU. It is at least plausible that the widespread fatalism and blaming of the EU that we found during the interviews merely serves to mask a lack of local willingness to undertake difficult reforms. While the EU can certainly be blamed for sending mixed signals to BiH, local politicians have rarely been able to compromise and meet all of the conditions set before them. Only if they do and progress towards accession is still not made could they credibly claim that the EU is truly not interested in the country's EU future. Until then, both sides can be blamed for the repeated stalemates.

Aside from the political elites' perceptions, citizens also feel that the EU is not doing enough to support the country (Bargués & Morillas, 2021) when it comes to tackling some of its core issues (Perry, 2018). Greater European commitment towards BiH could reinvigorate some of the lost enthusiasm but would require more than just declarative statements and a more 'normative' approach (Daviddi, 2023). If it is genuinely interested in integrating the Western Balkans, the EU will have to adjust its 'accession toolbox' (Börzel, 2011). Yet the danger is precisely that the very insistence on difficult and identity-sensitive reforms could cause a further backlash against EU integration (Freyburg & Richter, 2010; Subotic, 2011). We find some indication of this during our interviews, particularly with Serb MPs.

The absence of a genuine external commitment to BiH, together with decreasing local enthusiasm for the Europe project, will probably perpetuate the status quo (Bargués & Morillas, 2021). For years, the EU has been willing to tolerate the current stalemate and sacrifice democratic principles if the region remains stable (Bieber, 2018). The ongoing war in Ukraine, however, might change this calculation and potentially shift the dynamics for the BiH context. Uvalić (2019), for instance, has argued that the security and stability of the whole region would be much better promoted through a credible accession process

than through a return to crisis management. At present, however, BiH seems to be stuck in a vicious circle. In the absence of a major crisis, the EU is unlikely to increase its engagement and provide a more credible membership perspective. This, in turn, will only increase local frustration with and alienation from the EU, helping to perpetuate the status quo and possibly leading to more and more anti-European voices. The emergence of openly Eurosceptic parties in the future should also not be excluded, which would create even more troubles for an already troubled periphery.

With regard to the main limitation of our studies, despite repeated attempts, unfortunately no Croat MP (representing the least numerous ethnic group in BiH) agreed to an interview. It would have been interesting to see whether their views on the country's Europeanization differ from those of the two dominant ethnic groups, particularly since almost all Croats in BiH have Croatian citizenship and are thus already citizens of the EU. Finally, although we conducted interviews with important political figures and MPs, it should be noted that authority in BiH mostly flows from the top to the bottom, given the country's relatively high power distance index. Political party leaders are the ones setting the political agenda, which is largely followed by party members and parliamentary representatives.

Notes

- 1 This view, however, is not without challenges. Richter and Wunsch (2019) argue that over-reliance on conditionality is inadequate in achieving profound democratization unless it is supplemented by stronger local institutions and civil society. According to Vidačak (2021), it is precisely the EU's unclear, inconsistent, and erratic conditionality that have not allowed civil society to play a more transformative role in society. Finally, there are also questions as to whether the European Commission could successfully use conditionality to promote reforms in the Western Balkans, given that it has problems when applying conditionality for its own member states (Jacoby & Hopkin, 2019; Blauburger & Van Hüllen, 2020).
- 2 It is important to bear in mind that out of its three neighbours – Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro – BiH has up to today only settled its border with the latter.
- 3 We touched upon the country's complex constitutional structure earlier in the chapter. In short, it is characterized by high levels of decentralization in the decision-making process, overlapping jurisdictions, and lack of accountability and transparency. As a result, throughout the country's accession process, the EU has at times required that certain functions be centralized, which the RS has seen as an unwarranted affront to its constitutionally guaranteed position.

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Appendix

Table A6.1: Conducted Interviews

Initials	Gender	Parliament	Type of interview	Date of interview	Duration	Name of interviewer
MP1	M	BiH House of Representatives	In person	5 April 2023	31:00	Adnan Muminović
MP2	F	BiH House of Representatives	In person	12 April 2023	33:38	Adnan Muminović
MP3	F	BiH House of Representatives	In person	19 April 2023	33:34	Adnan Muminović
MP4	F	BiH House of Peoples	Skype	13 April 2023	33:16	Adnan Muminović
MP5	M	BiH House of Representatives	In person	19 April 2023	21:57	Adnan Muminović
MP6	M	FBiH House of Representatives	Phone	12 May 2023	23:35	Hatidža Jahić
MP7	M	FBiH House of Representatives	Skype	23 May 2023	24:43	Adnan Muminović

CHAPTER 7

Perceiving ‘Europe’ in Dire Times

Elite Perceptions of European Integration in Turkish Politics after the 2010s

Başak Alpan

Middle East Technical University, Ankara

Ali Onur Özçelik

Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Eskişehir

Abstract

This chapter explores the transformative dynamics in Türkiye–EU relations post-2010, particularly within the context of Turkish political elites’ perceptions. The chapter underscores the profound impact of the strained Türkiye–EU ties, marked by blocked negotiation chapters and democratic backsliding. Emphasizing the shift from conditionality to transactionalism, it scrutinizes the evolving geopolitical landscape and realpolitik considerations, notably in light of the Ukraine war. The analysis centres on Turkish members of parliament involved in the Türkiye–EU Joint Parliamentary Committee, probing their perspectives on economic, security, and identity dimensions. Historical context, key events, and the concept of ‘peripherality’ are examined,

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employing interviews and Committee meeting minutes. The chapter culminates in an assessment of recent perceptions of the EU perceptions among Turkish political elites, examining potential centre-periphery dynamics in bilateral relations.

Keywords: Türkiye–EU relations, elite perceptions, geopolitics, EU conditionality, transactionality

Introduction

As Puchala (1971) famously described it, the EU is an elephant approached by several blind men. It is an evolving institution and a structure perceived differently by different actors at different points in time. But what would happen if there were another elephant in the room? Indeed, especially starting in the 2010s, when Türkiye–EU relations experienced a historical drop, with negotiation chapters remaining blocked and Turkish democracy backsliding, the Türkiye debate in Brussels and elsewhere in Europe was almost completely silenced, making Türkiye the elephant in the EU room – one still, however, endowed with formal EU candidacy. In this context, it is important to understand how this dramatic shift in relations impacted on the perceptions of the EU in Turkish politics from the 2010s onwards, focusing on the ‘insider’s gaze’, as already scrutinized in [Chapter 1](#) of this volume. By ‘insiders’, we mean in this chapter MPs of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) who are or have been members of the Türkiye–EU Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), the committee that established in the aftermath of the 1963 Ankara Agreement responsible for the evaluation of bilateral issues between Türkiye and the EU and annual reports submitted by the Association Council to the presidents of the TGNA and the European Parliament.

In this regard, the primary objective of this chapter is to evaluate the perceptions of the political elite in Türkiye regarding the EU and the process of European integration during the post-2010 period. This period marked a significant shift in EU conditionality within the country, accompanied by sentiments of disenchantment and disillusionment with the EU among both political elites and the public. Moreover, the chapter will delve into the contestation of the EU in this context, examining the factors contributing to the changing views of the Turkish political elite regarding the EU and European integration. Especially since the March 2016 migration deal between the EU

and Türkiye, this context has undergone significant changes. Several domestic and international developments contributed to turbulence within bilateral relations, resulting in a thorough shift in Türkiye–EU relations from a conditionality perspective to transnationalism, prioritizing mutual interests for Ankara and Brussels. In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, the renewed significance of geopolitics and *realpolitik* also contributes to this varied focus on Türkiye in terms of strategic and pragmatic issues, relegating normative concerns to the background within Türkiye–EU relations.

One also must add to this inquiry into perceptions of the EU among the Turkish political elite the significant dimension of ‘peripherality’, an indispensable research dimension of this volume and the LEAP (Linking to Europe at the Periphery) Network. Do the Turkish political elite perceive Türkiye as peripheral to European integration? Has there been any shift in this ‘peripherality perception’ lately? This endeavour to understand the Turkish elite’s perceptions of the EU after 2010 will proceed with a particular focus on three thematic dimensions – namely economy, security, and identity – through interviews with Turkish MPs who currently are or have been in the past members of the JPC and minutes of the post-2010 JPC meetings (see Appendix, [Table A7.1](#) for details of the interviewees).

The chapter is structured as follows: following the introduction, the next section provides a historical background of EU perceptions within the Turkish political landscape. The third section explores the overarching features of Türkiye–EU relations, with a specific emphasis on three pivotal dimensions central to the analysis in this volume and chapter – namely, economy, security, and identity. Additionally, this section examines three significant events in Türkiye–EU relations during the specified period, as identified through interviews conducted with relevant stakeholders and in the minutes of JPC meetings. Subsequently, the fourth section focuses on the methodology employed in this research. The fifth section delves into the findings obtained from our field research, presenting a comprehensive analysis of the data collected. The final section offers concluding remarks that assess recent perceptions of the EU among the Turkish political elite, specifically examining whether these perceptions reflect a centre–periphery dynamic within the bilateral relations between the two parties.

Setting the Context: Background Perceptions of the EU in Turkish Politics

For Turkish politics, ‘Europe’ is probably the most popular concept, albeit a contested one. Starting from the later eras of the Ottoman empire and lingering after the proclamation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, ‘Europe’ emerged as the primary determinant of Turkish political history. The 1963 Ankara Agreement (the Association Agreement between Türkiye and what was then the European Economic Community) and the 1999 Helsinki European Council announcing Türkiye as an official EU candidate – events which marked the pinnacle of this perseverance both institutionally and legally – clearly showed that ‘Europe’ means ‘the EU’ for Türkiye as both an institution and an ideational project.

Therefore, from the start, the Turkish perception of Europe has been filtered through two ideational lenses: *‘Europe’ as a foreign policy orientation* and *modernity as an anchor*. After the 1999 decision and the equalization of the ‘Europe’ ideal with the EU *par excellence*, a further lens was added to the above list, and since then, the EU has also been perceived through a policy-based discourse. Especially after the 1999 Helsinki decision, Türkiye was required to carry out reforms particularly in fields of democracy and human rights. In this sense, ‘the EU appears as a transformative actor that has a crucial role in consolidating democracy, human rights, and rule of law in the country, with positive implications for foreign policy as well’ (Eralp & Torun 2012, pp. 85).

However much EU membership is perceived as a natural extension of the Turkish modernization process, a counter-argument also historically finds resonance in Turkish politics: *double standards discourse* (Alpan & Şenyuva, 2020, p. 49; Alpan, 2021, p. 122). Double-standard discourse has been prevalent in Turkish politics since the early years of European integration. This perception of the EU revolves mainly around the EU’s ‘insincerity’ and ‘insensitivity’ to Turkish priorities and values stemming from history and state tradition (Alpan, 2021, p. 122). Legal and political changes stipulated by the EU, such as the Copenhagen Criteria and the provisions in the Progress Reports, only instrumentalize Türkiye’s EU bid, while Türkiye is deliberately kept aside by the Union. The idea is prevalent in the country that despite completing all of the requirements, Türkiye will never be accepted as

an EU member and will face new preconditions every time the current set is met: '92% of Turks believe that the Union has "double standards" when it comes to Turkish accession', as it was put by Egemen Bağış, a former minister of EU affairs (Bağış, 2011).

In the post-2010 period, the above-mentioned double standards discourse also found resonance in political debates, particularly on the EU's transactional relations with Türkiye in the realms of migration and energy and in the debates revolving around the 15 July coup attempt in 2016, as will be elaborated below.

Shift from Accession Candidacy to Transactional Partnership: Three Dimensions and Three Milestones in Türkiye–EU Relations after 2010

The first point to be made regarding Türkiye–EU relations after 2010 is about the deterioration of EU conditionality and the backsliding in the EU-induced reform process in Türkiye. This is labelled in the literature the period of 'de-Europeanisation' (Aydın-Düzgit & Kaliber, 2016; Özçelik & Çakmak, 2022) or 'Europeanisation-as-denial' (Alpan, 2021). The political commitment to European integration began to undergo a transformation as early as 2005. This shift was observed not only within the ruling party at that time, the Justice and Development Party (AKP, Turkish acronym), but also among other domestic political actors. Simultaneously, there was a rise in Eurosceptical tendencies within the broader Turkish public. These dynamics were closely intertwined with the diminishing significance attributed to Europeanization and EU accession. The contestation of the EU within the wider Turkish public further contributed to changing perceptions of and attitudes towards European integration. That is, in the period after 2010, 'Europe' was no longer the *lingua franca* in the Turkish political landscape, and every political actor had to speak that language to assert their location within politics (Alpan, 2014, p. 69). In the EU camp, growing scepticism was also voiced about Turkish EU membership, including a rise in anti-Islamic and xenophobic notions (Hauge et al., 2016, p. 18). Aydın-Düzgit and Tocci sum up the main dynamic of this phase by stating that 'since 2005, "anti-Turks" in Europe and "anti-Europeans" in Türkiye have reinforced each other, generating a spiral of antagonism and a lack of reform in Türkiye, and increasing the distance between them' (Aydın-Düzgit & Tocci, 2015, p. 31). The growth

in the distance between Turks and Europeans has impeded constructive dialogue and cooperation on various fronts. The spiral of antagonism described by Aydın-Düzgit and Tocci continues to impact the relationship between Türkiye and the EU, creating challenges in fostering a more productive and mutually beneficial engagement between the two parties.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the influence of 'Europe' did not entirely vanish from the realm of Turkish domestic politics during this period. It continued to play a role in shaping economic policy orientations, security considerations, and identity debates. Consequently, this section aims to delve into the noteworthy developments that unfolded in the post-2010 era, examining the key issues that propelled Türkiye–EU relations in various directions. These issues have been identified through the insights and perspectives shared by our interviewees, allowing us to paint a comprehensive picture of the bilateral relationship.

Economics

As previously mentioned, the 1999 Helsinki decision had a significant impact on Türkiye–EU relations, particularly in terms of the transformative effects it triggered within Turkish politics, polity, and policies. This influence extended to various aspects, and the realm of the economy was no exception. Indeed, Türkiye's EU accession efforts entailed a significant level of economic policy convergence (Akman & Çekin, 2021, p. 296), in order to meet the economic elements of the Copenhagen Criteria, which emphasize a functioning market economy, the capacity to cope with competitive pressures, and harmonization with the *acquis* (European Council, 1993). Türkiye's efforts were therefore motivated by the twin imperatives of the economic benefits associated with the status of EU membership and the EU's financial assistance. Nevertheless, the influence of the EU on Türkiye declined markedly after 2008, coinciding with the onset of the global economic crisis. As the reform process ground to a halt, the economies of both entities suffered, leading to a downturn in their bilateral political relations (Akman & Çekin, 2021, p. 297). All in all, 'the EU's anchor for Turkish institutional reforms and leverage over Turkish politicians ended abruptly around 2010 as the accession process almost completely stalled' (Acemoğlu & Üçer, 2015, p. 23).

In the post-2010 period, the most significant milestone event regarding the thematic dimension of economics has been the modernization of the Türkiye–EU Customs Union Agreement, as also pointed out by our interviewees. The Customs Union (CU) and its institutional structure had contributed to EU–Türkiye relations and the introduction of EU-induced polity in Türkiye (The Turkish–EU Joint Parliamentary Committee that this chapter particularly focuses on is one of these institutions). Nevertheless, the overall backsliding in the reform process was reflected in the operation of the CU, as ‘institutional rule-based economic governance [was] weakened’ in this period (Arısan-Eralp, 2018, p. 3). Discussions on upgrading the CU started in 2014 at the initiative of the European Commission and were accelerated with the May 2015 declaration by Türkiye’s economy minister Nihat Zeybekçi and the European Commissioner for Trade Anna Cecilia Malmström (Arısan-Eralp, 2018, p. 1). Based on an impact assessment, the Commission recommended to the European Parliament and the European Council the commencement of negotiations for the modernization of the CU and ‘to further extend the bilateral trade relations to areas such as services, public procurement, and sustainable development’ (European Commission, 2016).

Another important development in the economic thematic dimension of Türkiye–EU relations during this period was the launch of the IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) II period in 2014 (which would last until 2020). Within the framework of the IPA II funding scheme, Türkiye was supposed to receive €4.4 billion, reduced to €3.5 billion in reaction to Türkiye’s distancing itself from the EU. These recent cuts in IPA funds due to democratic backsliding in Türkiye have served to politicize the funds (Toygür et al., 2022, p. 4).

During the post-2010 period, despite the deteriorating bilateral relations between the parties, the Commission’s annual reports on Türkiye referred to the country as a key partner in economic terms, making the economy a significant thematic dimension shaping relations. It could be argued that the economic criteria have been the most unproblematic set of Copenhagen Criteria in terms of Türkiye’s compliance with the EU *acquis* from the start. Similarly, the economic dimension has been the least conflictual aspect of the bilateral relationship in the post-2010 period, despite the overall deterioration of relations – something that needs to be noted when thinking about the context that has shaped the perceptions of the political actors.

Security

It has frequently been argued that Türkiye's potential contribution to the EU's security structure was perceived as a reason for the country to become a candidate for accession (see Toygür et al., 2022; Aybet & Müftüler-Baç, 2000; and Gregoriadis, 2006, for a discussion on the contribution of Türkiye's potential EU membership to the European security architecture). Thus, security has always been a significant thematic dimension of bilateral relations. From a post-structuralist perspective, 'security' has been the 'privileged signifier' characterizing discourses on 'Europe' in the Turkish political landscape (Alpan, 2010).

First, it must be noted that Türkiye–EU relations during this period have been significantly affected and shaped by global and regional political developments, leading to the emergence of two important dynamics regarding Türkiye's security-based preferences: transnationalism and a return to a realist security logic. To start with, the intensifying power struggles between the US, China, and Russia not only laid the foundation for a new multipolar system characterized by the pursuit of hard power but also prompted some middle-range powers to balance their interests in relation to the so-called great powers (Conley, 2023; Renda et al., 2023). With the rise of China and Russia in the so-called multipolar system, alternative foreign policy destinations have emerged for Türkiye, causing it to shun its existing ties with the United States. Türkiye's unique security relationship with Russia (epitomized by the purchase of S-400 missiles by the former) has also been evaluated by some as proof of Türkiye's shift to transnationalism, as well as signalling a departure from democratic principles (Arısan-Eralp et al., 2021). Moreover, due to the worsening security environment in the region, Turkish decision-makers, particularly after 2015, have opted for a new foreign policy line that increasingly demonstrates the primacy of conventional security concerns (Oğuzlu, 2020, p. 136). The Russian military involvement in Syria in late 2015, the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in late 2016, Trump's continuing efforts to undo the legacy of Obama, the increasing penetration of China into the Middle Eastern theatre, the growing geopolitical rivalry between Shi'a and Sunni power blocks, and Türkiye's worsening security situation at home caused a realist revival in Turkish foreign policy during this period (Oğuzlu, 2020, p. 129).

This shift in the geopolitical environment and Türkiye's renewed focus on a harder security logic also had a direct impact on bilateral Türkiye–EU relations, rendering the 'security' dimension as prevalent as ever. Even under the direct circumstances where Türkiye is perceived as undermining regional stability and security in the EU's neighbourhood (namely, the Eastern Mediterranean), EU foreign ministers have continued to recognize that 'the EU and Türkiye have a strong interest in an improvement of their relations through a dialogue which is intended to create an environment of trust' (cited in Toygür et al., 2022, p. 4). Moreover, we witness in the post-2010 period that issues like migration and energy are also included within the scope of security, i.e. securitized (see Buzan et al., 1998, and Buzan and Wæver, 2003, for main examples of the literature on 'securitization'). In this vein, the Türkiye–EU statement of March 2016 should be read as a response to the Syrian migrants trying to reach to the European shores via the Eastern Mediterranean during the summer of 2015. The statement, as announced by the European Council and Türkiye on 18 March, led to a reordering within Türkiye's migration policy and stipulated that 'all new irregular migrants crossing from Türkiye into Greek islands as of March 20 will be returned to Türkiye' and 'for every Syrian being returned to Türkiye from Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Türkiye to the EU, taking into account the UN Vulnerability Criteria' (European Council, 2016).

Another pressing issue on the security agenda between Turkey and Cyprus during this period revolved around the sphere of energy. The existing dispute between Ankara and Athens over gas reserves and maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean flared up in July 2020 after Türkiye put out a Navtex that it was sending with the *Oruç Reis* research ship to carry out a drilling survey in waters close to the Greek island of Kastellorizo (Alpan, 2020; Alpan & Öztürk, 2022, p. 50). After the Navtex, Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis called for an EU embargo on Türkiye given the country's latest 'illegal' drilling and exploration activities (Alpan, 2020). In this respect, it needs to be noted that non-normative reasoning based on security concerns has been shared by the two parties during the crisis. While Türkiye viewed the current dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean as a major threat to its national security stemming from its long-standing issues with Greece and Cyprus, the EU, as expected, supported its member. Turkish officials went as far as to refer to the Eastern Mediterranean as

the 'Blue Homeland', implying that Türkiye has an indisputable right to assert territorial claims in the region's maritime delimitation efforts.

Nevertheless, the most significant security-related event in the specified period that had repercussions for bilateral relations was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as also underlined by almost all interviewees. Türkiye has actively pursued a diplomatic solution since the war broke out. Ankara's initial reaction to Russia's attack on Ukraine was that Moscow's decision and stance were unacceptable, and it conveyed a message of support to Kyiv (Renda et al., 2023). Later, it decided to close the Turkish Straits to both littorals and offered to mediate between Russia and Ukraine (Çelikpala, 2022). The war highlighted Türkiye's dependence on NATO as its ultimate insurance policy vis-à-vis Russian expansionism. According to Bechev, in the longer term, the war would bring Türkiye closer to the West, whereas Türkiye's de-democratization limits its convergence with both the US and the EU (Bechev, 2022). In this respect, the Russian invasion could also be a way for Türkiye to refresh the country's stalled relationship with Western allies and to take part in the EU's future restructuring (such as the European Political Community initiative), since it is already clear that there is little chance of getting back to 'business as usual' with Russia (Wasilewski, 2022). Similarly, the Russian invasion was also pointed out by our interviewees as the most significant security-related milestone.

During the post-2010 period, there has been a notable shift in the nature of the bilateral relationship between Türkiye and the EU. The relationship has transitioned from being primarily normative and rule-based to becoming more pragmatic and strategic (Renda et al., 2023). This shift has further emphasized the significance of the security dimension within the relationship. Notably, developments in areas such as migration and energy have highlighted the relevance of security considerations in shaping the bilateral relationship. Moreover, the Russian invasion of Ukraine stands out as a pivotal event during the specified period, impacting the dynamics between Türkiye and the EU. However, despite contestation between the two parties, albeit motivated by different factors, they have managed to find avenues for cooperation, particularly in the realm of security. This is primarily due to Türkiye's critical role within the broader European security framework. Türkiye's strategic importance, its geographical position, and its efforts in addressing common security challenges have contributed to

the recognition of its role as an important partner in ensuring regional stability and security cooperation with the EU.

Identity

The Cold War and the ensuing profound social and political transformations led to the emergence of new social and political identities. Scholars particularly working on critical theory, post-Marxism, post-structuralism, postmodernism aimed to grasp these societal changes and the emerging complexities. European studies reacted to these dynamics by undertaking the reconceptualization of identity-based politics (Alpan, 2010). After the signing of the treaties of Maastricht (1991) and Amsterdam (1997), European integration became linked with issues such as democracy, minority rights, culture, belongingness, and multiculturalism. Although the relevance of identity to Türkiye–EU relations is rather a far-fetched debate, we will focus on the emergence of the EU as the *modernization anchor* under the rubric of the identity dimension regarding bilateral relations.

The late 1990s were a period in which Türkiye further formalized and institutionalized links with the EU, particularly after the 1999 Helsinki decision. In this respect, European integration has been used synonymously in Türkiye with ‘democratization’ (Aydın & Keyman, 2004; Müftüler-Baç, 2005; Öniş, 2009; Kubicek, 2005; Ulusoy, 2008) and ‘modernization’ (Alessandri, 2010; MacMillan, 2016). The anchoring of Türkiye to EU conditionality brought about by the Helsinki decision led to a comprehensive set of legal changes, particularly in the realms of human rights and democracy, which contributed for some time to the above-mentioned association between democratization and EU integration. The picture of EU–Türkiye relations started to change after 2005. Identity constructions in the post-2005 period rarely entailed references to ‘Europe’ or ‘the EU’ (Alpan, 2021, p. 122). In this respect, the post-2010 period is labelled the period of ‘de-Europeanization’ or ‘Europeanization-as-denial’ in the literature due to the decreasing political commitment to European integration and the erosion of the EU as the democratization actor.

As discussed in [Chapter 1](#) of this book, the concept of ‘de-Europeanization’ is crucial in understanding contestation and resistance against EU norms, values, and institutions. De-Europeanization refers to the potential reversibility of EU-induced reforms and instances

of resistance and contestation. The concept sheds light on the split between societal preferences and the interests of the political class, highlighting the potential stagnation or reversal of reforms during the accession process. This has been particularly the case in Türkiye during the post-2010 period. For example, the government's attempts to delegitimize and outlaw the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the government's 2014 ban on social media sites such as Twitter and YouTube were indicative of a reversal of the Turkish government's commitment to the EU conditionality. The prevalence of transnationalism in the relations, as was explored in the previous section, complements the picture, further adding to the erosion of the normative dimension of Türkiye–EU relations, relegating relations to a sectoral collaborative framework in fields such as energy and migration. In this vein, the keyword 'transnationalism' had been the most significant milestone characterizing Türkiye–EU relations in terms of the identity thematic dimension in the focused period, as stated by almost all of our interviewees.

On a different note, the 15 July 2016 coup attempt also contributed to the waning of the EU democratization perspective in the country. The EU's reaction to the state of emergency proclaimed after the attempt and the repression in the aftermath led to the rejuvenation of the double standards discourse (explored in the previous section) within the Turkish political circles on the grounds that 'the EU does not fully understand the magnitude and severity of the challenges Türkiye has been facing' (Anadolu Agency, 2018). This perception led to a further decoupling of Türkiye's democratization prospects from European integration after the coup attempt, in which the divergence between Türkiye and the EU on normative matters became even more apparent, leading to a significant strain in their relationship. The state of emergency, which lasted for two years (July 2016 to July 2018), played a pivotal role in exacerbating this divide. It provided a catalyst not only for the rise of an authoritarian regime but also for consecutive constitutional reforms. These reforms ultimately led to the replacement of Türkiye's parliamentary system with an executive presidential system in 2018, consolidating power in the hands of the president.

More recently, Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 further fuelled concerns regarding the erosion of rights and freedoms, the rule of law, and judicial independence. This withdrawal, coupled with the arbitrary dismissal of high-level bureaucrats,

particularly those in key economic positions, and their subsequent replacement with individuals closely aligned with the government, has raised red flags. These actions create a worrying trajectory, impeding Türkiye's progress towards alignment with EU norms and principles (Özçelik & Çakmak, 2022, pp. 7–8). As a result, unlike the economy and security dimensions, the identity issue has produced significant contestation dynamics not only within the Turkish political arena against the EU but also in the EU arena against Türkiye's shift from a democratic regime to a more authoritarian one. The issue of identity has generated substantial dynamics of disagreement and conflicting perspectives, reflecting the divergence of understandings and values between Türkiye and the EU on matters of governance and democratic principles.

Methodology

The primary method for this chapter is based on semi-structured interviews with members of the Turkish parliament who have joined the Türkiye–EU JPC, as well as an analysis of minutes from the 2010 meetings of the JPC between Türkiye and the EU. This combination of data sources offers a comprehensive method for comprehending the perceptions of the political elite, to investigate their motivations and priorities regarding Türkiye–EU relations. Understanding how MPs perceive the relationship can shed light on the main perception nodal points regarding European integration, as well as on whether and how the interviewees perceive the 'peripherality' of Türkiye within the bilateral relations over the thematical dimensions of economic, security, and identity.

We conducted interviews between 22 December 2022 and 20 February 2023. The selection of MPs was based on their participation in Türkiye–EU JPC meetings. We initially contacted the selected MPs via email or their respective political party headquarters, paying close attention to their participation in the most recent JPC meetings. Although we received responses from opposition party MPs, we were unable to secure appointments with MPs from the ruling party AKP and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP, Turkish acronym), despite visiting their offices in person. As a result of the tragic earthquake disaster that occurred on 6 February 2023 and the subsequent general election campaign, several opposition MPs were forced to cancel their

appointments. Consequently, we conducted face-to-face interviews with a total of nine MPs. However, to establish a general framework, we analysed the minutes of a total of 14 JPC¹ meetings held since 2010. In addition, the records of the TGNA from February 2022 to December 2022 were reviewed to incorporate the impact of the Ukraine conflict on Türkiye–EU relations into our analysis.

The incorporation of semi-structured interviews not only improved the study's validity and reliability but also provided the opportunity to obtain rich, in-depth perspectives directly from MPs. These interviews enable a nuanced understanding of parliamentarians' individual perspectives, experiences, and perceptions. The examination of JPC minutes provides valuable insights into the dynamics of bilateral relations as well as the impact of EU-related policies on Turkish parliamentary debates. The minutes of the meetings between Turkish and EU officials are a valuable historical record that provides insight into the negotiations, obstacles, and points of agreement that occurred during those meetings. By examining the JPC minutes, we can identify patterns of cooperation, key concerns, and the influence of EU policies on domestic decision-making. This ensures a multidimensional analysis of the political landscape: the triangulation of data from the diverse sources strengthens the findings' robustness and credibility, allowing for a thorough examination of the research questions and contributing to a better understanding of the complex dynamics within the Turkish political context.

Main Findings

Economy

Despite shifts in Türkiye's democratization process and EU aspirations, as well as changes in foreign trade priorities, particularly since 2010, Ankara maintains a strong interest in preserving its economic ties with the EU – the least conflictual area in terms of bilateral relations. However, as highlighted by various statements from Turkish parliamentarians and members of the European Parliament, there are significant challenges and concerns that need to be addressed.

There are several complexities surrounding the Türkiye–EU Customs Union, exploring issues such as visa liberalization, free trade agreements (FTA), technical barriers to trade, participation in EU

agencies, and the modernization of the Customs Union. One of the key concerns raised by MPs is the issue of visa liberalization. Turkish businesspeople are said to face hurdles in competing with their counterparts in the EU due to the visa question, which acts as a handicap and hampers the smooth functioning of the Customs Union. Interviewee #2 emphasized 'the necessity to solve the visa question, which is a handicap for Turkish businessmen and affects the good functioning of the Customs Union'. Another significant challenge stems from the FTAs negotiated by the EU with third countries. Although Türkiye is not directly involved in these negotiations, it is still expected to implement the agreements, creating difficulties for Turkish businesses. This places Türkiye in a disadvantaged position, as it must adhere to agreements that it has no say in shaping, potentially impacting its trade competitiveness. This is a common concern agreed upon by Turkish MPs, and they further labelled the situation as 'unfair'. For instance, one bureaucrat who took part in the JPC meeting mentioned that 'third countries refrain from signing FTAs with Türkiye if they have done so with the EU, which results in a serious competition disadvantage for Türkiye' (63rd JPC Meeting, 2010).

Technical barriers to trade pose further challenges within the CU. These barriers include import restrictions on goods previously moving freely within the EU, subsidies for public procurement, unnecessary inspections regarding intellectual property issues, counterfeiting within the free trade area, and transport quotas. Such barriers impede the seamless flow of goods and can hinder the economic benefits of the Customs Union. Moreover, Türkiye's non-membership in EU agencies for chemicals, food safety, and medical matters creates a gap in regulatory alignment. This not only affects trade harmonization but also hinders Türkiye's ability to participate in decision-making processes and contribute to shaping regulations that impact its economic interests.

The harshest criticisms raised by the former minister of EU affairs, Egemen Bağış, stated that the issue of double standards is also prominent in discussions surrounding the Customs Union. Egemen Bağış highlighted 'the perceived discrepancies in the treatment of Türkiye compared with other candidate countries'. Bağış posed a thought-provoking question, asking whether Europe can afford to lose Türkiye and highlighting the need for fair treatment and recognition of Türkiye's progress. Such criticism suggests that Türkiye feels it is being treated as a peripheral country despite being a part of the core. Referring to the

heightening economic competition among the US, China, and the EU, one interview participant pointed out:

The US was the world's leading economic power in the 2010s, followed by the EU in second place and China in the third. However, now that China has surpassed the EU, Türkiye can be the second after the EU. Ukraine cannot achieve this, and other candidate countries cannot either. (Interview #3)

This confidence was also evident during the JPC meetings, as Turkish MPs generally believe that if the EU wants to regain its economic dynamism in the post-Brexit era, it can do so only by establishing a strong partnership with Türkiye. On the other hand, in our interviews, one opposition MP conveys the following regarding the EU's stance towards Türkiye:

I have visited Brussels three times this year. Each time, we clearly felt that there is no progress on issues such as the renewal of the Customs Union, the work on migration legislation, or the topic of visa liberalization. None of these matters are being addressed. Developments related to human rights and the rule of law in Türkiye are seen as the most significant obstacles ahead, and everyone is awaiting the outcome of the election. (Interview #1)

In conclusion, the Customs Union between Türkiye and the EU is confronted with various challenges and concerns. Visa liberalization, free trade agreements, technical barriers to trade, participation in EU agencies, and double standards are among the key issues that require attention and resolution. Regarding the upgrade of the Customs Union, one should also add the Cyprus issue to this equation, as it was raised as a potential impediment to strengthening economic relations between Türkiye and the EU. Still, the MPs see Türkiye as an equal partner of the EU as well as a part of the 'core' regarding economic ties.

Security

As expressed by the MPs and found through the analysis of JPC minutes, the importance of security is evident not only in the context of EU relations but also at the heart of Türkiye's relations with the West. Three key issues have dominated the security agenda between Ankara and Brussels since 2010: migration, energy security, and the war in

Ukraine. This last has emerged as the most significant milestone event, underscoring the importance of the country in the EU security architecture.² We now first document findings in relation to the three thematic issues, then we explore the extent to which the war in Ukraine has changed bilateral relations in terms of the security dimension.

Migration. According to the interviews, there are various security-related perspectives and dimensions of Turkish–EU relations specifically concerning migration management and its broader implications. The first perspective emphasizes Türkiye’s role as a stabilizing force for the EU’s periphery, particularly in managing migration and ensuring security.

The EU wants to keep its periphery a little stronger for its own stability. It wants this for migration, and it wants this for security. Just imagine if Türkiye were to experience something like Syria. What would happen? The EU would collapse ... Therefore, even if Erdoğan tries to annihilate this country, the EU will want to keep it afoot because its interests require this. (Interview #4).

The second perspective revolves around the issue of visa liberalization, which was a part of the 2016 migration agreement between Türkiye and the EU. Opposition MPs express frustration over the EU’s failure to fulfil its obligations, such as progressing with the visa liberalization process and granting visas. However, it is important to note that visa liberalization involves a complex set of criteria that Türkiye needs to meet. For instance, an opposition MP told us during the interview, ‘We have fulfilled all our responsibilities in the migration agreement, but the EU is not doing its part. We need to create pressure there. Not only are they not progressing in visa liberalization, but they are also not granting visas to anyone right now’ (Interview #5).

The third perspective highlights the evolving nature of Türkiye–EU relations, shifting from a candidate country perspective to a negotiation with a third country. This change is attributed to the Syrian crisis and the subsequent refugee crisis, which compelled a re-evaluation of Türkiye’s membership negotiations. The focus shifted towards maintaining ties with Türkiye while prioritizing areas of mutual benefit rather than full membership. For one opposition MP, the characterization of the relationship as ‘transnationalism’ highlights the pragmatic approach of concentrating on mutually advantageous issues. He argues:

Especially after the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011, and with the subsequent refugee crisis becoming an increasingly pressing issue over the years, the perspective towards Türkiye naturally shifted away from membership negotiations ... Instead, the focus turned towards finding a way to keep Türkiye connected to the EU without severing the ties completely. The emphasis became on concentrating on the areas that would be more beneficial to the EU ... Rather than seeing it as a candidate country due to those transactional relationships, it's more like 'let Türkiye stay on the side and maybe we can have a partnership with them'. (Interview #1)

Finally, there is a perception that the EU places greater emphasis on migration control than on addressing concerns about declining democracy and human rights in Türkiye, as it is believed that the EU is primarily preoccupied with whether Ankara can stop the flow of migration from Türkiye to Europe. One MP explains this as follows:

Progress reports have turned into regression reports. The Commission's latest report is 140 pages long, and within those 140 pages, they just criticized. The only place they applauded was for hosting refugees. But ... democracy is almost non-existent. Human rights are almost non-existent, press freedom is almost non-existent, and European Court of Human Rights decisions are almost non-existent. Demirtaş and Kavala cases are almost non-existent. (Interview #3)

In a nutshell, the EU's interest in maintaining stability and managing migration and the pragmatic focus on specific areas of cooperation demonstrate the complex nature of evolving Türkiye–EU relations in terms of security considerations. However, criticisms of democratic decline and human rights issues point to ongoing challenges and disparities in priorities between the two sides. Although the normativity dimension of the bilateral relationship is eroding, which is resented by the MPs, this makes Türkiye even more indispensable for the EU security architecture, making it a core partner for European security.

Energy. The other component of Ankara–Brussels security relations has been energy. Türkiye has long been considered the energy hub for the EU. This has gained more significance particularly following the war in Ukraine.

You cannot find a solution to the energy crisis by bypassing Türkiye and solely relying on an agreement with Azerbaijan to double the capacity of the TAP [Trans Adriatic Pipeline]. Similarly, increasing the capacity of the Greece–Bulgaria Interconnector System cannot address the energy crisis that Europe will face. All these projects rely on Türkiye as a transit point. Consequently, if you continue to disregard Türkiye in this manner, you will not benefit the European Union, Türkiye, or the relationship between the two sides. (Interview #1)

This again points to the centrality of Türkiye to the European security architecture.

Russian invasion of Ukraine. However much the issue of migration was perceived by the interviewees as significant to the security dimension of bilateral relations, when asked about the key milestone event regarding security, almost all respondents mentioned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This could partly be because the interviewing period and the start of the invasion were very close together, while the migration issue had been on the agenda for some time.

To start with, almost all interviewees argued that the war in Ukraine showed how indispensable Türkiye is to the European security architecture. As one interviewee argued: ‘The fact that Türkiye is not an EU member is drifting us away, but if we need to think about security as a whole, it will include NATO as well as the EU, and of course Türkiye’ (Interviewee #1). Of course, this is a point not immune from harsh criticism by opposition MPs. One of our interviewees argued, ‘Whatever Türkiye is selling now is brutal power. The country is trying to carve a space for itself in the European security structure after the war in Ukraine ... Nevertheless, the country is now facing the risk of being thrown out of the Council of Europe. This is what really matters’ (Interview #4).

Another important point about the Russian invasion of Ukraine in relation to Türkiye’s centrality in Europe’s security framework is that Türkiye is able to play a brokerage role between the parties to the war, which is something ‘manageable for the EU’ (Interview #5). This interviewee continues:

The war has severely affected sectors like food and logistics, which is also quite problematic for the EU itself ... Because Türkiye is a part of this equation, the EU finds itself in a more comfortable zone ... That

is, the fact that Türkiye is a part of these relations makes the war more manageable for the EU. (Interview #5)

Identity

Although Türkiye claims to maintain a central position in its relations with the EU in terms of both security and economics, it is not an ambitious claim to assert that Türkiye has increasingly distanced itself normatively from the EU, particularly since the 2010s, and has strengthened its position as one of the periphery states that reluctantly attaches itself to the EU's democratic principles. There is a prevailing belief, particularly from a Turkish perspective, that the EU represents a project aimed at fostering democratization. As one of our respondents claimed:

the process of membership in the EU should be acknowledged as a process, and it should be pursued without making any concessions until the end of this process. The goal of this process is for Türkiye to attain universal values and to reach the standards, principles, and values that prevail in the European Union. (Interview #1)

While such ambition to become part of the EU still exists, it is commonly acknowledged by our interviewees and revealed in the JPC meetings that Türkiye gradually abandoned the progress it made in terms of democratic conditionality between 1999 and 2005, and moved towards becoming an authoritarian country, deviating from its path as a democratic nation. Another interviewee confirmed that, especially after 2010, Türkiye has experienced a regression in terms of the democratic values of the EU, and the ruling party, which operates with an unconventional confidence, has evolved from democracy towards an authoritarian system:

Let's take Erdoğan, for instance. Let him attend the European Council meeting. Why the hell does nobody look like me there, Erdoğan might wonder. Let's take Erdoğan. Let's bring him to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit and make him sit there. Erdoğan will say, everyone is just like me. It's that simple for him. When he goes there [Shanghai Cooperation Organization], does anyone mention Kavala or talk about his release? Does he differ from Putin? Lukashenko or China? There's no difference. Is this real Türkiye? It shouldn't be. (Interview #3)

All of this suggests that Türkiye carries out its relationship with the EU without fully adhering to democratic principles. Thus, according to the interviewees, the milestone event in terms of the identity dimension in Türkiye–EU relations has been the shift to transnationalism, which has rendered Türkiye’s position in the European integration process even more peripheral. Such a situation in bilateral relations is usually captured by the transactional relationship. As one interview participant notes:

Currently, there is a completely transactional relationship, to put it bluntly, which resembles horse trading. ‘Transactional’ may seem like a sophisticated term, but it’s just like negotiating at a horse market. What will we do about migration? Oh, here’s a migration agreement. What about intelligence and security cooperation? Oh, here’s an agreement for that too. (Interview #4)

Conclusion

There is currently almost no Türkiye debate in Europe. This is partly because of the deterioration of Turkish democracy and the erosion of EU conditionality in the country, but also due to the perpetual crises experienced by the EU itself. The EU, which has long projected liberal norms and values, has also been affected by these changes, especially after the Eurozone crisis of 2009. This crisis damaged the EU’s external reputation and caused internal disputes, weakening its integrity. Subsequent events like the Arab Spring, migration influxes, the rise of authoritarianism in member states (Hungary and Poland), Brexit, the impact of COVID-19, and the Ukraine war further distorted the EU’s vision of being a more integrated, harmonious, and united global actor. Consequently, the EU has struggled to project its normative agenda both externally and within its borders.

These challenges, characterized by declining democracy, geopolitical shifts, migration crises, internal disputes within the EU, and conflicts such as that in Ukraine, have all contributed to the deteriorating relationship between Türkiye and the EU and the silencing of the Türkiye debate in Europe. They have exacerbated existing differences and hindered cooperation on various fronts, impacting the overall dynamics between Ankara and Brussels. In fact, as early as 2008, Turkish–EU relations had already started to lose their initial zeal, prompting some

leading scholars to understand the dynamics of the bilateral relationship from the perspective of de-Europeanization.

Given the ongoing war in Ukraine, the refugee crisis, and the dispute over the Eastern Mediterranean problem, it has never been more crucial to comprehend bilateral relations between the EU and Türkiye. Although Brussels and Ankara have encountered numerous problems throughout their history, bilateral relations reached their lowest point during the aforementioned crises. Of these, the war between Russia and Ukraine is the one that has brought about a substantial transformation in the security and defence strategies of the EU. Moreover, this event has underscored the critical significance of enhancing diplomatic relations between Türkiye and the EU. While Türkiye's relationship with the EU initially revolved around its candidacy for membership, it has evolved into a strategic partnership based on mutual needs.

Against this background, this chapter has explored how the bilateral relationship in its current stalemate context is perceived by the Turkish elite, particularly after the 2010s. The interviews with the Turkish MPs who are or have been part of the JPC, a pivotal institution in the institutional aspect of bilateral relations since the 1963 Ankara Agreement, and analysis of JPC minutes show that with respect to the thematic dimensions of economics and security, the Turkish elite see Türkiye as quite a part of the 'centre', seeing both parties as equal partners equidistant from decision-making processes. Nevertheless, in terms of Türkiye's identity-related relation to the EU, the country is still seen as peripheral to the democratization and modernization processes regarded as indispensable to European integration – something which has been exacerbated with the rising transactional tone in bilateral relations.

Notes

- 1 The JPC meetings between 19 December 2018 and 17 March 2022 were not held due to the claim made by Turkish side regarding the Swedish parliamentarian (Evin İncir) representing the European Parliament, alleging proximity to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). The meetings were rescheduled following the departure of İncir from the JPC (Interview #1).
- 2 Another important thematic issue that was raised by the MPs was, not surprisingly, Cyprus, which we do not include into the analysis here. Despite being a significant game changer of the relations, the Cyprus issue does not have a direct bearing on the research question at hand on 'peripherality', which is a distinct topic on its own.

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Appendix

Table A7.1: Interviews with Turkish MPs serving in the Turkish–EU JPC

Interview code	Gender	Party affiliation	Political ideology	Date and type of interview
Interview#1	Male	Republican People's Party (CHP, Turkish acronym)	Centre left	23 December 2022 In person
Interview#2	Male	CHP	Centre left	22 December 2022 In person
Interview#3	Male	Good Party (İYİ Parti, Turkish acronym)	Centre right	20 February 2023 In person
Interview#4	Male	People's Democratic Party (HDP, Turkish acronym)	Left	3 February 2023 In person
Interview#5	Female	CHP	Centre left	22 December 2022 In person
Interview#6	Female	HDP	Left	14 January 2023 In person
Interview#7	Male	CHP	Centre left	16 January 2023 In person
Interview#8	Female	CHP	Centre left	16 January 2023 In person
Interview#9	Female	İYİ Parti	Centre right	22 January 2023 In person

PART III

The Peripherality of Potential Candidate Countries

CHAPTER 8

From Dreaming of to Dealing with Europe

How the Political Elite in Georgia Frames and Contests the EU

David Aprasidze

Ilia State University, Tbilisi

Abstract

How do Georgian political elites frame the EU and EU integration in their discourse? Why do they simultaneously support and contest the EU? How does the membership perspective recently opened for Georgia alter this discourse and contestation? In this chapter, we argue that the EU became the cornerstone of domestic political struggle in Georgia. Local elites regard the EU and EU integration as a strategic process, producing new opportunities and challenges. They contextualize events related to the EU and EU integration through the lenses of their interests and expectations. This reveals the limits of the EU's transformative power, and therefore conditionality, even within the membership perspective, especially in the liminal periphery with competing forces such as Russia. Along with secondary data regarding

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Georgia–EU relations, the chapter draws on original interviews with members of the Georgian parliament, both from the ruling party and the opposition, and their public statements.

Keywords: EU, transformative power, conditionality, Georgia, political elite

Introduction

In 2020, during the election campaign, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party declared that Georgia would submit a formal application for EU membership by 2024. This announcement was widely received as purely electoral populism and politically ‘unthinkable’ (Groeneveld, 2021). In less than two years, however, Georgia had sent the membership request to the EU, using the window of opportunity opened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Paradoxically, the new reality caused a split in the previously uncontested recognition of EU integration as a positive goal. GD, willing to embrace integration two years earlier, turned cautious if not Eurosceptical, and began to critically approach some EU policies and practices (Emerson & Blockmans, 2022). It suddenly became apparent that, contrary to previous assumptions about unanimous support for EU integration among the political elite and the population alike – surveys still show over 80 per cent public approval of the EU (NDI & CRRC, 2023) – EU and EU membership are contested and highly politicized issues in Georgian politics.

This chapter addresses the following research questions: how do the political elites frame the EU and EU integration in their discourse? Why do they simultaneously support and contest the EU? How does the membership perspective recently opened for Georgia alter this discourse and contestation? The chapter article connects to the overarching question of the current volume: how is the EU’s role as a transformative power perceived by elites in its inner and outer periphery and what are the main reasons for its contestation?

The chapter has the following main argument: based on the rational choice institutionalism assumption about the domestic response to adaptational pressure from the EU to ultimately meet the Copenhagen Criteria, we believe that political elites in Georgia (incumbents and the mainstream opposition represented in parliament) perceive EU integration as a strategic process producing new opportunities and challenges for them and their competitors. They see the events of

integration through the lenses of their ordered interests and expectations. The incumbents are largely satisfied with the status of ‘liminal periphery’ (see below), since it allows them to pursue a cherry-picking strategy towards adaptation – implementing reforms fitting with their regime survivalist agenda and avoiding others. The incumbents also feel the limits of the EU’s transformative power in the periphery, and they use opportunities presented by competing forces such as Russia to boost their own manoeuvrability in dealing with the EU, which softens the conditionality of EU integration as an outcome. Opposition members continue to express univocal and unconditional support for the EU, since they perceive it to serve their interests in competing with the incumbents and increasing their electoral support.

This does not mean, however, that Georgia is abandoning its EU integration path. It remains ‘embark[ed] on seeking prospective EU membership (thus aiming for convergence with EU requirements), while on certain topics [it takes] a differentiated or even opposite perspective’ (see [Chapter 1](#)). This results in simultaneous support for and contestation of the EU, especially among the incumbents.

As a periphery of the EU, Georgia represents a case of a geographical and political ‘liminality’ (‘neither East nor West’ – see [Chapter 1](#)). It has been through different stages, though: in the 1990s, when Georgia became independent, the country was a remote, unimportant geographical area far away from Europe. Over time, and with EU support, it has succeeded in finding a niche, mainly as a corridor connecting Europe with the Caspian Sea and further to Central Asia. After the adoption of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2003, the EU and EU integration became attractive symbols for all mainstream political actors in Georgia. After a change of government in 2003, the flags of the EU were put next to the Georgian national flags above all public buildings (Ó Beacháina & Coene, 2014, p. 930). The political elite, both those in power and the opposition, used the promise of ‘uniting with Europe’ to garner electoral support in the country. The dream of the EU – however far-fetched and unrealistic it sounded – had its political gains: during the last decade, more than 70 per cent of the Georgian population showed unconditional support for the country’s EU integration. The asymmetrical relations between parties or ‘deficit of reciprocity’ – Georgia willing to embrace the EU but the EU avoiding a clear answer – did not undermine this support within the elite (Sabanadze, 2022). The unanimous acceptance of the EU by the

political elite continued when Georgia signed the Association Agreement in 2014. The soft conditionality of the Agreement enabled the Georgian authorities to select the reforms they wanted to implement and avoid those that would undermine their power.

The war in Ukraine dramatically changed the conditions from 2022 onwards. The EU acknowledged the new geopolitical realities and decided to open the gates for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Georgia's unanimous support for the EU and its own experience of Russian invasion of 2008 suggested that the authorities would embrace the new chance and strictly and swiftly implement whatever Brussels requested. However, the Georgian authorities turned cautious about the EU.

The transition from dreaming of to dealing with the EU in the case of Georgia reveals that the EU and EU integration are embedded in domestic political contestation. It also reveals the limits of the EU's transformative power, even within the membership perspective, especially in the face of competing external forces such as Russia that 'challenge the EU in their shared neighbourhood' (see [Chapter 1](#)). On a larger scale, our findings contradict previous assumptions that EU conditionality is more efficient within the membership perspective (accession conditionality).

The chapter is structured as follows: in the first section, the methodological approach and theoretical framework are presented; the second section provides a short overview of EU–Georgia relations, focusing on the transformation of the periphery; the third section embeds our research object in the current debate about the EU's transformative power, or more specifically the outcome of its conditionality; in the fourth section we analyse and present our empirical findings; and the final section summarizes the main conclusions.

Methodological Approach and Theoretical Framework

The chapter is based on original research that began in late 2021, with semi-structured interviews conducted from December 2022 to May 2023. The research and the chapter primarily cover developments between 2020 and 2022, particularly looking at elite attitudes towards the EU before and after the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. In some

cases, the analyses reach as far back as 2003, when the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy.

In methodological terms, the research is qualitative-interpretative, utilizing data generated from scholarly works and analytical papers, open media sources, and semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide covering topics such as perceptions of the global role of the EU, Georgia–EU relations in general terms and specific events taking place during the last decade, and the EU reaction to crisis and war. The semi-structured interviews allowed us to control the flow of conversation while at the same time maintaining a degree of freedom to adapt to new information provided by the interviewee. We targeted representatives of the political elite, operationalized as national decision-makers, represented in the parliament.

On the one hand, the political landscape in Georgia is significantly fractured: in the most recent (2020) parliamentary elections, 60 political parties participated (Election Administration of Georgia, 2020), while the parliament, with 150 members, has two factions, seven political groups (political groups have almost the same rights as factions but consist of a smaller number of parliamentarians), and 14 independent members (as of October 2023; see Parliament of Georgia, 2020a). On the other hand, the landscape is dominated by the ruling GD, which controls power on a national level and in almost all local municipalities. This makes Georgia a case of dominant-power politics with some elements of feckless pluralism (see Berglund, 2014).

Considering the above, we targeted members of the parliamentary Committee on European Integration of Georgia for interviews. The Committee has 14 members, eight representing the ruling majority and seven representing six groups of the opposition (as of October 2023; see Committee on European integration, n.d.). Initially, we aimed to conduct six interviews – three from the majority and three from the opposition. Despite all attempts, the majority representatives refused to participate. We added one interview with an opposition representative to compensate for this shortcoming, reaching four interviews in total. As for the ruling majority, we rely on public statements accessible in media sources. For this purpose, we systematically searched through national online media sources such as IPN.ge (Interpressnews), Georgia Today, Civil.ge, and Netgazeti.ge. We used the English-language pages whenever the media outlets had them. Where

the author translated information available only in Georgian, this is indicated in the citations. The same applies to interviews, which were conducted in Georgian, transcribed, and translated by the author. All interviewees choose to remain anonymous.

In terms of its theoretical framework, the chapter applies the theoretical model of domestic adaptation to the EU (or Europeanization) proposed by Börzel and Risse (2003; see also Lebanidze, 2020 for application to the post-Soviet space). According to this model, domestic change is needed as a result of the existence of “misfit” or incompatibility between European-level processes, policies, and institutions, on the one hand, and domestic-level processes, policies, and institutions on the other’ (Börzel & Risse, 2003, p. 58). The misfit is translated into top-down EU adaptational pressure (or conditionality) aimed at eliminating it (or achieving convergence with EU-level polity, policies, and politics, ultimately the Copenhagen Criteria). However, it is not a sufficient condition for domestic change to take place. The second condition (and more relevant for our purposes, since it reveals the bottom-up reaction of local, domestic actors) is the response ‘to the adaptational pressures [by] actors [or] institutions’ (Börzel & Risse, 2003, p. 58).

The authors of the model argue that domestic players’ reactions can be understood by a logic of either rational choice (the logic of consequentialism) or sociological-constructivist institutionalism (the logic of appropriateness). In this chapter, we follow the agency-centred rational choice perspective, according to which:

rational, goal-oriented, and purposeful [actors] ... engage in strategic interactions using their resources to maximize their utilities based on given, fixed, and ordered preferences. They follow an instrumental rationality by weighing the costs and benefits of different strategy options considering the (anticipated) behaviour of other actors. From this perspective, Europeanization is largely conceived as an emerging political opportunity structure that offers some actors additional resources to exert influence while severely constraining the ability of others to pursue their goals. (Börzel & Risse, 2003, p. 63)

The authors also argue that country-specific domestic structures (the number of veto players or the quality of formal institutions) can increase or decrease domestic resistance to adaptational pressure (Börzel & Risse, 2003, pp. 64–65). We argue that in countries of the EU’s

‘liminal periphery’, the existence of alternative external forces and integrational models, such as Russia, constitutes an additional factor impacting the domestic reaction to external adaptation pressure from the EU, since it increases local actors’ potential to ‘resist’.

We agree that the sociological perspective should also be considered. Indeed, the ‘collective understanding’ of what is ‘proper, socially accepted behavior’ does ‘influence the ways in which actors define their goals and what they perceive as “rational” action’ (Börzel & Risse, 2003, pp. 65–66). ‘The two logics ... are not mutually exclusive [and] often occur simultaneously or characterize different phases in a process, of adaptational change’ (Börzel & Risse, 2003, p. 59). Therefore, the focus on rational choice logic in this chapter represents a solely methodological decision.

Applying this theoretical model to the empirical part of our study, we expect political elites to understand EU integration as a strategic process, producing new opportunities and challenges for them and their competitors. They contextualize EU-related events through the lenses of their fixed and ordered interests and expectations, using available resources, including those offered by other external factors, such as Russia, to increase their domestic response power.

From Alien to Neighbour and from Neighbour to Member? The Transformation of ‘Periphery’ in EU–Georgia Relations

Georgia’s relationship with the EU is a matter of geography. In strict physical-geographical terms, the country lies in the South Caucasus, beyond the borders of Europe and part of Asia. While in the modern globalized world the salience of the location factor has diminished, it is evident that geographical proximity enhances linkages between countries and societies, especially in the people-to-people format. Therefore, the geographical location still impedes Georgia’s route to the EU (Sabanadze, 2022, pp. 144–146). Over time, political, economic, and societal developments within the EU and in Georgia have contributed to the relativization of the geographical factor. Thus, Georgia has travelled from the non-European to the neighbouring periphery of the EU and currently faces a new transformation – from neighbour to membership candidate.

This journey started about 30 years ago, in the early 1990s, when Georgia gained independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Considering the trajectory mentioned above, these relations can be divided into three phases from the EU perspective: (1) contact with a largely unknown, alien country (outer or Russian periphery); (2) recognizing Georgia as a neighbouring country (liminal periphery); (3) acknowledging Georgia's membership perspective (inner periphery) (for a different periodization, see Sabanadze, 2022). Although the chapter focuses primarily on the latest developments, it is necessary to look at the previous periods briefly.

In the first phase, we can distinguish two stages. Initially, EU–Georgia relations were overwhelmingly one-sided: the EU provided humanitarian aid to a newly established country. This nature of the relations was unsurprising considering the situation of Georgia in the early 1990s. With the civil war in Tbilisi and secession wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia was a candidate for a failing state. In addition, it is essential to mention that not only Georgia but all Soviet republics (except the Baltic states) were seen through the ‘Russia first’ policy prism (Lang & Lippert, 2015) or as a ‘Russian periphery’. At that time, Georgia received humanitarian assistance under the TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) programme. The name of this programme was itself telling – the Commonwealth of Independent States was an organization established by Russia and other successor states of the Soviet Union (again excluding the three Baltic countries).

In the second half of this phase, the first legally binding frameworks – Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) – were signed between the EU and several former Soviet republics in 1996, including Georgia. The Agreement was important for Georgia since it established an institutional framework for sectoral cooperation and regular EU–Georgia contact under the Cooperative Council – the first institutional mechanism for promoting political linkages between the two parties. However, none of the PCAs envisaged integration. Only the agreements with Ukraine, Russia, and Moldova (not that with Georgia) included prospects for free trade agreements (Sabanadze, 2022, p. 141).

Despite this, gradually, Georgia gained its niche – first as a transport and energy corridor. From the second half of the 1990s, Azerbaijan began to exploit its hydrocarbon resources with the support

of Western companies and to transport them to the Western markets through Russia but also past Georgia. In 1995, INOGATE (Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe) was initiated by the EU to support energy cooperation between the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus and, through this, enable the transportation of hydrocarbon resources to Europe. After almost 30 years, Georgia contributes to Europe's energy security. Currently, two strategic pipelines run through the country: the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum (South Caucasus) gas pipeline, part of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) connecting Caspian gas fields to Europe. The importance of these pipelines has increased following Russia's weaponizing of energy resources before and after the invasion of Ukraine.

The second phase of the relations represents a qualitative change in the vision of the region held by the EU. It starts with the neighbourhood policy launched by the Union in 2003. Initially, Georgia (and the South Caucasus) was not considered a part of the EU neighbourhood. According to some observers, the Rose Revolution – a largely peaceful popular uprising that led to regime change and subsequent modernizing reforms in Georgia – contributed to the decision of the EU to include the South Caucasus in the policy (Simão, 2018, p. 312; Lebanidze, 2020, p. 136). Later, in 2009, the Eastern Partnership was launched in Prague to outline the Eastern dimension of the EU neighbourhood. This decision was partially a reaction of the EU to the Russian–Georgian war of 2008, where the EU mediated the ceasefire and sent observers that still operate in the country as a European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) (Lebanidze, 2020, p. 136).

EU–Georgia relations made a more significant qualitative leap with the signing of the Association and DCFT (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade) Agreements in 2014. The Agreements have been in force since 2016. From 2017, Georgian citizens can travel for short periods to most EU countries without a visa. Despite this considerable and tangible approximation of Georgia to the EU, neither the Eastern Partnership nor the Association Agreement has ever been regarded as a route leading to EU membership. On the contrary, the European Neighbourhood Policy was initially launched as a parallel, accompanying process to the so-called 'big bang enlargement' of 2004, with no membership perspective for countries addressed by the policy. It was simply an alternative to enlargement (Schimmelfennig, 2018). The same

applies to the association agreements signed with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. None of these documents entails any indication of possible membership. In the broader picture, the EU was absorbed with its domestic problems. Even immediate candidates in the Balkans were stuck thanks to the Union's 'enlargement fatigue', which ultimately grew into 'enlargement resistance' (Economides, 2020).

This was the reality until Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Shortly after the invasion, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova applied to the EU for membership. In June, the EU granted membership candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and acknowledged the membership perspective of Georgia (Davitashvili, 2023). This decision represents the most profound transformation in the relations between the EU and Georgia and marks the new third phase. We will now turn to the Georgian perspective on the relationship and look at how this transformation changed the domestic perception of the EU and EU integration.

Membership Perspective versus Survival Strategies: Why Dreaming of Europe Is Better Than Dealing with Europe

In the literature on the European Neighbourhood Policy, there is almost a unanimous consensus that the EU's leverage to push for political or policy changes is less potent in countries that enjoy no membership perspective than in countries with such a perspective. The membership perspective is the strongest incentive ('golden carrot') in making EU-induced reforms possible. Therefore, scholars believe that the European Neighbourhood Policy cannot produce outcomes in democratization and modernization to the same level that enlargement policy can (Börzel & Lebanidze, 2017; Davitashvili, 2023; for earlier works, Lehne, 2014; Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008).

In this chapter, we argue, however, that the strength of EU pressure for adaptation (or conditionality power) is not determined solely by the membership perspective. On the contrary, as we see in the case of Georgia, introducing the membership perspective can even have a negative effect. Since the membership perspective became more real, a coherent and undoubtedly positive image of the EU and EU integration has been deconstructed and linked to specific interests of political

elite actors. This change produced cleavages and contestations that did not exist in Georgia before in relation to the EU.

Two structural conditions must be considered to understand the dynamic at play. First, Georgia is a hybrid regime (Wheatley & Zürcher, 2008). The incumbent actors apply regime survival strategies that dictate that they implement those reforms fitting into their agenda to enhance popular support and avoid others that may undermine their grip on power. For instance, they may be willing to implement infrastructural projects and reform the police or tax authorities because this enhances their attractiveness and capabilities. On the other hand, they are reluctant to give up control over the judiciary or electoral administration because this limits their power. In the case of EU–Georgia relations, the survival strategy translates into cherry-picking adaptation (Bolkvadze, 2016), which undermines the efficacy of conditionality (Mgaloblishvili, 2023). The European Neighbourhood Policy and the Association Agreement frameworks allow this type of selective behaviour on the part of the receiver country, since specific reform agendas are mutually agreed upon. On the other hand, the membership perspective is based on stricter criteria and is more consequential in its adaptational logic.

The second conditional factor (which was not present at earlier stages of EU enlargement) is the existence of the competing model of integration (more delicately called ‘overlapping regionalism’ by Buzogány, 2019). In the case of Georgia (as with Moldova and Ukraine), EU integration is contested by Russia. Russia launched its regional integration in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union, forced Ukraine (and Armenia) to decline association agreements with the EU in 2013, and invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014, when Ukraine ultimately signed the agreement with the EU (about the Eurasian Economic Union as an alternative to the EU, see Korosteleva, 2018). On the one hand, by applying harsh methods, Russia is further pushing Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova towards the West from a security perspective. However, it still constitutes a key spoiler of EU democratization and modernization efforts by feeding anti-liberal and anti-EU actors in the region (see Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015).

Although the past of Russian–Georgian relations – the 2008 war and Russia’s recognition and occupation of two territories of Georgia – limits the possibility of rapprochement between the two states, the Russian factor still expands the spectrum of choices of the Georgian

government while dealing with the EU. In other words, it increases the potential of the incumbents to resist EU-induced adaptation pressure. This situation became more salient following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, when the trade turnover between Georgia and Russia increased considerably, causing the growth of the Georgian economy by more than 10 per cent – giving the ruling regime both economic and political dividends (Cordell, 2022; for recent Russian–Georgian approximation see Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023).

The combination of these two factors (regime survival preference and existence of alternatives) affects the mechanism of how EU conditionality usually works while inducing domestic change and adaptation in the targeted countries: it increases the manoeuvrability of incumbents to counter external pressure from the EU. It enables them to avoid strict conditionality and continue with a cherry-picking strategy. Now we can turn to domestic actors and try to understand the rational underpinnings of their enduring or changing perceptions about the EU and EU integration in times of war.

Deconstruction of EU and EU Integration: Friends and Foes inside the EU?

Until recently, the EU, with all its institutions and member states, was the shining city on the hill for Georgian political elites, ruling and opposition alike. Political actors unanimously recognized the country's accession to the EU as a positive and shared goal. Article 78 of the country's constitution states that 'the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization' (Constitution of Georgia, 1995). The Georgian political elite has massively shaped public attitudes on this matter (see Ó Beacháina & Coene, 2014, on how Euro-Atlantic aspirations were embedded in Georgia's modern political identity). The overwhelming majority of the population has supported EU integration over the last decade – on average more than 75 per cent, and more than 80 per cent since 2022 (NDI/CRRC 2023).

In accordance with this spirit, in 2020 the ruling GD unveiled an ambitious plan to apply for EU membership by 2024. The chair of the party, Irakli Kobakhize, placed the EU at the centre of the party programme while campaigning during the national elections:

The European Union is an irreplaceable space for preserving and developing our identity and creating decent living conditions for each of our citizens. Our election program is based on the ambition of the ‘Georgian Dream’ political team to create all the conditions for Georgia to apply for full membership in the European Union in 2024. (Netgazeti, 2020a)

Other representatives of GD supported the party leader and emphasized the importance of joining the EU. The chair of the parliament, Archil Talakvadze, repeated the same political commitment in his inaugural speech:

We take a pledge to the society that through consistent and coordinated actions, we will create all the conditions for Georgia to apply for full membership in the European Union by 2024; at this important historical moment of our country, the parliament is committed to cooperation, discussion with healthy political forces, and we are equipped to fulfil the powers imposed by the Constitution. (Parliament of Georgia, 2020b)

The chair of the Parliamentary Committee on European Integration, Maka Bochorishcili, sounded very dedicated and quite optimistic:

Naturally, the accelerated implementation of the Association Agreement by 2024, the fulfilment of key commitments will be the first basis for Georgia to have ambitions to apply for EU membership in 2024. (IPN, 2020)

In 2020, opposition representatives did not question integration as an objective per se but they did doubt the feasibility of the ruling party’s promises. Opposition leaders interpreted the GD statements as pure electoral populism. One of the members of the parliament commented:

It is a part of the election campaign by ‘Georgian Dream’, but it is important for our country ... we have a similar initiative, and other opposition parties do as well. (Netgazeti, 2020b)

The political consensus regarding the EU and EU integration as a common and uncontested goal of Georgia suddenly shattered in February 2022 after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Shortly after the start of the war, Ukraine sent its membership application request to the EU. In the beginning, GD, the initiator of the EU membership bid for 2024, hesitated to follow and even announced that it would keep to its initial

plans of submitting the bid in 2024. Later, however, an application was drafted and sent, as it was also by Moldova.

In June 2022, the EU (European Commission and European Council) decided to grant candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine but asked Georgia to address 12 priorities as a prerequisite for granting the same status (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, 2022). Following the decision, the GD majority in the parliament set up working groups and started to address the priorities. The opposition and civil society declined to participate in the proposed format, regarding it as a façade. After several months of work, in May 2023, the ruling party declared most of the priorities fulfilled and blamed the opposition for failing to contribute and for intentionally blocking the implementation of some priorities – for instance, priority number 1 on decreasing political polarization.

Tracing how the discourse about the EU and EU integration has altered during this period is essential for our investigation. The opposition shows a certain degree of continuity in univocal and unchallenged acceptance of the EU and EU integration as a positive end. Representatives of the opposition, in public statements and during our interviews, portray the EU as a ‘peacemaker’, ‘stabilizer’, ‘union of values’, ‘successful project’ globally, and ‘friend’, ‘supporter’, and ‘home’ for Georgia.

An alternative to the EU does not exist for representatives of the opposition:

The EU is our historic choice. It is our unique historical chance. If not in the EU, we will be in a grey zone, post-Soviet space, without a clear future, with bleak prospects for democracy or prosperity. Alternatively, we will be just swallowed by Russia. (Interview 2)

There are only two options: we are part of the EU family or the backyard of Russia. (Interview 1; Interview 4 provided a very similar comment)

If we want democracy, prosperity, human rights, and security ... the EU has no alternative. Only the EU can provide all together. (Interview 3)

The opposition is outspokenly positive about the EU’s support for Georgia’s development during the last decade. The main achievements are named as the Visa-Free Regime Agreement, which enables ‘our citizens to travel, to see and learn what Europe is ... and that there is no return to the Soviet past’ (Interview 4), but also the Free Trade Agreement, which ‘unfortunately is not fully used yet but has a great

potential to decouple us from the post-soviet market' (Interview 3; again, an almost identical comment was made in Interview 4). It is worth mentioning that the ruling-party representatives also share a positive attitude regarding past achievements in EU–Georgia relations. However, they present this as an argument that Georgia deserves candidate status under their administration. See, for example, Kakha Kaladze, mayor of Tbilisi and secretary general of GD:

The Georgian government achieved visa liberalization. It is the merit of the Georgian Dream, together with the public, that [we] travel freely to Europe with a Georgian passport, without a visa. In addition, the Association Agreement, Free Trade Agreement was signed by Georgian Dream and we will do our best to get the candidate status. (IPN, 2022b)

The opposition does not share Euroscepticism and strongly disagrees that the EU challenges Georgian statehood or identity. Quite the contrary:

For Georgia, the three are inseparable – consolidation of statehood, securing future development, and membership in the EU. (Interview 2)

The EU has always been a reliable partner, including in times of crises:

The EU was the biggest material supporter, including the vaccination, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU also supported us in fighting the anti-vaccination propaganda during that time. (Interview 1)

Members of the opposition portray the EU as capable of adjusting to the challenges it faces. Even though they see the EU as a multi-level, multi-actor entity, they believe that in times of crisis, it can act unanimously:

We often criticize the EU because it needs time to make decisions, because of the many diverse members, and because of the consensus needed. However, in times of crisis, the EU is quite capable ... The EU is slow because of its size, but it has very effective mechanisms. (Interview 3)

The opposition's unconditioned acceptance of the EU and EU integration contrasts with the statements of ruling-party representatives. Their rhetoric, as already mentioned, has considerably changed since the beginning of 2022. Nowadays, the ruling party offers a more diversified description of the EU and EU integration. First, the deconstruction

happens on institutional levels: the EU is not one coherent entity any more but consists of different institutions representing diverse interests and having different weights in policy-making. For instance, the GD representatives emphasize the limited role of the European Parliament compared with other bodies of the EU, based on the European Parliament's critical resolutions and its members' critical statements. For instance, Irakli Kobakhidze said of one of those resolutions:

The absurd records of the European Parliament cannot have any value. I will say once again that even the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union would be envious of this level of absurdity. It is already the third time that the European Parliament has made incredibly absurd decisions. Neither the first nor the second resolution was shared by the European Commission or the European Council. (Georgia Today, 2023)

Similarly, the ruling party began to distinguish between EU members, sorting them into those considered more 'biased' or more 'objective' towards Georgia. In this regard, Kobakhidze, while commenting on the resolution mentioned above, acknowledged the role of Hungary:

Hungary had a healthy position, which is very welcome. The Hungarian MEPs do not obey the general coordination directed against our country. (Georgia Today, 2023)

One more deconstruction relates to EU integration itself. The GD leadership downplayed the importance of candidate status – or more precisely, the fact that Georgia did not receive it together with Ukraine and Moldova. According to this discourse, Ukraine was granted candidate status because of the war, and Georgia was denied it because it did not join the sanctions or even the war (here, the authorities deliberately omit the case of Moldova, which did not join the sanctions and yet received status):

The connection between the war and the candidate status was directly emphasized by the leaders of the European Union. They directly said that Ukraine was granted candidate status because of the war ... If we get involved in the military conflict, EU candidate status will be guaranteed for us. (IPN, 2022a)

Georgia should have received candidate status. Georgia deserved to receive candidate status because it was the most successful among the three countries in all aspects, with all kinds of reforms. We were told

that this was a political decision and that they were giving it to Ukraine because Ukraine was involved in the war. We know they did not give it to us because Georgia did not get involved in sanctions and war. (IPN, 2022b)

Furthermore, ‘dignity’, preservation of ‘sovereignty’, and ‘traditions’ are often quoted as prerequisites for Georgia for ‘accepting’ the EU membership:

We deeply believe that membership in the European Union is not possible at the expense of giving up dignity and independence; with a slavish attitude, it is possible only by preserving dignity and independence. (IPN, 2023)

Initially, People’s Power, a splinter group of GD, expressed the most radical anti-EU and anti-liberal statements. The group was formed in the parliament by members of the ruling party in August 2022. Their most notorious initiative was a draft law to tighten control over civil society organizations (CSOs) and independent media. In parallel, the same group verbally attacked civil society representatives, especially from the LGBT community. Western partners criticized the anti-CSO draft law. It also resulted in large-scale public protests in Georgia, after which the ruling party withdrew the drafts from the parliament. From this moment on, GD openly adopted the anti-liberal rhetoric of its splitter group. The party suddenly moved from its officially declared centre-left ideology to the radical right camp. The prime minister of Georgia and a member of the political council of GD attended and addressed the Conservative Political Action Conference hosted by Hungary in May 2023, drawing critical comments from the Party of European Socialists (PES), in which GD was an observer member (Civil.ge, 2023). Anticipating exclusion, GD left the PES.

Although we cannot conclude that GD is against EU membership, the above statements are in sharp contrast not only with the assessments of the opposition but with the positions expressed by the ruling party before 2022.

After analysing the aforementioned discourse, we can conclude that the EU and EU integration remain key issues for Georgian political elites. However, they approach these issues primarily from a domestic political contestation angle and through the lenses of their specific interests. Both the ruling party and the opposition look at and use the

EU from the perspective of power competition and regard the opening of the membership perspective as a strategic change that creates opportunities and challenges for them. It seems profitable for the opposition to frame and present the EU as a unified actor, an unconditional and reliable friend, because against this background, the government, which hesitates to follow EU recommendations and even dares to criticize them, looks more negative. On the other hand, it is beneficial for the government to present a deconstructed view of the EU, where there are both friends and foes, and the foes (not the EU as a whole), linked to the local opposition, are culprits who can be blamed for all problems on the path of integration.

Conclusions

The EU and EU integration have been at the core of Georgia's domestic political discourse since 2003, after adopting the European Neighbourhood Policy. At that time, the country began a transformation from belonging to the outer or Russian periphery to belonging to the liminal periphery. The EU and EU integration enjoyed the unconditional support of the elite and the population alike. This remained firm despite the 'reciprocity deficit' – while Georgia was seeking membership, the EU was ready to grant a Free Trade Agreement, a Visa-Free Regime Agreement, and an Association Agreement but not a membership perspective.

Unconditional support and recognition of the EU and EU integration ended after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The EU made a bold decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and laid out 12 priorities for Georgia as a precondition for granting the same status. Yet contrary to the expectation that Georgian political elites would embrace this opportunity, the new reality caused the first ruptures in the so-far unconditional support for the EU – it suddenly became contested and politically disputed. The opposition largely continued its unquestioned support of the EU. At the same time, the authorities represented by the ruling party began to deconstruct the EU (at institutional and country levels) and express some doubts, if not scepticism, regarding EU integration.

Based on the rational choice institutionalism argument about the domestic response to adaptational pressure from the EU, we believe that this turn occurred because political elites in Georgia perceive EU

integration as a strategic process producing new opportunities and challenges for them and their competitors. They see the events of integration through the lenses of their ordered interests and expectations. The incumbents are largely satisfied with the status of 'liminal periphery', since it allows them to pursue a cherry-picking strategy towards adaptation – implementing reforms fitting into their agenda while avoiding others. The incumbents also feel the limits of the EU's transformative power and its conditionality and use opportunities presented by competing forces such as Russia to boost their own manoeuvrability in dealing with the EU. The opposition continues to show univocal and unconditional support for the EU, perceive it to serve their interests in terms of competing with the incumbents and increasing electoral support. The outcome is simultaneous support for and contestation of the EU, especially among the incumbents.

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CHAPTER 9

The Ambivalence of Kosovo–EU Relations in the Last Decade

The Perspective of Kosovo’s Political Elites

Bardhok Bashota

University of Prishtina

Dren Gërguri

University of Prishtina

Leonora Bajrami

South East European University, Tetovo

Abstract

This chapter provides a theoretical and conceptual background that sheds light on EU–Kosovo relations from a core–periphery analytical perspective. Within this research purview, the study focuses on the examination of the three main areas of interaction – politics (identity), economy, and security – manifested in the framework of contractual relations within the process of Kosovo’s integration into the EU. The study highlights the ambivalent attitudes of political elites in Kosovo, who, while resisting or contesting different aspects in relation to the EU, are still actively engaged in the EU integration process. Moreover,

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based on empirical data from original semi-structured interviews with representatives from the aforementioned elite, this chapter explores how the EU is perceived and contested in Kosovo within evolving circumstances in profoundly changed contexts, most recently the war in Ukraine.

Keywords: Kosovo, EU, core, periphery, contestation, ambivalence, political elite

Introduction

In 1999, the EU launched its enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans via the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), which through consistent conditional policies has encouraged structural changes in these countries in terms of politics, economics, and security. This process marked the beginning of the EU's efforts to export its norms, standards, values, political influence, and financial and technical assistance to the countries of this region, expecting acceptance and convergence in turn. Dominating this process was the core-periphery relationship wherein the EU maintained its hierarchical core-periphery relationship with the countries concerned (Kinsella, 2012; Featherstone & Kazamias, 2000).

However, since the EU has encountered an evolving geopolitical context during the last decade, which has been characterized by successive crises such as the Eurozone crisis, Brexit, the migration crisis, and especially the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, the dynamics of interaction between the EU and these countries has reached dimensions of 'complex interdependence' (Simionov & Pascariu, 2017), diluting the core-periphery boundary. In these circumstances, this interaction needs to be conceptualized not only using quantitative indicators, which can show how the decisions of the EU as a core shape its periphery, but also in subjective and political terms, which show how the EU is perceived, imitated, debated, and contested by political elites in various peripheral spaces, where expectations of its transformative power and capacity have changed during this decade.

In the case of Kosovo, the EU integration process has unique aspects that are divergent from that of other Balkan countries. Specifically, the EU has applied a much more rigorous approach regarding visa liberalization procedures for Kosovo, and it is even argued that some of its member states, such as France, have imposed 'double standards'

(Marciacq et al., 2022). Additionally, not having a consensual position on the status of Kosovo (with five EU member states – Spain, Greece, Slovakia, Romania, and Cyprus – still not recognizing its independence), the EU has continued to treat this country in a unique way, even in terms of contractual relations within the SAP. This approach has drawn an exclusionary line around Kosovo, inching it further the EU's periphery, and significantly influencing how local political elites view the EU and the country's process of integration with it. This observation requires more in-depth research, and the current study aims to fill in this gap.

In what follows, we will approach various forms of EU contestation in Kosovo using Wiener's definition of this concept as a form of 'raising objections and critically engaging with its norms, policies, and practices' (Wiener, 2018, p. 2) but also as 'a way to express the differences of experience, expectations, and opinion' (Wiener, 2014, p. 11). In this conceptualization, regardless of the objections and challenges presented by the different practices of contestation of the EU, this contestation should result not in non-compliance with EU norms, or simply in a reversal of EU-driven reforms (as the literature on de-Europeanization suggests), but in a series of ambivalent reactions to the EU (Wiener & Puetter, 2009, pp. 7–10).

The chapter is organized into three sections. In the first section, a literature review covers Kosovo–EU relations in political, security, and economic terms during the last decade. The second section investigates the methodology for conducting, coding, and interpreting empirical data from semi-structured interviews with Kosovo's political elites. In the final section, we interpreted the coded data using four main categories: Kosovo as a periphery of the EU; the ambiguity of the EU's foreign policy on Kosovo; the role of the EU in facilitating the dialogue for the normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations; and EU–Kosovo relations through the lenses the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

Kosovo–EU Interactions in the Last Decade: A Literature Review

Some researchers (Požgan et al., 2020; Hoti et al., 2022; Gehring et al., 2017; Shepherd, 2009) have argued that the EU, despite facing successive crises during the last decade, has not diminished its presence

and role in the countries of the Western Balkans, as one of the regions on its periphery. Despite the lack of military capacities and internal divergences, and the fact that its progressively increased presence has resulted in rivalry with third parties such as Russia, China, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates, it has continued to act in this region and especially in Kosovo as a great transforming power. However, since the aforementioned studies are based mainly on a conventional top-down approach, exploring the ability of the EU to drive dynamics and structural changes in its periphery, some researchers remain interested in more studies that apply a bottom-up approach, which also emphasizes the way the EU is perceived, accepted, and contested in different places and times in its periphery.

However, while the literature justifying the importance of studies on how the EU is perceived in its periphery is growing significantly (Yabanci, 2016; Belloni, 2016; Stojić, 2017; Müller et al., 2021; Mahr, 2018), some scholars, such as Elbasani and Musliu, emphasize that the existing studies continue to remain marginalized, largely ignoring the perceptions of local actors towards the presence of the EU in the countries of the Western Balkans (Elbasani, 2018; Musliu, 2021). Researchers such as Mutluer and Tsarouhas (2018) and Baracani (2019) have highlighted the absence of studies dealing with the Kosovo political elite's perceptions of the EU, while at the same time arguing for the empirical relevance of the perception of local actors in Kosovo regarding the performance of the EU.

Political Cooperation (Identity): The Europeanization of Kosovo through the Accession Process

In political terms, relations between Kosovo and the EU have been unique and complex since 2003, when Kosovo's aspirations for EU integration were recognized at the Thessaloniki Summit (European Commission, 2003). However, between then and now the path of Kosovo's integration with the EU has been very challenging, either because of the asymmetry¹ between them or because of the EU's policy in the region, which could be construed as incoherent (Yabanci, 2014, p. 123; Palokaj & Tuhina, 2016, p. 16). Some researchers point out that Kosovo–EU relations can be divided into two periods: the first period includes the years 2003–2008 when Kosovo's progress towards the EU was hindered as a result of the unresolved political status of

the country; the second period starts from 2008, when recognition of Kosovo's independence was constantly rejected by five EU member states (Qehaja, 2014, p. 90; Bashota & Hoti, 2021, p. 3; Musliu, 2021, pp. 29–32).

The declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008 created new momentum for redefining its relations with the EU. The concrete step came through the feasibility study process for Kosovo in 2012, where it was emphasized that Kosovo met the basic standards of an EU member state – paving the way for the negotiation of the Stabilization Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU. At the same time, dialogue began on visa liberalization for Kosovo (Qehaja, 2014, p. 93; Sonnback & Zogjani, 2021; Yabanci, 2016). In this context, it has been widely appreciated that although through the SAP the EU remained consistent in the Europeanization process of Kosovo, the fact that there was no consensual position among its member states on the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state characterized this process as ambiguous and complex. As argued by Qehaja (2014) and Baracani (2019), such circumstances led the EU to adopt a neutral position towards the status of Kosovo to find a creative institutional and legal solution to overcome the divisions within its member states. Even though it remained neutral towards Kosovo's independence, the EU² indirectly continued to support Kosovo in building the capacities of its main state institutions, as in the areas of rule of law, modernization, and functionalization of customs, as well as the fight against corruption. However, as some other scholars have argued, for the political elite in Kosovo, such an approach³ creates uncertainty over the future of the integration process, since they consider that EU member states have a decisive role in this aspect (Mutluer & Tsarouhas, 2018, p. 432; Baracani, 2019, p. 20).

Another challenge in EU–Kosovo political relations within the SAP is the way that Kosovo has been treated by the EU regarding visa liberalization (Hoogenboom, 2011, p. 10). In fact, this issue has very clearly highlighted the incoherence of the EU's foreign policy actions. This is because, even though in supranational institutional lines such as the European Commission and the European Parliament, Kosovo's capacity to fulfil all conditions has been positively assessed by the visa roadmap, the intergovernmental institutional line dominated by the Council of the European Union and member states has subsequently decided on additional conditions. In fact, unlike other Balkan

countries, Kosovo has fulfilled 50 additional criteria (Group for Legal and Political Studies, 2015; Dugolli & Bashota, 2016). As a reaction to this approach, public opinion and political elites perceive the EU as selective and applying double standards to Kosovo (Eurasia Press and News, 2011; Marciacq et al., 2022). This is one of the critical points for contesting the way that the EU followed Kosovo's effort for visa liberalization. However, despite the Eurosceptic spirit on this topic, the Kosovar political elite and public opinion continue to remain in complete convergence with the EU regarding the country's European integration (Prishtina Institute for Political Studies and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2023).

Despite the lack of clarity in its integration policy, it has been shown that the entire political establishment has continued to remain pro-European, valuing the country's integration into the EU as the main priority of its political agenda (Democracy for Development, 2020, p. 31) and appreciating this integration as a potential source of economic and developmental benefits, offering 'a more stable and strong society' (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022, p. 47; Democracy for Development, 2020, p. 31).

As Economides and Ker-Lindsay (2015) have argued, unlike the political elites in Serbia, which have followed a more instrumental approach in the Europeanization of their country, in the case of Kosovo the local political elites have shown more convergence and solidarity with the EU on the path to Europeanization. In fact, since the declaration of independence, as argued by Musliu (2021), Kosovar political elites have focused on the creation of a European state *par excellence*, further trying to reach the status of 'ideal' European state by invoking symbols – presenting a state flag like that of the EU, naming the national anthem 'Europe', and signifying the promotion of diversity and internationalization with the 'Young Europeans' campaign (Musliu, 2021, pp. 28–29). In thus performing Europeanization, the political elites have made an effort to internalize European rules, conditions, and standards and behave according to them. Thus, Europeanization appears as a stepping stone to democratization and modernization during the process of state-building in Kosovo (Sonnback & Zogjani, 2021; Musliu, 2021).

Finally, one of the most reliable indicators that Kosovo is in convergence with the policies of the EU regarding Europeanization and integration is the formal application by the government of Kosovo in

December 2022 for status of a candidate country, although without fulfilling all of the obligations set out in the SAA. The prime minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, said that: ‘we want no back door, no fast-track. We want to build the EU in our country with our people’ (Reuters, 2022). However, experts in Kosovo–EU relations have emphasized that the application does not clarify Kosovo’s European perspective if its independence remains unrecognized by the five EU member states (Palokaj & Tuhina 2016, p. 11). Attitudes of the political elites of the opposition camp regarding the application have an even more critical tone. As a Kosovar member of parliament from the opposition has pointed out, ‘Kosovo’s application for this status was not made at the right time and in coordination with the allies within the EU, and the application was made more to take pictures for social media by the ruling political elite’ (RTV 21, 2023).

Kosovo–EU Relations in Terms of Security Cooperation

Kosovo–EU relations in terms of core–periphery relations can also be articulated in terms of security. In this context, the peripheral position of Kosovo in relation to the EU consists of two dimensions. First, Kosovo had an immediate need for support from the EU to strengthen one of the most basic components of its empirical statehood: the consolidation of the rule of law. In this regard, through its Mission for the Rule of Law (EULEX) the EU became one of the main contributors to internal security in Kosovo. Second, since the ongoing agreements with Serbia remain open-ended, they impose the need for EU involvement in facilitating dialogue for the normalization of relations between the two countries, in which case the EU would have to engage in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in its backyard.

The relations of the EU with Kosovo, also in terms of security, were settled in a new context just one day after the latter declared independence on 17 February 2008. First, the EU reached the peak of its involvement in Kosovo through the deployment of the EULEX, the largest civilian mission of conflict management and destabilization within the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (Greiçevci, 2011; Stefanova, 2011, p. 155; Lika, 2023, p. 15). EULEX had the approval of all member states, with a mandate ‘to monitor, mentor, and advise on all areas related to the rule of law and carry out certain executive functions’ and, ‘ensur[e] the stability of Kosovo, the wider Western Balkans

region, and Europe as a whole' (European Union External Action Service, 2012). In practice, EULEX's mandate was much more comprehensive. Even formally, the EU states that 'EULEX skills and expertise are also being used to support the key objectives in the visa liberalization process, the Stabilization and Association Process and the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue' (European Union External Action Service, 2014).

As Qehaja and Kursani have pointed out, to realize these functions, EULEX adopted a 'chameleonic pragmatism,' through the invented paradigm of status neutrality, a paradigm eventually accepted by Serbia as well as by the five countries that do not recognize Kosovo independence. Although, as Qehaja and Kursani have pointed out, this approach has been perceived by local political elites in Kosovo as unclear and complex, nevertheless EULEX has managed to create a presence in most of the territory of Kosovo and, gradually, to fully come into service (Kursani, 2013, p. 6; Qehaja, 2014, p. 100). To define the common rule-of-law objectives and advance the agenda for the liberalization of visas and SAA, EULEX, together with the EU Office and the government of Kosovo, created the Joint Rule of Law Coordination Board (JRCB) in November 2012. However, after only three summits this initiative lost its momentum and produced few concrete results (van der Borgh et al., 2016, p. 28).

Regarding EULEX's performance, the evaluations among researchers vary, ranging from very positive to those showing poor performance. For example, Zupančič et al. (2018) and Güner (2021) note the positive performance of the mission in macro terms. They point out that EULEX's performance has led to the creation of an environment conducive to sustainable peace within the framework of reforms in the rule-of-law sector, and to efforts to create inter-ethnic bridges of communication. Among other things, the role of EULEX is to be admired in the field of implementation of several agreements for the normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations reached under the facilitation of the EU (Zupančič et al., 2018; Güner, 2021). Brussels itself considers that EULEX has done a considerable job in realizing its main objectives, showing that 'from 15 June 2018 to 14 June 2020, EULEX's justice monitors attended 784 court sessions in 214 criminal and civil cases, including high-profile cases, war crimes cases, gender-based violence cases, hate crimes, corruption cases, and cases previously dealt with by EULEX' (European Union External Action Service, 2020).

On the other hand, some researchers have taken a more critical view, emphasizing that EULEX has not been sufficiently effective. Kursani (2013) points out the inability of the mission to adapt to the local context and mentality. One of the reasons it has incited frustration among the population and the local political elite is the dichotomy between the initial over-ambitious statements and the tangible results that the mission has achieved on the ground (Kursani, 2013, pp. 4, 17). Other researchers have also highlighted the weaknesses of the mission regarding the rise of local ownership in the perception of the population and political elites (van der Borgh et al., 2016, pp. 25, 28; Yabanci, 2014, p. 129). Within the political framework, according to Qehaja, in the eyes of the population and the local political elite, the European perspective on Kosovo remains uncertain, despite the presence of the EU's largest mission there (Qehaja, 2014, p. 101). Some political elites from opposition parties have, in the last decade, contested the legitimacy of EULEX, especially in terms of the perception of it as a continuation of the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), labelling it a 'EULEXperiment' and 'UNMIKistan' (Musliu & Orbie, 2016).

Second, the involvement of the EU in a proactive approach to facilitating the dialogue for the resolution of protracted disputes between Kosovo and Serbia shows that the promotion of security and stability in its periphery is an important priority of its foreign policy agenda (Bashota & Hoti, 2021, p. 5; Kartsonaki, 2020, p. 104). Indeed, as Bashota argues, the unresolved problem of Kosovo highlighted the fragility of the EU for effective actors in its security perimeter during the 1990s, which would have been the time for an EU success story in the field of peace negotiation (Bashota, 2019). Moreover, Kursani has argued that such a high prioritization of this negotiation process by the EU highlights three issues:

- (1) The EU views the dialogue as the only path for solving major problems in relations between Kosovo and Serbia, (2) these relations are key for regional stability, and most importantly, (3) there is no 'Plan B' should the dialogue fail. (Kursani, 2013, p. 5)

During this process, the EU made it clear to both countries that advancement in European integration depended directly on the progress achieved during this dialogue (Stefanova, 2011, p. 155). Visoka and Doyle's (2016) assessment is that the EU applied a pragmatic approach by initially designing a technical negotiation format, before

moving to a political one. According to them, this was done to deconstruct issues with high political sensitivity in technical terms and, in later stages, to move towards a comprehensive solution to the disputes between the two parties. These researchers emphasize that this approach reflects the EU's history of conflict resolution, i.e., a type of 'neo-functional peace' (Visoka and Doyle, 2016, p. 863).

During this negotiation process of more than a decade, 38 agreements of a technical and political nature were reached, the most important of which was that of 19 April 2013, 'Agreed Conclusion: The First Agreement Governing the Principles for Normalization of Relations', also known as the Brussels Agreement (Balkans Policy Research Group, 2020). Through this agreement, the frameworks for normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations and the basic parameters for the establishment of an association/community were established, through which the integration of ten municipalities with a Serbian majority into the institutional life of Kosovo would take place (Bashota & Dugolli, 2019, pp. 127, 131). All of these agreements, especially the Brussels Agreement, were evaluated as historic achievements for the EU (Balkan Insight, 2013). In this context, the EU continued to consider dialogue the key to the integration of Serbia and Kosovo into the EU. Through the new enlargement strategy for the Balkans presented in 2018, entitled 'A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans', the European Commission emphasized that:

Without effective and comprehensive normalization of Belgrade–Pristina relations through the EU-facilitated dialogue, there cannot be lasting stability in the region. A comprehensive, legally binding normalization agreement is urgent and crucial so that Serbia and Kosovo can advance on their respective European paths. (European Commission, 2018)

However, this dialogue has been criticized from time to time for a lack of transparency for the public in Kosovo and Serbia (Friedrich Eber Stiftung, 2012), and the fact that almost all agreements were formulated with ambiguous language and without monitoring mechanisms for their implementation (Bashota & Dugolli, 2019). The most sensitive point in the stages of implementation was the establishment of the association/community of the municipalities with a Serbian majority foreseen by the Brussels Agreement and by the agreement for its

implementation of 25 August 2015. The efforts of the governing coalition (the Democratic Party of Kosovo and the Democratic League of Kosovo) encountered resistance from the opposition camp, as the Self-Determination Movement (Vetëvendosje!), the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), and the Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA), during 2016–2017, strongly opposed the establishment of this entity. This confrontation between ruling parties and the opposition camp led to an extreme polarization among political parties, political elites, civil society, and Kosovar opinion in general (Bashota & Dugolli, 2019, pp. 135–136; Troncotă, 2017; Balkans Policy Research Group, 2020).

Another development that has produced frustration within a faction of the political elite in Kosovo and among EU member states during the 2018–2019 period was the way the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, facilitated the process of eventually reaching final agreement between the parties. After the inclusion of the ‘controversial idea’ of the former president of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, and the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, about the possibility of ‘correcting the borders’ or even ‘exchanging territories’ between the two countries as part of the agreement, the negotiation process did not reach the point of receiving the support of all member states, especially Germany (Krasniqi, 2020, pp. 17, 18; Balkan Insight, 2018). This situation led to involvement of the US, Germany, and France but without the tangible development of a comprehensive agreement.

Kosovo–EU Economic Relations

In economic terms, EU–Kosovo relations can be examined in a stricter hierarchical discourse of centre–periphery interaction. Cooperation in this field highlights the asymmetry of Kosovo’s peripheral position in relation to the EU with respect to their commercial partnership and Kosovo’s considerable dependence on the EU for economic, financial, and technical assistance (European Parliament, 2018). As Bashota, Bytyqi, and Podrimqaku (2014) and Bashota, Sela, and Ismaili (2014) argue, a relations imbalance has been established since 1999, when the EU led the component of the reconstruction and economic development of Kosovo within the framework of UNMIK. As a post-conflict society, Kosovo was highly dependent on international assistance, largely guaranteed by the EU. As Baracani (2019, p. 20) has estimated,

the immediate need for the establishment and functionalization of state self-governing capacities in Kosovo prompted the EU to allocate the largest amount of aid to this country, making Kosovo ‘the recipient of the largest amount of EU aid per capita in the world since 1999’.

The EU continued to support Kosovo during and after its independence, especially in the context of the realization of its agenda for European integration and the strengthening of empirical statehood. As estimated by the EU itself, in the period 2007–2020, through funding mechanisms such as the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation (CARDS) programmes and the Pre-Accession Instruments (IPA I and IPA II), the EU supported Kosovo with a contribution of about €1.5 billion. Such assistance, in addition to support for the country’s European future, is aimed at reconstruction; sustainable economic reforms; and reforms in the public administration sector, the rule of law and order, and education, agriculture, and culture (European Union Office in Kosovo, 2021). The EU continues to support Kosovo in the agri-food sector and the fulfilment of the economic criteria that emerge from the SAA, through the financial assistance of a provision of €63.96 million within the IPA III programme (European Union Office in Kosovo, 2022).

Studies show that there are many differences regarding perceptions of the EU’s performance in terms of financial support and economic development of Kosovo. According to research on the ground, 73 per cent of Kosovo citizens believe that EU membership will be beneficial for Kosovo (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022, p. 47). On the other hand, some civil society voices have been more critical regarding the allocation of financial resources within the Pre-Accession Instruments, noting that ‘these funds are generally allocated to consulting and construction firms of the EU and not local ones’ (Mutluer & Tsarouhas, 2018, p. 427). Civil society also has critical assessments of the way it is treated by the EU. As Yabanci (2016) pointed out, the people’s perspective rests on the idea that more than a cooperative approach, the EU applies a pedagogical approach to civil society. Seeing it as ‘weak and not fully equipped’, the EU is not very committed to considering local society’s opinion regarding the development of the country’s European integration agenda, which orients the EU to disproportionate cooperation with the government while the bottom-up contribution remains deprecated and the voices of society at large are marginalized (Yabanci, 2016, pp. 10–11). Also, as Papadimitriou and Petrov (2013)

have suggested, it is difficult to claim that the EU has fully achieved its objectives in the economic development of Kosovo, as it did not live up to its pledges of donations and of supporting the country in strengthening the rule of law as a necessary precondition for the attraction of foreign investments.

Another way the EU has evinced its support for Kosovo is in the solidarity it shows for society and local institutions in amortizing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies estimate that Kosovo remained the country most affected of the Western Balkan states by the effects of the pandemic (OECD, 2023; Group for Legal and Political Studies, 2020a), pushing the country's government to undertake economic recovery measures (Group for Legal and Political Studies, 2020b). In these circumstances, the EU planned a powerful financial scheme to support the most vulnerable groups in society and to ensure the macro-financial stability of the country (Shasha, 2021). Specifically, in financial terms, EU assistance for Kosovo amounted to €7.03 million for the purchase of 700,000 doses of vaccines, while in technical terms, direct support was offered through the donation of medical equipment and articles necessary to fight the pandemic (European Union Office in Kosovo, 2021).

Methodology

In our case study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with local political elites (eight deputies of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo) to investigate how they understand and conceptualize the position of Kosovo as an EU periphery; how they evaluate the performance of EU instruments in supporting Kosovo on its European integration path; the role of the EU in the development and normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations; and the definition of the vision, mission, and goals of the EU towards Kosovo in light of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine.

The interviewees were purposefully selected based on the following criteria: first, most of them are members of the European Integration Commission of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo; second, they are representatives of the governing party, opposition parties, and parties from non-majority communities; third, in order to have diverse and proportional representation in the sample, MPs were selected to ensure that some were from a young, less-experienced demographic

and others were older and more experienced. Lastly, an effort was made to achieve a gender balance, with four female and four male deputies. The interviews were conducted in the months of February, March, and April 2023 in Pristina in the form of audio recordings under conditions of complete anonymity.

Analysing the Data

The semi-structured interviews were manually analysed using thematic analysis with pre-established categories (see [Table A9.1](#) in the Appendix). Through the ‘coding’ of the interviews (see [Table A9.2](#) in the Appendix), an inductive method for analysing the interviewees’ responses was established.

Kosovo as an EU Periphery

Conceptually, Kosovo’s peripheral position results from the way that the EU approaches the country from at least two directions. First, as Kosovo is the smallest country in the Balkans (and among the smallest in Europe) it does not in itself constitute any strategic or economic importance for the EU. Second, it is a well-known sentiment, not only among the political class but also among citizens, that the EU in its relations with Kosovo applies double standards, be they of a political, economic, or even security nature. In this context, it is worth mentioning the neutrality over the status of Kosovo, the application of a visa regime only for citizens of Kosovo, and the lack of unity within the EU membership over recognition of the independence of the country, according to one MP from a minority party in the ruling coalition (i3).

Analysing some of the main characteristics of the relations between the EU and Kosovo within the framework of the SAA, the commitment of both parties (the EU and Kosovo) is revealed in their expectations of approximation to each other. One of these characteristics is the low level of intensity and commitment of the EU to realizing its agenda in Kosovo. Members of both the government and the opposition are dissatisfied when it comes to the EU’s consistency and eagerness in dealing with Kosovo’s issues related to the SAP.

The incoherence of the EU, according to one opposition MP (i6), consists in the continuous establishment of new and special conditions for Kosovo which have not been applied to other Balkan countries.

MPs also consider the institutional fragility of Kosovo as a challenge to the country's path towards the EU. According to another opposition MP (i5), this institutional fragility consists of a lack of strengthening empirical statehood, namely in the form of fragility of the rule of law and slow economic development. There was a perception of time having been wasted by Kosovo in its fulfilment of contractual obligations due to two factors: the institutional crisis resulting from the blocking of the ratification of the demarcation agreement with Montenegro; and the decision to apply a 100 per cent tax to products imported from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. There have been ups and downs in cooperation between Kosovo and the EU, and the MPs who were interviewed agree that stability is a key issue in the EU's focus on Kosovo–Serbia relations. Specifically, the EU focuses a lot on the achievement of the Brussels Agreement of 19 April 2013 because of this interest in stability and because the integration policy was supported by dialogue, as one of the MPs in the ruling coalition emphasized (i1). The EU has long been at the forefront of efforts to reach a comprehensive agreement between the parties. However, these efforts have often encountered obstacles both within and beyond the EU. EU enlargement fatigue, the deliberate non-implementation of agreements by Serbia, and ad hoc actions such as the imposition of tariffs on Serbian imports from Kosovo have all undermined said efforts. As a result, as a MP from the opposition points out (i4), neither side is currently negotiating in good faith.

*The Ambiguity and Disunity of the EU's
Foreign Policy on Kosovo*

Another important issue that highlights the peripheral position of Kosovo in the EU is the non-recognition of its independence by five EU member states, as well as the performance of EULEX in strengthening the sector of the rule of law. Some MPs share the opinion that there is a mistrust among Kosovo's political elites towards the EU that results from its inability to play an active role in foreign policy. According to one of the MPs in the governing coalition, 'such a thing was observed when we discussed with high representatives of EU institutions regarding the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence by its five member countries, in which case the main response of theirs has been that these are internal problems of the member countries, that is,

problems that Kosovo should deal with bilaterally' (i3). Furthermore, according to one of the MPs from an opposition party, acting in a unilateral manner in foreign policy has caused the EU to lose credibility as an actor in its facilitating role in the dialogue with Serbia, and even as an actor of reliability that can offer a clear perspective on Kosovo's incorporation into the European family (i5). This type of perception is supported by field studies emphasizing that internal political developments in the EU have led to its inability to implement a stable and cohesive policy when it comes to Kosovo, as can be seen in the case of visa liberalization (Berisha, 2021).

Likewise, MPs from both the opposition parties and the government coalition view the performance of EULEX in Kosovo with a large dose of scepticism. According to them, EULEX has greatly influenced the 'psychology of the political elite' so that it is perceived as a kind of 'guarantor' and supporter of Kosovo's institutions; it is perceived that it has exercised these roles to a larger degree than it has managed to help in the improvement of these institutions' performance. It is further implied that corrupt affairs within EULEX have discredited its presence in Kosovo and have lowered the hopes of the elites and the local population for tangible results on the ground regarding the strengthening of rule of law (i7). This inefficiency of EULEX is explained, for one deputy, by the fact that 'the experts that the EU has deployed to Kosovo have not always been the best, and that in itself highlights a discourse of treating Kosovo as a second-rate country!' (i6). MPs from parties both in government and in opposition accuse EULEX of being one of the causes that led to the creation of the Special Court because it did not handle alleged war crimes properly (i1, i4). In this regard, studies on the performance of EULEX have focused on the disproportion between the initial commitments of the mission and tangible results on the ground. Concretely, the citizens of Kosovo welcomed EULEX from the beginning, hoping that it would catch the 'big fish', fight high-level corruption and organized crime, strengthen the independence of the judiciary, and bring Kosovo closer to the EU. But EULEX shows poor performance in these areas (Balkans Policy Research Group, 2019).

*The Role of the EU in Facilitating the Dialogue for the
Normalization of Kosovo–Serbia Relations*

The data shows that some of the MPs appreciate the role of the EU as a facilitator of the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue but at the same time highlight its limited power to force the parties to advance with tangible results on the road to full normalization. According to them, this is due to the lack of unity among EU members that would allow them to maintain a common stance in this process. In the perception of some deputies, Germany is the only country that has followed a clear and consistent line in the relation to the dialogue. Germany's consistent and pragmatic approach, according to one of the MPs in the government coalition (i1), is appreciated by Kosovo in general for the fact that it has been clear to both Serbia and Kosovo that they cannot be integrated into the EU while problems in relations between the two countries stand open. In almost all studies on the dialogue, the EU is repeatedly asked to be more proactive, to increase the emphasis on supervision of agreement implementation and reporting, and to enact more frequent and rapid intervention (Friedrich Eber Stiftung, 2012).

In addition to the lack of unity within the EU, one of the MPs from a minority party (i6) sees the lack of inclusion in the dialogue of the representatives of the local Serbs of Kosovo, as well as the lack of power of Kosovo to 'blackmail' the EU through an alternative strategic orientation, as did Serbia, with its strategic ties with Russia. One MP expressed the hope that the Ohrid Agreement of 18 March of 2003 will propel the EU to put pressure on the five member countries to recognize the independence of Kosovo and to advance its agenda to normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations (i7). On the other hand, the MPs agree to some extent that without the involvement of the US, it will not be possible to reach a final agreement for the normalization of relations with Serbia. According to them, EU–US cooperation brings more credibility and hope for this process.

Some MPs are inclined to perceive the EU as an actor that has taken an unfair approach to Kosovo regarding visa liberalization. They assess the application of double standards for Kosovo compared with other Balkan countries as proof of Kosovo's placement at the outermost edge of EU's periphery. According to one deputy (i6), 'the issue of visa liberalization for Kosovo is the shame of the EU'.

*EU–Kosovo Relations through the Lenses of the COVID-19
Pandemic and the War in Ukraine*

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to institutions around the world, including in Kosovo. Kosovo initially based its preventive measures on existing legislation. In August 2020, the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo approved the Law on the Prevention and Fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Territory of the Republic of Kosovo. As for the perception of the deputies of the cooperation between the EU and Kosovo in the fight against COVID-19, they emphasize that the EU viewed Kosovo and other Balkan countries as peripheries, and thus did not prioritize them for support as it did its member states. This led the countries of the region, including with Kosovo, to find solutions by purchasing vaccines from other producers, such as China or Russia. One MP (i7) perceived the biggest factor in lack of support from the EU at the beginning of the pandemic to be the inability of the government to address the EU with clear requests about what it needed as emergency aid for Kosovar health institutions. This opinion is supported to an extent by a report on the management of COVID-19 in Kosovo, which states that the beginning of the pandemic was characterized by politicized management (Elshani et al., 2023).

The political elite highlighted the influence on Kosovo–EU relations of the geopolitical changes following the war in Ukraine (i5). Changing priorities due to the war, with the risk of decreased interest in Kosovo on the part of EU, meant that the crisis also brought some challenges for Kosovo (i6).

However, according to an MP from the opposition, it could be said that the EU has only adjusted its dynamics in trying to normalize Kosovo–Serbia relations, intending to prevent an eventual extension of the conflict in the Balkans (i8). According to a deputy from the minority community, it is in the EU's interest to end all conflicts in its periphery because several conflicts at the same time would put the EU in a very delicate position: 'We are convinced that the EU would strongly push Kosovo and Serbia towards reaching a comprehensive agreement' (i3).

Meanwhile, regarding the degree of convergence of Kosovo in relation to the EU over the war in Ukraine, one member of parliament emphasizes that Kosovo has fulfilled all the demands and calls of the EU to be by its side in condemning Russian aggression. He states that

‘even though Kosovo is a small country, within its capabilities, it has shown loyalty to the EU and the US’ (i2).

Regarding the implications that the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have had for the EU’s approach to Kosovo, the political elite generally shows a tendency towards understanding and sensibility with the EU. The establishment attributes the perception of the EU’s response to Kosovo’s fight against the pandemic as ineffective in the face of the complexity of the situation. On the other hand, even regarding the impact of the war in Ukraine on EU–Kosovo relations, political elites in Kosovo continue to feel the presence and commitment of the EU in supporting Kosovo on its path to European integration.

Conclusion

Since the EU’s incorporation into the SAP, relations between Kosovo and the EU have taken on a new dimension. Initially, the lack of definition of Kosovo’s final status and, after the country declared independence in 2008, the absence of a unified EU position on recognizing that independence, contributed to the complexity of relations. Due to the EU’s disunity, Kosovo is not provided with a reliable perspective on its path to European integration. In addition, the country’s limited institutional capacity to meet the criteria within the EU’s agenda casts a shadow over its prospects for integration.

Nevertheless, despite having faced a series of crises over the past decade, the EU has maintained its developmental drive in Kosovo, while the political elite of Kosovo has maintained its ambivalent stance towards the EU. Despite contesting and criticizing the EU’s treatment of Kosovo, they have continued to demonstrate full commitment to convergence with the EU, keeping the issue of integration in the country a top foreign policy priority. In terms of centre–periphery interaction during this period, the local political elite’s perception of Kosovo’s peripheral position has been dominated by the narrative that the EU treats Kosovo as a second-rate country, enforcing extra parameters that were not applied in the case of other countries of the Balkans. It could be inferred that some countries have privileged access to the EU that is unavailable to Kosovo. Despite this, Kosovo’s political elites have not developed any contestation line toward the EU in the form of a coherent political strategy. Moreover, the dispute stems from repeated dissatisfaction with the way that the EU has treated Kosovo in certain fields.

In this regard, a deputy from the government coalition emphasizes that:

taking into account the fair and unfair approach of the EU towards Kosovo, we continue to see the EU with an eye of optimism since, at least, we are included in the vision of Europe, even though we have no role in the processes of its internal politics ... Even if we are sometimes frustrated and react by expressing dissatisfaction with the EU, we do so because we perceive and judge that the EU is not treating us fairly, and consistently, however, we remain committed to the integration of the country into the EU. This is our approach, and this is our primary work. (i2)

In the context of the new geopolitical dynamics caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there is a perception among a large part of the political elite that the EU has only returned its attention to expansion towards the Balkans and Kosovo intending to maintain peace and stability in this region. So, due to the political sensitivity of the region, the EU operates with more political fragility, especially as there is now a potential to offer a clearer perspective for the countries of this region and Kosovo. Kosovo, in its condemnation of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, has shown complete convergence with the approach of the EU, even though the EU has not been too enthusiastic about evaluating Kosovo's position, perhaps due to the small role that Kosovo plays in the international arena. The EU remains most interested in how Serbia is reacting to the crisis in Ukraine.

Notes

- 1 The most visible side of the asymmetry consists in the powerful position of the EU, which, through the top-down model, manages to transfer rules and become attractive through the distribution of rewards for the countries of the region (Elbasani, 2013).
- 2 Even including the five countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence.
- 3 As Palokaj and Tuhina have argued regarding the process of Kosovo's integration into the EU, the most significant aspect of this uniqueness consists in the fact that the SAA was signed not between EU member states and Kosovo but between EU institutions and Kosovo, even emphasizing that this agreement offers Kosovo a 'European perspective' instead of 'European integration' (see more at Palokaj & Tuhina, 2016).

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Appendix

Table A9.1: The main categories of the interpretation of coded data

Category	Interpretation
1. Kosovo as an EU periphery – The contractual dimension of EU–Kosovo relations within the SAA – Kosovo’s challenges in realizing its EU integration agenda	The interest of the European Union Applying double standards
2. The ambiguity and disunity of the EU’s foreign policy about Kosovo – Non-recognition of Kosovo’s independence by the five EU member states – EULEX’s performance in strengthening law and order sectors	Non-EU foreign policy Treating Kosovo as a ‘second-rate country’
3. The role of the EU in facilitating the dialogue for the normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations – The position of the EU regarding the visa regime for Kosovo	EU mediation as a facilitator but without binding power EU–US cooperation brings more credibility and hope
4. EU–Kosovo relations through the lenses of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine – The current state of Kosovo–EU relations	The conditions are right for a comprehensive Kosovo–Serbia agreement The EU’s perception of Kosovo as its periphery consists not in its exclusion from EU support but rather in the fact that the country has not been a priority for it

Table A9.2: Anonymous interviews cited

Inter- viewee	Age	Gen- der	Birth- place/ ethnicity	Political party/ ideology	Type of inter- view	Date of interview	Name of the inter- viewer
i1	50	M	Kosovo Serbian	Progressive Democratic Party/centre left	Audio	24 Feb 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i2	26	F	Kosovo Albanian	Vetëvendosje!/ centre left	Audio	24 Feb 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i3	31	M	Kosovo Egyptian	New Demo- cratic Initiative of Kosovo/centre left	Audio	8 Mar 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i4	58	F	Kosovo Albanian	Alliance for the Future of Kosovo/centre right	Audio	22 Mar 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i5	37	M	Kosovo Albanian	Democratic Party of Kosovo/centre right	Audio	28 Mar 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i6	30	M	Kosovo Albanian	Vetëvendosje!/ centre left	Audio	30 Mar 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i7	37	F	Kosovo Albanian	Democratic Party of Kosovo/centre right	Audio	30 Mar 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i8	38	F	Kosovo Albanian	Democratic League of Kosovo/centre right	Written	7 Apr 2023	Bardhok Bashota

CONCLUSION

Reconsidering EU Accession in the EU's Peripheries

The Ambivalence of Elite Disillusionment and Contestation in Troubled Times

Ali Onur Özçelik

Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Eskişehir

Miruna Butnaru Troncotă

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest

Radu-Alexandru Cucută

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest

Stating that the EU means different things to different people depending on the types of interactions they have with it is already a truism. This book has sought to investigate the diverse nature of the EU's interactions with different countries that are at different stages of EU accession. It has focused on political elites' perceptions of the EU over the past decade, during which the Union has faced several crises, including migration, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the start of the Ukrainian war. We aimed to scrutinize the specific interpretations and understandings of the EU in turbulent times and to make a connection

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with how these recent crises have impacted politicians' views on EU integration but also on their country's status as an 'EU periphery'.

An important strand of recent constructivist literature has studied the complex ideational, social, and power-based mechanisms that create centres and peripheries within the EU and in relation to its neighbours. Based on post-structuralist and constructivist analyses that we took as the basis of the theoretical framework of the study, we assumed that the identities of both the core and the periphery are, therefore, determined to some degree by their interrelationship. From this perspective, in defining EU peripheries we relied on post-structuralist accounts and their focus on the 'fluidity of spaces' constructed around centres and defined as peripheries but holding various meanings. The main assumption that all of the different case studies shared is that the relations between centre and periphery are dynamic and defined as a two-way street. This view departs from the pejorative meanings most often associated with the concept of 'periphery' in conventional perspectives.

One of the main ideas that we wanted to advance in this book is that there is much to learn about Europe and the EU through understanding its peripheries and their ever-changing relationships in the context of recent crises. As such, one of the main contributions of our book to the literature in the field is the comparative analysis of different instances of an 'insider's gaze' into the EU's peripheries and into the shifting realities of the EU integration process in the context of recent years' turbulent crises and war in Ukraine.

This final chapter aims to sum up the findings of the studies that have attempted to compare the attitudes of these diverse domestic political elites towards the EU, and their motivations at various stages of the EU accession process (e.g., member states that have been left out of the Schengen zone despite their efforts to fulfil the required conditionalities, candidate countries that have seen the process frozen for almost a decade, potential candidate states that have little prospect of opening negotiations). In this respect, the book presents eight distinct case studies that fall within the concept of 'EU peripheries' (a position that we aimed to problematize) depending on the political relationship each country has with the EU: two member states (Hungary and Romania), four candidate countries (Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Türkiye), and two potential candidate countries (Georgia and Kosovo).

Each chapter adopts an inter-disciplinary approach, grounded in post-structuralist and constructivist perspectives, to highlight the peculiar and evolving nature of 'EU peripheries', focusing on the plurality of power relations inducing more politicization into the EU integration process and thus opening the possibility for the peripheries to influence and shape the core. This implies comprehending the EU integration process from the perspective of the periphery as expressed in the discourses of political elites. Beyond this common perspective and the common design of the basic questions of the semi-structured interviews, all chapters use different theoretical backgrounds and different types of data beyond that collected through the interviews, and together they provide rich and diverse contributions to current debates in EU studies.

Conceptually, there are several prominent conclusions that can be drawn from the book. In terms of the way 'peripherality' is internalized and understood, all countries exhibit complex and nuanced understandings of their own peripherality, going beyond a simple binary categorization. They recognize that certain dimensions may align with peripherality while contesting it in others. Ukraine contests the notion of being Europe's periphery, emphasizing its historical, cultural, and geopolitical significance. However, when it comes to a political-economic and developmental point of view, there is some conditional acceptance of the idea of peripherality, since 'subjective' asymmetries of sorts (socio-economic development, geopolitical weight, international authority, etc.) are drawn into the interviewed Ukrainian parliamentarians' perspectives. Unlike Ukraine, the Turkish political elites see Türkiye quite as a part of the 'centre' and engaged in bilateral relations, seeing both parties as equal partners equidistant from decision-making processes. Nevertheless, in terms of Türkiye's identity-related relationship to the EU, the country is still seen as peripheral to the democratization and modernization processes regarded as indispensable to European integration. In the case of the Romanian elites, although the tendency to self-identify as peripheral to European integration is higher, there is also a higher degree of alignment with the standards and expectations of core EU member states.

There are also several important conclusions about the relationship with the EU of the countries considered in the volume. The relationship between Ukraine and the EU is characterized by a desire for recognition and equal standing, while the relationship between Hungary

and the EU is marked by contestation and divergent interpretations. Romania's relationship with the EU explores the concept of liminality and examines whether exceptional treatment has led to a liminal interpretation of its position within the EU. Additionally, Türkiye's relationship with the EU has shifted from normative to pragmatic and strategic, focusing on security considerations. The Hungarian case contributes to the understanding of peripherality by illustrating how Hungary's divergent national foreign policy interests, geographical proximity to the war, and kin-state politics with the Hungarian community in Ukraine shape its relationship with the EU. Hungary's contestation within the formulation of a unified foreign policy direction at the EU level pushes it further into the periphery.

Political elites in Georgia perceive EU integration as a strategic process that brings opportunities and challenges. The incumbent government adopts a cherry-picking strategy to selectively implement reforms that align with its survivalist agenda while avoiding others. The opposition, on the other hand, supports the EU unconditionally as it serves their interests in competing with the incumbent government. This aligns with the framework's argument that political actors contextualize EU-related events based on their ordered interests and expectations. Similar considerations can also be found in the case of Moldova, where the EU is primarily perceived as a guarantor of peace, a provider of wellbeing, and a normative benchmark for internal policies. This aligns with the framework's consideration of the perception of the EU as a strategic process that produces opportunities and challenges for political elites.

There are also theoretically and empirically relevant instances of contestation of the EU. Political elites in Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, and Kosovo contest various aspects of the EU, such as its actorness, effectiveness, and response to critical situations. The Turkish elite's perspective reflects contestation at the domestic level, where objections and critical engagement with EU norms and policies exist. The deteriorating EU–Turkey relationship can be seen as a form of contestation at the domestic level, where Turkish actors contest the adoption of EU policies, norms, and values. The Turkish elite's perception of Turkey's position within the EU aligns with contestation at the domestic level, while the challenges faced by the EU and its relationship with Turkey reflect contestation dynamics at both the domestic and the intra-EU levels. The studies nonetheless highlight that existing instances of

contestation can hinder the EU's ability to influence these societies and to promote its norms and values in future.

Party positions remain relevant. They significantly shape the interpretation of the EU's actorness in critical issues. This is evident in Hungary, where the government, opposition parties, and the far right construct their own narratives around the EU's role based on their political interests. In contrast, the perception of the EU in Ukraine may be more unified across political parties. Nevertheless, the influence of contextual factors cannot be disregarded: historical, geopolitical, and socio-economic factors shape the perceptions and contestations of political elites in each country. These factors are critical to understanding peripherality and the expectations placed on the EU.

The chapters themselves highlight important issues in understanding perceptions of EU dynamics.

In [Chapter 2](#), 'Perceptions of the Hungarian Political Elites of the EU's Foreign and Security Policy during the War in Ukraine', Melek Aylin Özoflu and Krisztina Arató focus on the reasons that can lead to contestation of the EU in its internal periphery, selecting a case study – the tensions between the EU's foreign policy interests and Hungary – which demonstrates, at least in the context of the war in Ukraine, divergent attitudes in relation to the so-called mainstream European position. Methodologically, this is the only chapter that does not include original qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews but instead uses as an equivalent a critical discourse analysis of the minutes of parliamentary debates within the Hungarian national parliament and of other official documents or associated literature. The analysis is oriented towards a focus on the language used by the Hungarian political elites in a determined timeframe: between the outbreak of the crisis, i.e., 24 February 2022, and the Hungarian national consultation on EU sanctions against Russia, i.e., 15 January 2023. Overall, the chapter confirms and connects to other relevant studies in the literature suggesting that the governing elites in Hungary have an overtly Eurosceptic narrative. It illustrates this by analysing MP discourses that strongly contest the EU's positioning with regard to the war in Ukraine and Russia, the main argument advanced being the desire to defend the national interests (security and economic) of the Hungarian state. Moreover, the two authors show that most of the opposition parties (with a neutral exception – more Eurosceptic, not pro-Russian, but rather strongly nationalist and anti-globalist) adopt a

discourse aligned with European values and policies, but the authors question whether this position truly reflects their democratic creed or whether it is just used as a tool to delegitimize the ruling forces in view of future electoral gains.

On the other hand, in [Chapter 3](#), ‘The Ambivalent “Eurosceptics” of the EU’s “Inner Periphery”: Assessing Perceptions of the EU among Political Elites in Romania during Turbulent Times’, Miruna Butnaru Troncotă and Radu-Alexandru Cucută try to make sense of elite perceptions of the EU and of their view on Romania’s political and symbolic position within the EU by using a composite theoretical framework based on concepts such as liminality, centre–periphery constructed relations, party-based Euroscepticism, and critical geopolitics. The main hypothesis of the chapter concerns the extent to which Romanian political elites, as representatives of Romanian society, see the country as part of the EU’s ‘inner periphery’. The main findings highlight the peculiar character of the Romanian Eurosceptic discourse and its ambivalent nature in the context of Romania’s second Schengen rejection in late 2022.

The chapter offers an up-to-date mapping of these often contradictory meanings attached to Romania as treated by the EU as ‘periphery’ that contributes to a better and more nuanced understanding of Romanian elites’ paradoxes. This paradoxical self-perception that we encounter in the Romanian elite discourses refers to opposing attitudes sometimes held by those identifying with the same political party or even by the same person: nationalist arguments referring to Romania being treated as an ‘EU colony’ coexisting with very harsh self-criticism stating that Romania does not in fact live up to EU standards and that its ‘backwardness’ justifies the country’s ‘rightful position’ in the EU periphery.

The image of Romania as a part of ‘EU’s inner periphery’ is not necessarily a result of recent crises and events (such as the Schengen rejection or problems with the fight against corruption) but rather comes on a continuum that started in the pre-accession period. Procedurally speaking, Romania was treated as an ‘exception’ to the general rule of EU accession; this created the premises for the feeling of being ‘not fully an EU member’, locating the country from the beginning in a liminal position, an in-betweenness associated with the image of ‘exception to the rule’ that has served in the EU studies epistemic community as a ‘stigma’. For the Romanian case, the analysed period (2020–2022)

has relevance because after the December 2020 parliamentary elections, the subject of nationalism resurfaced in Romanian politics. This coincides with the fact that in the same year, the first Eurosceptic right-wing populist party (AUR) entered the Romanian parliament. In this context, we argue that the period between 2020 and 2022 represents a critical conjecture because the EU was hit not just by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic but also by the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine. The analysis thus illustrates that Romania's Schengen rejection in December 2022, together with the disillusionment resulting from previous EU crises and the more active presence of a populist far-right party (AUR) in the Romanian parliament and very visible in public discourse since 2020, created a favourable symbolic space for discursive representations that enforce Eurosceptic attitudes. Many Romanian politicians practically associate their frustration with Austria's veto in the Council with Romania's treatment as one of EU's inner peripheries. The findings illustrate how these favourable conditions for discursive manifestations of Euroscepticism are reflected in the discourse of Romanian political elites, who are eager to voice their feelings of frustration at being associated with the image of 'being on the EU periphery', 'not being a full member state', or being treated as a 'second-class member state'.

In [Chapter 4](#), 'Cha(lle)nging Peripherality: "Critical Expectation Gaps" and EU-Ukraine Relations in Post-Euromaidan Perceptions of Ukrainian Political Elites', Roman Kalytchak and Andriy Tyushka highlight the pro-European orientation of Ukrainian political elites through an analysis that focuses on their discourse in the stage preceding the outbreak of the war. Starting from the unquestioned Euro-optimism of Ukrainian society after 1991, the chapter proposes a courageous questioning of the idea of the periphery by Ukrainian political elites, a redefinition of the terms methodologically supported by a qualitative narrative inquiry that involves, beyond desk research (of political parties' electoral programmes or manifestos, publicly available interviews, and op-eds by Ukrainian elite representatives), an analysis of the discourse of 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of the full spectrum of political forces in the incumbent parliament of September 2021 – February 2022. Hence, '[a]nalytically framed using the "critical expectation gaps" approach, this study explores how wide or how narrow the perceived gap is between Ukrainian political elites' hopes and expectations of EU engagement

and the actual dynamics of the EU's performance – and why'. The value of the study comes from the major emphasis placed on the investigation of pro-European attitudes before February 2022, with a series of current accents (COVID-19, post-war) that support the basic hypothesis; on a similar note, in the BiH contribution in this volume, one could note the observation regarding the importance of studying the Ukrainian political elites, an underdeveloped field of investigation, although 'EU integration has always been an elite-driven process'.

A fundamental element of the chapter is the strong contestation by political elites of the label of 'periphery', the sole positioning of this kind within the case studies presented in this volume. Opting for the idea of 'strategic marginality', representatives of the elites promote the use of this concept because "margins" usually connotes the idea of belongingness to an entity or formation, be it a state or a regional organization, albeit at the external borders or ends of that entity'. The interviews confirm a strong sense of both territoriality and value belonging to the European space, with very few grey areas that draw attention to the potential challenges involved in the joint exercise of sovereignty in certain EU-level policy segments. The scarcity of Eurosceptic positions can be argued to relate to the fact that 'Ukraine's position as a membership-seeking state is that of a partner aspiring to join a community of equals' and, moreover, the fact that (during the interview collection period, so before the war), elites perceive 'Ukraine as an emerging leader and new centre of gravity in Europe, the centre of "New Europe"'. The chapter concludes that after the start of the war, discourse and perceptions did not change significantly in a context in which the image of Ukraine in Europe began to be increasingly visible and more linked to a mutually assumed future European course. Even if the outbreak of the war and the EU's attitude towards Ukraine mitigated critical expectation gaps, the authors remain cautious, because 'it is uncertain whether this gap will not widen in the future, given Ukraine's massive suffering of war and sacrifice in the name of Europe'.

In [Chapter 5](#), 'Republic of Moldova: The Challenges of a Periphery's Shifting Identity, from the Russian Federation's Sphere of Influence to EU Accession', Nicolae Toderaş and Daniel Pascal do not contest the tag of EU periphery often attributed to the Republic of Moldova and base their analysis on the premise that the only clear democratic political option of this state is the European one. The chapter represents a balanced analysis of what was, is, and could be the political path of

the Republic of Moldova. From the authors' point of view, the idea of periphery is assumed both by the political elites of Moldova and by the citizens, the change in the last decades being the desire to be no longer a periphery of the Russian Federation but one of the EU – with the advantages this entails; the envisaged scenario is one of a common European course that, in the future, through the enlarging of the borders of the EU, would automatically cancel the status of peripheral state. This is why Toderăş and Pascal's analysis emphasizes not the idea of periphery – uncontested and understood as a temporary status with a series of future opportunities – but whether domestic political elites perceive this European course as irreversible or not, and their determination to contribute to the irreversibility of the process.

The multiple European and national crises, as well as the involvement of Eurosceptic parties, have to some extent affected the pro-European attitude of Moldovan citizens, although the authors believe that an adequate discourse among incumbent political elites could successfully counter this trend. Moreover, the interviews show the clear orientation of the mentioned political forces towards the European course of the Republic of Moldova, without any other option taken into account, indicating a long-term political commitment, largely unaffected by possible future electoral disruptions, to this desired goal. Even if aware of the importance of the current Ukrainian crisis, which has 'generated windows of opportunity' otherwise unavailable, the authors' conclusions indicate that, oscillating between a deep attachment and a sometimes cautious approach determined by the volatile internal political stability and the Eurosceptic wave that is growing at the EU level, the majority of political elites interviewed, more or less determined to effectively take action, consider that the European path of the Republic of Moldova is rather irreversible.

In [Chapter 6](#), 'Rather Lukewarm: Shifting Perceptions towards the EU among Bosnia and Herzegovina's Political Elites', Hatidža Jahić and Adnan Muminović investigate the lack of enthusiasm that BiH political elites reveal for the EU integration process, the main cause being related not to the insufficient reforms undertaken at the domestic level but to the perception of the erosion of the EU's credibility faced with the 'erratic and arbitrary changing of the conditions put before the country' by the Union. As in the Ukrainian case, the authors maintain 'that the EU integration process has always been elite driven', and they underline the current positioning of the BiH elites, which, faced with

high political costs, may even translate their frustrations into encouraging severe domestic Eurosceptic narratives and actions. The authors argue that the shortcomings observed in the effectiveness of the EU's conditionality in BiH's case are caused mainly by low credibility regarding the country's membership perspective, and by the high domestic costs that ethnic political elites would have to pay for achieving the EU goal. Moreover, the context would be hampered by the presumed presence of several stereotypical attitudes, such as Islamophobia, towards a country that is also considered a part of the troubled Balkans. The conclusions of the chapter are extremely interesting and bold. First, they indicate the attempts of some politicians to force the hand of Brussels (to ease its reforming demands), by stipulating the possibility that increasing frustration may turn into Euroscepticism or even anti-European discourse. Second, they draw attention to the more critical attitude of the representatives of the Serbian group, which contradict the expectation that the so-called stereotypical and Islamophobic attitude of the EU would determine a similar response from the Bosnian group, for example. Third, the authors point to the general tendency of domestic political elites to exclusively blame the EU for its low credibility in the eyes of the population, although the EU has usually been just a scapegoat in the face of a lack of desire among the same elites to assume the high costs of the reforms required not only for potential EU membership but also for a democratic path for the country. In the end, the fatalist positioning of domestic political elites is put to the test, as they currently must justify how the granting of candidate country status is compatible with the EU's low credibility image, which they have carefully constructed within the last few years.

Chapter 7, 'Perceiving "Europe" in Dire Times: Elite Perceptions of the European Integration in Turkish Politics after the 2010s', authored by Başak Alpan and Ali Onur Özçelik, evaluates the perceptions of the political elite in Türkiye regarding the EU and the process of European integration during the post-2010 period. This period marked a significant shift in EU conditionality within the country, accompanied by sentiments of disenchantment and disillusionment among both political elites and the public towards the EU. The chapter highlights how the Turkish political elite perceives Türkiye as peripheral to European integration, with a shift in this perception since 2010. The findings show that the post-2010 period has been marked by discourse about double standards, with the EU's 'insincerity' and 'insensitivity' to Turkish

priorities and values stemming from history and state tradition. The period of 'de-Europeanization' or 'Europeanization-as-denial' began as early as 2008, with the political commitment to European integration changing within the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and among other domestic political actors. The contestation of the EU within the wider Turkish public further contributed to changing perceptions and attitudes towards European integration. The conclusions illustrate how the issue of identity has generated substantial dynamics of disagreement and conflicting perspectives, reflecting the divergence of understandings and values between Türkiye and the EU on matters of governance and democratic principles.

Chapter 8, 'From Dreaming of to Dealing with Europe: How the Political Elite in Georgia Frames and Contests the EU', authored by David Aprasidze, is interested mainly, besides the general supporting or contesting attitudes regarding the EU, in Georgia's political elite's possible discourse shifts following the recently opened EU membership perspective. The chapter follows a rational choice institutionalist theoretical foundation, emphasizing – for the political forces in the current Georgian parliament – the importance of the opportunities and challenges that the EU has brought in structuring their position towards the Union, yet underlining the value of alternative theoretical explanations (such as sociological institutionalism) in properly understanding and depicting the current context.

The analysis points out that the current ruling political elites are 'largely satisfied with the status of "liminal periphery", since it allows them to ... [implement] reforms fitting into their agenda while avoiding others', while the membership potentiality (as revealed by the 12 priorities that Georgia would have to deal with in order to be granted candidate status) is seen as more constraining, with a clearly defined conditionality framework. This can also explain why these elites show increased resistance and why they 'use opportunities presented by competing forces such as Russia to boost their own manoeuvrability in dealing with the EU'. On the other hand, the open pro-European orientation of the opposition is just as well explained in terms of opportunities, because it could represent only a platform to challenge (electorally) the ruling forces. The chapter explains, therefore, a situation that contradicts previous research in which the credibility of the membership perspective was perceived as a powerful tool in generating reforms and support among applicant countries. So, even if it is often

underlined that ‘scholars believe[d] that the European Neighbourhood Policy cannot produce outcomes in democratization and modernization to the level that enlargement policy can’, Aprasidze proves that the stricter conditionality of the membership perspective has ‘produced cleavages and contestations that did not exist in Georgia before around the EU’. This conclusion justifies the survival/cherry-picking strategy of Georgian elites who decide to opt only for those reforms that will not endanger their status; if one also mentions the existence of alternatives to the EU path, one easily understands why the whole context ‘increases the manoeuvrability of incumbents to counter the external pressure from the EU’.

Finally, Bardhok Bashota, Dren Gërguri, and Leonora Bajrami, in ‘The Ambivalence of Kosovo–EU Relations in the Last Decade: The Perspective of Kosovo’s Political Elites’ (Chapter 9), shed light on a special dimension in EU–Kosovo relations in terms of centre–periphery interaction. An added value of this study is the exploration of the ambivalent line of the Kosovar political elite in relation to perceptions of the EU. The Kosovar political elite, while contesting and critical of the way that the EU has treated Kosovo in relation to certain stages of cooperation, have continued to show full commitment to and convergence with it, keeping the issue of EU integration as a top priority of the country’s foreign policy. This study also argues that the political elites in Kosovo have not developed any structured political strategy to resist and contest the role of the EU. Instead, political elites express their scepticism and contestation towards the EU in a reactive manner and in the form of frustration with the way the EU has approached and interacted with Kosovo.

Overall, the relationships between the studied countries and the EU are dynamic and subject to change. The chapters highlight the evolving nature of these relationships and the need to adapt our understanding of contestation and peripherality accordingly. In this respect, critical situations such as the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic have had an impact on the contestations, perceptions, and dynamics of the relationship in the countries at the EU’s periphery – in some cases strengthening solidarity and the need for ‘more EU’, in others raising doubts and disappointment over challenges that countries have faced over recent years. There is a need for further research on the correlation between national party positions and the interpretation of the EU’s actorness in critical issues. For example, understanding how

party alignments influence perceptions of the EU can provide insights into the dynamics of contestation and peripherality within the EU. Nevertheless, the studies brought forth in this volume are a worthwhile first step towards looking at the EU and the peripheries it creates from an alternative, and sometimes ignored, point of view.

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Introductory Note

References such as ‘178–179’ indicate (not necessarily continuous) discussion of a topic across a range of pages. Wherever possible in the case of topics with many references, these have either been divided into sub-topics or only the most significant discussions of the topic are listed. Because the entire work is about ‘EU peripheries’, the use of this term (and certain others which occur constantly throughout the book) as an entry point has been restricted. Information will be found under the corresponding detailed topics. Cross-references in a form such as ‘national parliaments, see also individual countries’ direct the reader to headings in a particular class (e.g. in this case ‘Georgia’) rather than a specific ‘individual countries’ entry.

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