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Senior Citizens and the European Union. A Romanian Perspective

Abstract

The general goal of this paper is to study senior Romanian citizens' EU attitudes after ten years of European membership, with a special focus on the unsolved tension between the instrumental and symbolic perspectives. By looking at the present context, the purpose of this research is to assess the challenges and transformations of the EU-related opinions and support of traditional euro-enthusiastic citizens in times of vulnerability and struggling economies. Equally, the paper favours a future-oriented view, and puts under scrutiny people's expectations and evaluations of the future developments of the EU and their consequences at personal, national and supra-national level.

Keywords: EU attitudes, crises, Romanian senior citizens, European integration.

1. Introduction

European integration has generated an array of economic, political, and social opportunities beyond the nation state. The borders were “dissolved”, transforming the experience of studying, working or living abroad into an everyday reality. The patterns of interpersonal interaction have changed, and the sustained transnational connections have brought together people with various backgrounds who learned about the many communalities they share. The consumer rights were improved through the single market agreements, and the general standard of living has increased. As some authors note, nowadays Europeans are free to obtain their academic degree in Germany, earn money in London, invest it in Luxembourg and retire to Spain (Kuhn, 2015). An early theorist of European integration, Karl Deutsch (1968/1957) expected these developments to foster a collective identity and public support for the European project: by interacting across borders, Europeans would become aware of their shared values and beliefs, and eventually adopt a common ‘we-feeling’.

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Still, during the six decades of European integration, gains and losses were unevenly distributed across social groups, creating both “winners” and “losers” in Europeanization. The differentiated stages of integration between member states and the continuous gap between EU’s core and its periphery have led to the emergence of different political communities and several European identities (Kaina, Karolewski & Kühn, 2015). Also, the uneven distribution of costs and benefits resulted in different stances of public attitudes and support for the European project. In this respect, the literature generally assumes that the lower status groups (e.g. the elderly, unemployed, long-term ill and those with disabilities) view the EU with scepticism whereas the privileged strata of society (e.g. the managers, owners of business, professionals, white-collar workers, Erasmus students) express pro-European attitudes (Schlenker, 2012; Negrea, 2011; Fligstein, 2009; Moravcsik, 2002). Nevertheless, what seems to matter even more than people’s default categorization as winners or losers of integration is their perception over the costs and benefits emerging from EU membership – whether people think that the EU has brought them personally more advantages than burdens. As already acknowledged, the self-assessment of personally benefiting from EU membership strongly determines support for European integration (Mau, 2005).

We are currently witnessing a downward trend with respect to European citizens’ trust in the EU, its politicians and institutions. This is certainly a reality that cannot be argued against, as recent scholarship and public opinion surveys have shown (EB 88, 2017; Durach, 2016; Hobolt, 2015; Armingeon & Ceka, 2014; Hartleb, 2012). According to one of the latest Eurobarometer surveys, 48% of the EU citizens are inclined “not to trust” the EU, and about one out of four have a negative image of the EU (EB 88, 2017). In this context, it is worthwhile taking an in-depth look at the potential triggers of the increasing Eurosceptical views and identify the various nuances that the most recent EU developments have caused at the level of the public opinion. Also, considering the “public opinion gap” between the euro zone and the rest of the EU (Hobolt & Wratil, 2015), a pertinent question to ask would be ‘How do elder Romanian citizens fit in the great picture that evokes public support for the EU in rather gloomy shades’? Are they still enthusiastic and optimistic with respect to the “saviour” Europe, an attitude that has been long nurtured by the dissatisfactions related to national politics or they have rather developed more critical and reality-based stances towards the integration process? Our main assumption is that Romania should not be taken for granted as a Europhile country anymore. Although it is true that the traditional instruments of public opinion investigation such as the Eurobarometer polls still depict Romanians as largely displaying pro-EU attitudes, we expect that, at a deeper level of analysis, these optimistic findings may be challenged. In this regard, we use a qualitative method, the semi-structured in-depth interview, in order to address the public opinion towards the EU in what elder people who spent less time in education are concerned.

2. Sources of public support towards the EU and European integration

Citizens’ attitudes towards the EU have been a constant source of inquiry for both scholars and European officials, as they have become increasingly important in shaping the European project (Schlenker, 2012; Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Gabel, 2003). The studies of public opinion have largely demonstrated that how people feel and think about the European issues influences their behaviour and actions, the Brexit vote being only

the most recent example of popular dissatisfaction with a globalized society (Pettifor, 2017), as well as a form of self-protection against EU powers (Tarran, 2016). Thus, at a time when the European Union is faced with serious challenges, the study of public attitudes towards the EU, their mechanisms and sources becomes a significant and pragmatic effort, since the public has the means to act based on its feelings of support or opposition regarding the European project.

Within the long debate on the sources of political support for the European Union, both instrumental and symbolic aspects have been discussed and thoroughly investigated at empirical level. The former approach establishes the utilitarian factors as the basis of EU support. These instrumental sources of EU support are usually subdivided into two categories (Mau, 2005, p. 292): one related to the *national* level (collective welfare, i.e. how beneficial European integration is for the country) and the other related to the *individual* level (personal welfare, i.e. the benefits individuals derive from European integration). The utilitarian thesis “maintains that the performance of the EU and/or of the nation states, in combination with a rational cost-benefit analysis of the EU membership implications, dictates support towards the EU and European integration” (Sigalas, 2010, p. 1344). In other words, “favourable economic payoffs” are commonly seen as preconditions of stronger ties of loyalties for the supranational institutions, tending to outweigh other emotional reasons for supporting the EU. The academic literature has largely demonstrated that economic benefits associated with membership in the EU are crucial for explaining variance in the degree of EU support (Schlenker, 2012; Hooghe & Marks, 2005). Yet, scholars have also admitted that public opinion about a complex structure such as the EU is highly likely to be based upon various and multidimensional factors and dispositions (Bosch & Newton, 1998). Equally, public opinion is not a fixed, static entity, but rather multi-layered and dynamic, shaped by life-course events and affected by the circumstances in which people live. Moreover, some authors discuss its ambivalence, by demonstrating that we can hold simultaneously positive and negative opinions about the same thing/institution. With reference to the EU, that means that citizens’ attitudes can be more volatile than initially thought, allowing them to agree and disagree with the EU at the same time (Durach, 2016, pp. 7-9).

As utilitarian support is output-oriented, appraisals of Europe are common in times of economic growth and prosperity, whereas critical evaluations become pervasive during periods of trials, when the economy registers a downturn. Hence, we may expect that under the pressure of the current crises, EU’s performance (especially the economic performance) is perceived as weaker and, as a consequence, citizens’ trust and support for the European project decrease, as the Union fails to meet the benefits that people expected of it.

The latter perspective – emphasizing symbolic representations of the EU – finds a stronger exploratory value for European support in the case of emotions and identity formation. As Marks and Hooghe show, “emotional or ‘gut’ commitments can be extremely powerful in shaping views towards political objects” (2003, p. 6). Affective attitudes and support are more diffuse as they are created through slow socialization and include less objective variables such as emotional responses, identity-related factors, and perceived threats to the nation (Boomgaarden et al., 2011). In a nutshell, the core premise at the basis of affective types of support reflects citizens’ choices as triggered by group attachments and membership, by the norms, values and loyalties defining one’s social identity (Verhaegen & Udrea, 2017; Sigalas, 2010). Processes of self-categorization as member of various social groups are thus at play when discussing the symbolic nature of EU support. In these self-categorization processes, the process

of ‘othering’ takes place. Othering denotes that individuals perceive themselves in relation to others and build their identity in contrast to several out-groups. From the symbolic politics hypothesis angle, national identity can both undermine and reinforce public support for European integration (for a detailed view on this item see Durach, 2016, pp. 13-16).

In relation to the Romanian society, previous research discusses public support for the European Union in terms of both symbolic and pragmatic determinants with a higher focus on the latter (Durach, 2016, pp. 45-46). The empirical findings that most scholars evoke state that Romanian citizens evaluate the EU membership both symbolically (being part of the civilized world, feeling European, being proud of their Europeanness, sharing peace and security measures with other Europeans) and instrumentally (referring to the freedom of movement, the European funds, other financial advantages) (Verhaegen & Udrea, 2017; Corbu et al., 2015; Udrea, 2014).

Besides the instrumental and symbolic accounts on EU attitudes and support, former studies have also emphasized the role of domestic politics in underlying people’s stances towards European integration (Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2006; Mau, 2005). In different words, since most average citizens are uninformed or uninterested with respect to European issues, the messages they receive from domestic political parties and/or actors are important in shaping public support for the EU. Attitudes towards the national and supranational levels of government are thus inter-related and affect each other (Ilonszki, 2009). Very often, the quality of national institutions – and the level of national democracy satisfaction – set the criteria for evaluating EU democracy.

3. The dynamics of EU-related opinions and support in Romania between 2007–2017

In the Romanian public space, the country’s accession to the EU and citizens’ attachment to this institution have had positive connotations right from the beginning. In the spring of 2007, shortly after Romania’s EU integration, 65% of the people reported high levels of confidence in the European Union, according to standard Eurobarometer polls (EB 67, 2007). The data also showed that about 80% of the citizens residing in urban environments and staying longer in education tended to display higher degrees of Euro-optimism, while the elder, rural and low educated population was less enthusiastic about the EU belonging. Conversely, peoples’ confidence in national institutions was very low. A significant percent of the Romanian respondents (72%) was distrustful in the national government, the situation being similar to that in Bulgaria, where the mistrust in the main institutions of the state reached 67% (EB 67, 2007). The high level of distrust in national institutions was a predictor for the high level of trust in the EU, similar to other CEE countries (Schlenker, 2012; Ilonszki, 2009; Tănăsioiu & Colonescu, 2008; Tverdova & Anderson, 2004). In different words, in 2007 the Romanians were among the most optimistic Europeans along with the Latvians and the Estonians. The great majority of them (i.e., 92%) predicted that their general living conditions would improve following the country’s joining to the EU, others felt safe just because their country was already part of the European block. Equally, and many were inclined to believe that Romania as a member state was more stable both economically and politically.

Briefly put, Romania’s accession to the European community was assimilated in the public space to the idea of a “better” life (e.g. better opportunities, open borders, improved liv-

ing standards, etc.), the EU being primarily perceived as an economic power (Gherghina, 2010). This positive evaluation of Romania's EU membership was also visible in the values that were associated by the surveyed citizens with the new "European" status of the country. Thus, for many of them, the EU meant democracy, economic prosperity, protection, efficiency, and technocracy (EB 72, 2009). Still, although Romania's joining to the EU was generally perceived as some kind of membership into "a very select club" (Durach, 2016, p. 183), back in 2007 only 41% of the citizens believed that their voice was heard at the EU level, while most of them argued that the important decisions were to be made by the biggest and most powerful member states (EB 67, 2007).

Starting with 2009, Romanians' optimism regarding the development of their country inside the EU began to indicate a downward trend, especially in the context of the European economic crisis. The standard survey conducted across the EU in the autumn of 2009 revealed that less than a half of the Romanians (47%) were satisfied with their living conditions whereas the European average in this regard was of 78% (EB 72, 2009). Life satisfaction was also low in other countries from Eastern Europe, such as Bulgaria (38%) or Hungary (42%). Still, the economic crisis that seriously challenged Europe at that time did not have a significant impact on Romanian citizens' trust in EU institutions, an important percentage of them reporting they trusted the European Parliament (65%) and the European Commission (58%). Also, compared with citizens from other EU states, the Romanians revealed a positive overall picture of the EU in 2009; in fact, they disclosed the best image of the EU, placing Romania above the EU average with 15% (EB, 72, 2009). Once again, their EU-related perceptions and opinions seemed to be driven by some sort of scepticism with regard to the capacities of the national institutions to manage the economic crisis and its complex consequences. In 2010, only 4 out of 100 Romanians thought their government was effective in combating the effects of the crisis, while 63% (with almost 20% more than the rest of the Europeans) credited the EU as being more efficient on that specific matter (EB 74, 2010).

The data released by the standard Eurobarometer surveys at that time were also confirmed by several empirical researches in the field. For instance, Bârgăoanu and Durach (2013b) showed that Romanians, especially the young and educated continued to exhibit a high level of trust in the European project, even amid of the economic crisis. Yet, even though they didn't directly blame the EU for the ongoing turbulent situation (Bârgăoanu & Durach, 2013a), their euro-enthusiasm was tempered by acknowledging the existing (but perceived as temporary) financial difficulties (2013b). However, a particularly interesting finding is that, for the young Romanian generation, "the EU is like a religion – nothing bad could come out of it" (Bârgăoanu & Durach, 2013b, p. 253).

Once with the refugee crisis and somehow contrary to common expectations, the results put forward by Eurobarometer polls on how Europeans perceived the EU and its institutions revealed that the EU was still depicted in positive terms, being strongly associated with "the freedom to travel, study and work" by 41% of the surveyed citizens. Furthermore, the European Union mostly conjured up a positive image for more than half of the Romanian responders (62%), three-quarters of them (75%) remaining optimistic about the future of the EU (EB 83, 2015). As far as trust in the EU was concerned, 68% of the Romanians exhibited high levels of confidence in the spring of 2015, while some months later their level of trust in the EU dropped by 10% (EB 83, 2015; EB 84, 2015). Yet, in Romania, more than half of the citizens (57%) still held positive opinions and images of the EU, whereas only 37% of the Europeans shared their view (EB 84, 2015). Moreover, while the number of the people who started to

associate the EU with a rather negative image was slightly increasing in other member states, in Romania only those who remained neutral towards the Union were up to 5% more numerous than one year before.

Further studies grounded on empirical evidence documented why Romanians remain among the most enthusiastic Europeans even in times of European crises and turbulences. In this respect, many authors argued that the overall more positive climate towards EU integration in Romania compared to other EU states is mostly due to the way Romanians tend to assess the economic and political performance of their country by contrast to European politics. Being discouraged by national politics and their government's ability to shape a promising future for the country, Romanians usually see the EU as a "saviour", as some kind of "promised land", where they are finally free to enjoy all the good and beautiful things that have been forbidden to them and their forerunners before the fall of communism (Chiciudean & Corbu, 2015; Udrea, 2014; Radu, Boțan & Corbu, 2013).

During the Brexit campaign in UK, the image of the European Union was affected by a new wave of depreciation. This time, only 42% of the Romanians showed a positive stance towards the integration process, a number that dropped by 15% since the autumn of 2015 (EB 85, 2016). A slight decrease was also visible in other member states, where an average of 34% of the people associated positive images with the EU. The optimism regarding the evolution of the economic situation of the community block for the next 12 months has also suffered some transformations, dropping by 10% among the Romanian respondents. Nevertheless, Romania remains one of the countries that report the highest levels of trust in the EU, with 47% of its population compared to the 33% European average.

Ten years after joining the European community, Romanians remain optimistic about their country's EU membership. According to a recent report published by the European Commission Representation in Romania, most of the Romanians (86%) have a positive or neutral attitude towards the EU, considering that their country has rather benefited from several advantages through this membership: e.g., good relations with other member states, respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, food security and food quality in Europe, higher living standards of EU citizens, etc. However, when evaluating their personal relationship with the EU, more than half of the respondents believe that Romania's EU membership has not brought too many changes in their daily lives. According to the abovementioned survey, only 22% of the citizens mention several personal advantages they have experienced in the post-integration period. On the list of personal benefits, the Romanians place on the highest position the possibility to work and study abroad, followed by the access to several markets and to a larger variety of products, the EU funds, the free travel regulations, and the increase of their monthly income (European Commission Representation in Romania, 2017).

The sources of the long-term euro-enthusiasm among Romanian public opinion can be found, as both the Eurobarometer reports and research studies have shown in Romanians' deep-rooted distrust in the national institutions corroborated with their assessment of the benefits emerging from EU membership and the optimism regarding the future directions of the EU (Bârgăoanu, Radu & Udrea, 2017; Durach, 2016; Chiciudean & Corbu, 2015; Bârgăoanu & Durach, 2013a). Nevertheless, a limitation of most of these fieldworks may be the fact that they rather scrutinize the so called "winners" of the integration process, i.e. the young and educated respondents, who benefitted the most from all the good things the EU has to offer. When the focus is placed on a different category of people (such as the senior citizens, with

less access to information, education and intercultural exposure) the former results may be challenged.

4. Methodology

This paper examines Romanian peoples' perceptions and opinions regarding the EU after one decade of European integration. We focused on less educated senior citizens from rural areas, in order to find out how they understand, experience and evaluate EU membership on a daily basis, and to see how their personal experiences feed back into public support for the Union. By employing a past-oriented view, our goal was to identify respondents' perspective on the 'costs' and 'benefits' of Romania's accession to the EU at both personal and national level. By looking at the present European context, the purpose of the research was to assess the challenges and transformations of traditional euro-enthusiastic citizens' EU attitudes in times of strain and severe threats (e.g., the immigration crisis, Brexit, the terrorist attacks in France and other countries, etc.). Equally, this paper is future oriented and aims at exploring respondents' projections related to the future directions of the European Union and their country's place into the whole European picture.

The research on EU topics is still underrepresented in Central and Eastern Europe, with studies from the "core-EU" leading the way for every single aspect of the Europeanization process. Hence, we wanted to add to the limited body of Romanian research a comprehensive study that uses in-depth interviews in order to get a better insight into how people think and feel about the EU in difficult times, and what are the main drivers of their attitudes. Moreover, we have chosen to focus on elder citizens residing in rural zones and having spent less time in education because they are hardly taken into consideration by the current research on EU-related topics which rather discusses young educated (mobile) citizens' attitudes in relation to various aspects of the European integration process. At the same time, by exercising their right to vote in both national and European elections, most of the times in bigger numbers than their younger fellows¹, elder citizens also have the power to shape the ongoing construction of the European project.

The research questions guiding the analysis address some of the most relevant aspects related to EU public attitudes in Romania, e.g., knowledge of European institutions, costs and benefits of integration, trust in EU, identification with EU and other Europeans, opinions related to the future directions of the European project, etc.

RQ1. What is the information that elder Romanians have about the EU (importance, institutions, role, benefits) and what is its source (mass media, friends, personal experiences in other EU countries, etc.)?

RQ2. How is Romania's accession to the EU evaluated and experienced in the daily life of its elder citizens?

RQ3. What is elder Romanians' perception on EU's future in the context of the recent events (the refugee crisis, the Brexit, the terrorist attacks, etc.)?

In order to offer documented answers to these research questions, we conducted a series of 22 semi-structured interviews with senior Romanian citizens aged between 60 and 80 (both males and females), who live in rural places and have graduated from secondary school (on-

ly four respondents have finished high school). Most of them have a precarious access to media information (beyond TV news and reports) and are computer illiterate, thus only few possess a computer or benefit from good Internet connection.

Given the theoretical background of this paper as well as the empirical results put forward by previous studies and public surveys, we start from the premise that senior Romanians' supportive or Eurosceptic attitudes towards the EU are related to various and multifaceted factors, among which the evaluation of national economy (from the utilitarian angle), and the feeling of belonging to a common European space and identity (from the affective perspective) remain very relevant. However, as identity and interests are strongly intertwined (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Cinnerella, 1997), in practice it is very difficult, maybe even impossible to distinguish between the costs-benefits and the emotional dimensions of people's feelings and thoughts about the EU. Therefore, we have chosen to consider both perspectives when analysing the multi-layered nature of citizens' EU attitudes.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes each, were carried out face-to-face in December 2017, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. The discussion was rather informal and carried out in an environment that was both comfortable for and familiar to the participant. In order to ensure confidentiality, we decided to use fictive names for data analysis and interpretation.

5. Findings

What do elder Romanians know about the EU and what are their information sources?

Regarding their information sources in relation to the major events in Europe and the worldwide, television was identified as the main provider of general news among the interviewees. This is mostly due to their scarce access to other media forms (such as newspapers, magazines or social platforms), but also to the accessibility and the interpretation schemas it offers. As most respondents argue, the TV news reports and talk-shows are easier to follow, therefore more approachable and more appealing. "I watch all the news on the TV, I don't read much press. I'd rather read prayers than the press" (Olga, 69); "The pensioners mainly watch the TV news in order to get informed" (Mina G., 69). Only one out of twenty-two interviewees has a subscription to a newspaper, and no more than two respondents are computer literate and tend to use these skills from time to time, in order to search for certain issues that raise their interest when watching a news bulletin on TV. However, the citizens who know how to use computers and related technology efficiently say that the TV remains their primary source of information too: "When there is some news I don't get to catch on TV, I search it on the Internet" (Nuța, 61). Also, the social media platforms are used, occasionally, by very few respondents and mainly in relation to aspects regarding the socio-demographic category they belong to: "I use social media, I watch everything that is being posted on the pages of these retirees' associations that I'm part of. They post information that is useful for us. I am interested, for instance, in the legislation regarding the pensions, in social and economic affairs regarding my country, etc." (Constantin, 60).

The interviewees admitted being interested mainly in topics that cover national or local issues. Most of them reported being absorbed by pensions-related subjects, medicines that may improve their health, agriculture, politics, and other international or European topics that are

usually mentioned at the end of their list: “Living at the countryside, I’m mainly interested in news about agriculture and in politics, to see who’s taking care of us, the retirees” (Viorica B., 68). Some of the interviewees seem preoccupied with what happens beyond Romania’s borders, but that kind of news is seldom a priority. When asked about European news or topics that caught their attention recently, few respondents mentioned the European funds, the European actors they are proud of (e.g. Corina Crețu), the Brussels criticism of the new laws of Romanian justice, or the increased post-integration opportunities for their country’s development which, in people’s own words, are not always fully traded on: “I watch European news as much as I can (...). What drew my attention lately was the fact that our country didn’t absorb European funds, the fact that we are the last in the ranking” (Mina S., 65). However, more than half of the interviewees say they don’t usually pay much attention to the European or the international news, as they are not able to understand them properly: “I don’t really watch European news because, to be honest, I don’t understand it. In order to watch, one needs to understand (...). It may be important, but only for those who can understand it” (Viorica P., 80). In the absence of basic information concerning the main European institutions, actors and decisions, ordinary seniors say they prefer to focus on the local and national items that are perceived as affecting both the country and them, personally. Similarly, those who usually engage in consuming news on the European topics are particularly interested in specific issues with possible national consequences or with a direct impact on their lives.

Out of the total sample of respondents, only six labeled themselves as ‘well informed’, while most of the rest think they are poorly updated about the worldwide events. The old age, the poor access to a variety of information sources and the inability to understand high-sounding and complex topics explain, in senior citizens’ view, their lack of knowledge and, to some extent, their scant interest regarding what happens abroad and particularly in Europe. Furthermore, the respondents who claim they would like to know more about the European matters, complain about the fact that these issues are neither sufficiently covered on TV (“We get very little information from what is being discussed and decided at the European level” – Viorica B., 68), nor presented in an easy-to-understand manner. Mass media are thus blamed for not being concerned with explaining EU policies and actions’ effects on ordinary citizens’ lives, and for not being more transparent regarding how people feel and react to all the changes that surfaced in the post EU adherence period. This finding reveals, once again, that media are expected to somehow bridge the gap between the EU and its citizens, by covering more European issues and by offering more clear, detailed and intelligible analyses about the possible national consequences of the European measures.

In a nutshell, the surveyed senior citizens do not have an extensive knowledge about the European Union, its institutions, actors and their role at the EU community level. Most of them rely on the information that is broadcasted on TV in order to learn more about the EU. Still, at this point, elder citizens’ interest in EU topics is mostly reduced, and their involvement is largely driven by the impact of the European events on national and personal plans.

EU membership in the daily life of elder Romanian citizens

The data below aim at discussing the perceived effects of joining the EU on various aspects of citizens’ socio-economic life (e.g., economic welfare, infrastructure, social security, citizens’ rights, consumer products, etc.). We have tried to investigate seniors’ perception regarding both the ‘benefits’ and ‘costs’ of the EU membership in what the country as well as them as individuals are concerned.

Regarding the interviewees' understanding of the EU and its structures, findings show that a great majority associate it with positive images and optimistic forecasts. From their perspective, the European Union means continuous help for Romania, support in case of danger (war, disasters), European funds (especially subsidies in agriculture), a real hope for a better future, higher living standards, a gate wide open for youth development, unity and collaboration among member states, the possibility of travelling, alignment with other European civilizations, equality between member states, more jobs and the euro. The emphasis is broadly put on the help and the money that our country may receive together with the new opportunities for the Romanian young generations. A common finding indicates that the respondents do not find the EU of tremendous importance at personal level, motivating that, at their age, they do not have much left to do, despite the increasing chances the EU membership offers. Still, they perceive the European community as a genuine form of hope and support for their children and grandchildren. "The EU did good, generally. At least from what I've seen. There have been made a lot of projects for our country. I think they have somewhat contributed to the development of our village too" (Floarea R., 73).

Briefly put, the elder interviewees see the EU as hugely important for our country's evolution. Apart from pragmatic benefits such as the non-reimbursable funds, the freedom of movement (goods, people), and the open markets, the EU means a powerful 'family' that has welcomed us, an old civilization, a place for debate and progress. Other advantages that senior citizens perceived as deriving from EU membership were: the developments in infrastructure (through EU funded projects), the foreign investments that created new jobs for the population, the free movement regulations allowing any European citizen to travel across the EU without a passport or visa, and people's possibility to access European justice forums when unsatisfied with the national law system: "I believe EU membership is a good thing (...). We are in line with the civilized world" (Lucreția, 68); "After joining the EU, we are not a lonely country as we used to be during the communist regime. We now have where to find help" (Mihail, 73).

In terms of disadvantages, the respondents find it difficult to mention any spontaneously. More than half of them think Romania had zero drawbacks as EU member state so far, and cannot imagine how EU membership could negatively affect the country. Nonetheless, some interviewees brought into discussion the fact that after Romania's adherence the prices have risen, the brain drain phenomenon is more intense than ever, national companies were closed due to massive imports, significant penalties are applied if 'we' do not follow 'their' rules, and "Europe's leftovers" are imported at the expense of local products and services. A commonly mentioned disadvantage was related to the poor state of the Romanian agriculture and to the fact that the land and the forests are being sold to the foreigners. Combined with the fact that many people have left the country in the search of a better life, this brings anxiety and fear among the aging population as they feel their country and properties will be alienated: "I think Romanians should stay at home and mind their own business because we have a lot of work to do here, in Romania, we have land" (Eugen, 74); "The fact that all the young people have left is a big disadvantage. They opened the borders and everyone has left (...). There are over 30 young people who left only from this village" (Florica, 76); "I believe they brought here all the leftovers from all the EU countries (...). And instead of buying our products that are natural and healthy, we buy chemicals from them" (Maria M., 63).

A particularity in what costs and benefits of the EU membership are concerned has emerged from the results. Whereas most of the respondents do not agree with young people leaving

the country to do grunt work abroad, they support and are enthusiastic about them studying in European countries or even working there as white collars. The difference lies within the nature of the accepted jobs. Many interviewees are somehow paradoxically tempted not to blame the brain drain phenomenon that much, but perceive differently the fact that many Romanians have left the country to work as blue collars in other European states.

The general opinion regarding the EU is unevenly split between the respondents who associate benefits and, thus, a positive image to the European block, and those who perceive the EU membership rather negatively. While more than half of the total sample expressed pro EU-attitudes and optimism about EU's future, about a third of the interviewees showed a Eurosceptic stance towards the integration process and the resulting effects on the country and its citizens. Yet, out of the eight respondents who were able to identify specific disadvantages for Romania as an EU member state, only two have a rather negative perception of the EU, arguing that most of the challenges that the country is currently facing (e.g., low standards of living, declining birth rates, increasing numbers of young people leaving their homes to work abroad, etc.) emerge as side-effects of the EU integration: "Romanians used to live better before joining the European Union. Since we are EU members, the country's population has registered a downturn, and lots of people are running away (...)" (Eugen, 74); "I've heard many are struggling to leave the Union. I don't know why. Maybe it was better when we were all by ourselves. We are too much indebted since we became an EU member state (...)" (Florica F., 76).

After a general evaluation of the ten years of Romanian integration with its ups and downs, the respondents were asked to speak about their direct experiences with the European Union and about the resulting perceptions and opinions. In this particular case, about half of the interviewees mentioned the subventions in agriculture (e.g., APIA agriculture funds), three people referred to travelling across Europe and the contact with other European civilizations, while ten seniors said they had no experience with the EU at all. These personal experiences with the EU and its institutions were assessed both positively and negatively. On the one hand, getting money to raise animals or cultivate the land was experienced as a real help for their families; on the other hand, some people encountered complications when fulfilling EU's bureaucratic requirements and had to (partially) return the funds, which has put them in financial difficulty. Furthermore, visiting other European countries has been perceived as a form of enrichment from a cultural point of view; still, when comparing the Western standards of life to the Romanian, the respondents felt much behind the 'truly' Europeans: "I find the EU good for some reasons and bad for others. When my husband was in the hospital, four years ago, I went to clean the land, but I left a cherry branch behind. When they came to take pictures, that branch cost me 900 lei (...). And then I said to myself: 'Leave me alone with their Union and everything!'" (Florica F., 76); "Six years ago, I had the possibility to visit a few countries with other three families. I liked it. I took the passport with me, but I don't have any stamps on it (...). Then I realized that the European Union has given us the possibility to travel around only with our ID card" (Ion, 73); "There is a huge difference between the Romanians and the other Europeans under any circumstance. In Europe, a retiree can afford to go on a trip, on vacations, on a cruise... whereas here we cannot afford to go 100 km away from the village. This is our life for now" (Viorica B., 68).

Indirect contacts with the EU were facilitated for the senior respondents by their children, grandchildren or extended families whose members had the chance to go abroad quite often for holidays, study or business. Therefore, learning about and discovering Europe and the

world through the experiences of their relatives makes our respondents happy and proud: “I didn’t have any experience with the European Union, but my children did have some advantages. For example, my daughter who is a teacher won three projects. This year she went to Prague and to Spain also (...). She then came home with her laptop and showed me where she was and what she did (...). I haven’t been anywhere, but I widened my knowledge through her experiences” (Floarea R., 73).

Summarizing, most of the interviewees have a rather positive perception regarding the EU and their new acquired status of European citizens that is not fully internalized yet. Grounded on economic and social benefits (that are perceived as being available especially for the youngest generations), this positive image of the EU and the support for European integration is driven by the conviction that, by joining the community block, Romania and its citizens have stepped towards a better future, where opportunities of all kinds wait for being considered: “I feel like a European when I see that young people may attend schools abroad, get scholarships, and have the possibility to grow both personally and professionally” (Maria M., 63).

Perceptions of the EU’s future in the context of the recent European crises

As far as people’s projections about the EU’s future are concerned, the results put forward many optimist responses and expectations. Still, citizens’ euro-enthusiasm seems sometimes nurtured by a deep lack of knowledge and familiarity with EU’s most recent crises and their profound effects at both national and European level. In this respect, we must specify that about a half of the respondents were unable to name some of the most important negative events the EU was confronted with in the recent years (e.g., the refugee crisis, the Brexit, the situation in Ukraine, the terrorist attacks). As previously mentioned, some admitted that they do not pay much attention to the EU-related topics when broadcasted on TV, because they are neither able to follow such complex discussions nor to understand their implications. Another reason for their reduced interest in the ongoing European crises is the general perception that these events do not affect them directly, as their country is not perceived as a targeted destination for those in need of shelter: “I heard something about refugees, but I didn’t give it too much importance.” (Maria G., 59); “I’m not that well documented. There are some countries that couldn’t keep up and were kicked off the European Union. But I see they accepted us and somewhat offer us their support.” (Floarea R., 73); “I know nothing about the European crises. I told you... I don’t do politics. I don’t get involved” (Nuța, 61).

Nonetheless, there were nine respondents who indicated the Brexit and the refugee crisis as subjects that concern them deeply. According to them, the Brexit is perceived as a real threat for the EU’s stability and unity. As some seniors argue, if not carefully handled, it can lead to the disintegration of the European Union. However, the majority’s point of view is that the EU will continue to exist with or without the Great Britain: “I’ve heard they don’t want to stay in the European Union anymore. They want to leave, but I assume it will be worse for them if they exit (...). The Union will go on anyway, with the other countries left” (Olga, 69); “I don’t believe that Britain’s leaving will tear the EU apart, because the Union has so many other powerful countries at its core. But it will highly influence the future development of the EU structures, that’s for sure” (Viorica B., 68).

The refugee crisis was more familiar to the surveyed citizens than the Brexit issue. As they mention, this is mostly due to the shocking images and stories broadcasted on TV in relation to the dramatic situation these people had to cope with both at home and at their arrival

in Europe. Many interviewees were deeply moved by the refugees' struggling for a safer and better life and expressed feelings of compassion towards them: "We should help these unfortunate individuals as much as we can, because most of them are not bad people (...). We should welcome them in the Union, they're human beings too. The skin color and religion don't matter" (Floarea R., 73). Yet, there were many voices that, although totally aware of the reasons why these people left their countries behind (i.e., war, violence, poverty, insecurity), could not empathize with their suffering, being rather too afraid of the possible negative effects of their overwhelming inflow on the cohesion of European societies and the security of Europeans: "They were forced to flee the war, I know, but if they come to us, they won't bring anything with them. We have to provide them with a living (...). It would be good if everyone returned to their homes, but these people can't go back because of the threat of war and death (...). We got stuck with them" (Florica F., 76).

A shared opinion among the interviewees depicts the refugee crisis as a major event that has the potential to cause instability and growing conflicts across Europe. The worries most interviewees shared in connection to the refugee crisis were financially, socially and culturally based. Specifically, senior citizens are afraid that integrating immigrants would generate extra costs the national governments (especially the Romanian one) cannot afford. Furthermore, they are suspicious about refugees' real intentions which may not always be right or transparent. Finally, the threat to the European culture, security or religion is perceived among the most negative consequences related to the recent migratory waves. Nevertheless, despite all the problems and challenges associated with the refugee crisis, many respondents emphasized their support for the EU in these uncertain times and the fact that the EU's divide is undesirable although possible. On the other hand, there were people who rather expressed gloomy predictions about EU's evolution in the following years: "The future won't be good anyway (...). The refugees did not come to work (...), but to receive help giving nothing in return" (Eugen, 74); "I don't know if the future looks good. I'm not confident about this... Look at the fights and the terrorist trainings in Syria (...). Also, from what I can read in the press, I'm afraid that other countries will leave the EU. The European Union is weakening, and it doesn't have the same power anymore" (Mina S., 65).

Summing up, despite some negative predictions regarding the future of the EU in these turbulent times, a common view among most respondents is that the ongoing EU crises do not need to be the beginning of its destruction. Rather, the crises may be seen as opening up opportunities for the member states to close the ranks and stand side by side in order to solve collective problems that involve mutual cooperation and solidarity.

6. Discussion and conclusions

In a context in which citizens' opinions seem to have become increasingly important in shaping the European project (Boomgaarden et al., 2011), the aim of this study was to bring to the fore senior Romanian citizens' EU attitudes and their challenges under the auspices of the present European circumstances. The research focussed on several main aspects in relation to ordinary people's perceptions and opinions towards the EU: knowledge of European institutions and their role at the EU level, costs and benefits of the integration process, identification with EU and other Europeans, trust in the EU, and projections regarding the future shape and character of the EU.

Like former studies in the dedicated literature (Corbu et al., 2015), the present paper reveals that Romanian citizens' concern about EU topics is relatively low and their involvement is driven by the relevance of the issue for the national or personal interests. Most of them seldom read or watch European news, and very few are familiar with EU's structures and initiatives. One of the common arguments that senior people often use to explain their scarce interest in European matters reflects media's limitations in providing detailed, accessible and practical information about the most visible European events. However, since most of the citizens have limited or no direct experiences with the EU, media, and especially the television remains their primary source of connection to the European environment. Hence, media play a key role in determining how they approach, understand and evaluate issues related to the European Union and fellow Europeans. Therefore, for people to become interested and involved, media have to increase the visibility of EU subjects and to discuss their impact at national, European and individual level, trying to bridge, thus, the gap between institutions, elites and population.

In what elder citizens' EU attitudes are concerned, the current study shows a rather positive image of the EU and a high level of satisfaction with Romania's EU membership. For most of the respondents, this positive stance towards the Union and its structures is mainly built on economic and social benefits. In this respect, free movement, European funds, Europe without borders and the improved consumer rights play very important roles. Still, for other interviewees, the support for European integration is driven by the conviction that, by joining the EU, Romania and its citizens have made a big step towards a better future, where democracy, security, peace, and opportunities of all kinds are increasingly available for everybody. In different words, when assessing Romania's EU membership, the great majority of the respondents see it as a good thing, particularly due to pragmatic reasons. Similar to other studies that focus on attitudinal sources of support for the EU in countries that benefitted from the transition from communism to post-communism (Schlenker, 2012), our paper confirms that instrumental calculations tend to remain key explanatory factors of Romanians' generalized euro-optimism and to outweigh other affective reasons for EU support. Relatedly, this paper shows that the utilitarian evaluation of the national economy is not necessarily a main driver of seniors' positive attitudes towards the EU. Despite one of the theoretical premises at the basis of this research, empirical results emphasize that elder citizens' euro-enthusiasm is rather nurtured by the amount of advantages and opportunities the EU membership has brought along than by their dissatisfaction with national politics.

Although the present research has also emphasized negative perceptions of the EU, a general perspective is that joining the European community translated into much more advantages than burdens. Still, one of the main contexts revealing interviewees' ambivalent opinions in relation to EU and fellow Europeans was facilitated by the free movement arrangements. By getting to travel and to meet other EU citizens, some respondents established a clear hierarchy between 'centre' Europe and 'periphery' Europe, between 'core-Europeans' (i.e., members of the economically well Western states) and 'peripheral-Europeans' (i.e., members of the economically troubled newcomers). The acknowledgment of the profound differences between 'truly' EU citizens and 'lesser' EU citizens in what every aspect of their life was concerned created frustration among the respondents and a sense of inferiority in relation to those who were lucky enough to enjoy a living that in Romania people only afford to long for right now.

Contrary to what other studies have shown (Schlenker, 2012; Fligstein, 2009; Moravcsik, 2002), and contrary to our initial assumption, in the case of Romania the lower status, the lack

of education or the old age were not necessarily predictors of Eurosceptic feelings. Based on the empirical findings put forward by this research we argue that, similar to their younger peers, senior citizens in Romania tend to associate the EU with optimism and hope through the various benefits emerging from the European integration process, even if they seldom impact them directly. For our target group, the support for the EU arises from a “second-nature” utilitarian reasoning, meaning that they do not usually perceive the European membership as a source of personal opportunities, but as a huge chance for their children and grandchildren to enjoy a better life.

Despite the present times of uncertainties, the EU is generally framed in positive terms, being still perceived as a sort of ‘saviour’ who will take care of us and will help us step into a better future, by facilitating our access to all the wonderful things that we, as Eastern Europeans with a communist past, have dreamed of for decades. In conclusion, elder Romanians’ confidence in EU institutions remains high after ten years of integration, with more than half of the respondents being certain that EU’s involvement in national politics is going to contribute to the country’s development and evolution. The euro-optimism is also striking when people are asked for an opinion regarding EU’s future, especially under the pressure of the current crises. On that matter, the general belief which resonates with similar results emphasized by recent Eurobarometer surveys and research studies (EB 86, 2016; De Vries, 2017) is that the EU might become more powerful and more united in the years to come, as a sense of community may be strengthened precisely in times of struggle.

Note

¹ See, for instance, the 2016 Parliamentary elections in Romania where, according to the official data delivered by BEC (Electoral Central Bureau) and distributed by several press releases at that time, the results were roughly influenced by the vote of the citizens aged between 45 and 64, and 65+ (whose presence at the ballot box was very high (54% and 23,7%, respectively) as compared with the relatively low turnout of their younger peers in these elections (<https://pressone.ro/parlamentare-2016-tinerii-chiulesc-rezultatul-e-decis-d-e-segmentul-45-64-de-ani/>).

A similar situation was noticed at the EP elections in 2014, when 48% of the Romanian participants resided in rural areas, 62% had middle studies, and 33% were aged between 51 and 65, according to the data found on the official website of the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy. (<http://www.ires.com.ro/articol/264/votanti-si-non-votan-i-la-alegerile-europarlamentare-2014>).

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