

## The EU Economic Crisis – Reflections in the Opinions of Citizens and Experts

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**Abstract:** *Perhaps one of the most important challenges that the EU is currently facing is that of building public support for the Union project as the economic crisis develops, confidence in the EU future is weakened and member states turn to their own boundaries. Therefore, this research aims at identifying the public opinion on the economic future of the European Union in the particular context of the euro crisis, given the fact that utilitarian considerations represent a key driver for the Europeanization process. At the same time, we compare expert opinions about the impact of the crisis on the future of the European Union, as well as the perceptions of ordinary people. To accomplish the research goals, we conducted expert interviews with 11 of the most prominent economic experts in Romania and a national survey (N = 1002)<sup>1</sup>. The study supports the perspective that citizens' opinions about the economic evolution of the European Union are largely based on their sociotropic and egocentric economic assessments. The crisis influences the perspectives on the EU, but only by tempering optimism, turning it into a moderate view. This result can be extended to other Central-Eastern states as well, due to their resembling paths. Also, experts indicate various scenarios when referring to the impact of the crisis on the EU's future, but beyond the variations, the prospects are neither optimistic, nor pessimistic, but rather moderate.*

**Keywords:** *European Union, economic crisis, euro, the EU's future, Central and Eastern Europe, Europeanization*

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## Introduction

The article aims at understanding the impact of the crisis on people's expectations and estimations about the future of the European Union. At the same time, we compare experts' opinions about the impact of the crisis on the future of the European Union, as well as the perceptions of ordinary people. To this end, we conducted expert interviews with 11 of the most prominent economic experts in Romania and a national survey (N=1002), with the purpose of identifying economic experts opinions about the future of the European Union and people's opinions about the EU future in the context of the economic crisis. The research was constructed so as to allow for a comparison between the opinions of elites and ordinary people. We believe that, within the public sphere, both experts and ordinary people should be heard, in order to be harmonized and to create a real debate space.

Especially in the euro crisis context, there is a growing need for citizen involvement, for critical debate on EU topics, for deliberation in order to form public opinions that should have an impact on present and future policies. However, for people to be able to debate and get involved the EU should become a largely discussed topic in national media, and all the events, measures and decisions at the level of European institutions should be disseminated at a large scale. At the same time, elites' views and people's attitudes and opinions regarding the changes, the policies or the expectations regarding the EU's future should be equally covered, since both dimensions have important contributions to developing and consolidating a Europeanized national public sphere. The Europeanization of national public spheres is an essential milestone within the Europeanization process and it contributes to reducing the current deficiencies and flaws in EU policies, especially the democratic and legitimacy deficits. Additionally, it constitutes the framework for political integration by providing a common space for debate and opinion formation (Crowley & Giorgi, 2006: 1-2).

The euro crisis, the intensification of transnational relations within the process of globalization, the growing power of supranational bodies and, at the same time, the return to nation-state protectionism, the mixture of identities are all factors that make the process of Europeanization a lengthy and difficult one. Perhaps one of the most important challenges is that of getting public support for the Union project in the context of the current crisis which has diminished the level of confidence in EU's future and has led Member States to retract to their own boundaries when it comes to measures and economic recovery, to increase the valorisation of the national problems over those of Europe. Therefore, poor economic conditions determine citizens to "punish" those in charge by withdrawing their support (Van der Eijk, Franklin, Demant, Van der Brug, 2007: 2-3).

Since the process of European integration was mostly based on economic instruments, the recovery of the economic situation is mandatory for continuing the Europeanization process. However, adverse economic conditions determined by the sovereign debts including a high level of unemployment, low output rates, lack of investors, low growth and austerity measures do not seem to maintain people's optimism or their tolerance for ineffective measures. The crisis might prove to be a catalyst for positive changes, but also a high risk factor if citizens retrieve their approval and their confidence in the EU (Tsoukalis & Emmanouilidis, 2011: 3). This will only make Europeanization more difficult and a political union or a consolidated European identity will be almost unreachable.

From this perspective, media involvement in maintaining citizens' supportive attitudes could be a valuable resource for the European communication process, although in times of crisis media coverage increases negative reports on the situation. In this regard, people evaluate the EU's economic situation and future based on their country's economic estimates and on their personal economic assessment, influencing in the end the real evolution of the economic process (Wu, Stevenson, Chen, Güner, 2002: 21-23). Therefore, the importance of elite and citizen perspectives on the EU economy is increasing and it influences the continuation of the European project.

In this context, we tried to understand the impact of the crisis on people's estimations about the future of the European Union and on experts' opinions about the effects of the crisis on future EU perspectives. This is particularly important since among the EU's communication goals, the Commission emphasized the need to establish a relationship with the European citizens and to initiate a dialogue with them, as there is a strong need to correlate the voice of the Union with that of its citizens, to evolve with the help of popular support ([http://ec.europa.eu/ipg/basics/policy/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/ipg/basics/policy/index_en.htm)). Within the context of crisis, this goal is harder to accomplish.

Furthermore, the result can be extended to the situation in the Central-Eastern states, which had comparable economic paths after the fall of the communist regime (<http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=2174>), and where the level of optimism regarding the EU's future is higher than in other member states, especially in Bulgaria and Romania ([http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb77/eb77\\_first\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb77/eb77_first_en.pdf)). Therefore, our research could provide valuable input on the support of people and elites for the European project in times of crisis. This approach could offer insight not only for Romania, but also the Central-Eastern area.

### **The Euro Crisis: Understanding the Context**

Continuing the EU project, improving EU communication and developing a Europeanized public sphere are all steps that seem ambitious in the context of the present euro crisis which, if not handled with maximum responsibility, may determine the collapse of the euro and, implicitly, the disintegration of the economic union. The euro crisis has a great impact, as the EU is an important global player and one of the economic superpowers, on international trade negotiations, policy development, and peacekeeping missions. Although the EU is not a military superpower, hence the dependence on the U.S., it maintains its status through its economic power as one of the largest exporters of goods and services. Therefore, the euro crisis has a strong impact because it affects the sector from which the EU derives its primary power (Fraser, 2007: 1-5).

The European Union has managed to consolidate its status of an economic entity and a unitary actor through the single currency. The current crisis might undermine this status. The adoption of the common currency has brought benefits such as the elimination of transaction costs within the eurozone and of exchange rate uncertainty or risk, the enhanced price transparency and reduction of price discrimination, the stimulation of trade or labor market flexibility (Mulhearn & Vane, 2008: 69).

However, the economic crisis highlighted some weaknesses of euro adoption and mainly economic problems that were overlooked such as breaching the limits of the

Stability and Growth Pact and accepting the increases in budget deficits without taking immediate action to reduce them. Problems evolved, the sovereign debt became a general concern and later measures taken for cutting budget deficits led to a negative impact on employment and growth. Moreover, the severe crises in Greece, Ireland and Portugal began to raise questions about eurozone survival (Arestis & Sawyer, 2012: 3) Even though the Greek crisis was somehow in the spotlight, the problems of the eurozone were determined by the large imbalances between the euro states from external surpluses to deficits, by differences in terms of labor costs and by increased variances in growth rates (Arestis & Sawyer, 2012: 10). All these led to the current crisis during which austerity measures have become burdensome for all Member States and people are becoming estranged from the EU. Negative debates in media also led to a decrease in citizen confidence in EU measures and plans for the future, thus impeding the Europeanization process.

However, the single currency is not a cause of the crisis, especially since it has enjoyed real success in its first years. In fact, it is estimated that the crisis would have been much larger without a common currency. The lack of a single currency would have led to a ripple effect of monetary devaluations, with no guarantee that the countries would have been able to cope with the crisis. In this regard, there is also the possibility that public opinion regarding the European Union might yet change in a positive way as citizens realize that their nation states could not have faced the crisis without the help and measures of the EU. Therefore, citizens might see EU integration as a safer way of dealing with financial issues (Verhofstadt, 2012: 222-224). Despite this possible positive aspect of the crisis, European integration is still affected if the main focus is on the political area, as the tension between a collection of nation-states and a political union consisting in a federal entity becomes stronger. The crisis emphasized the need for a unified reaction and for political coordination especially from a geopolitical perspective since the EU has to act as a single political actor (McNamara, 2010: 22). Also, experts underlined the fact that an important cause of the euro crisis was the EU's lack of competence in harmonizing national economies with different levels of competitiveness and various levels of financial difficulty. Therefore the issue represented by the lack of "political regulatory capacities" at the EU level has to be solved, perhaps within a constitutional project (Habermas, 2012: 1-3).

The crisis has also highlighted the need for real reform within the Union in order to assist the current policies in capitalizing on the mechanisms of globalization. Member States cannot compete individually with major economic powers. Moreover, if the economies can be united into a single market, there is also a need for a single political path. The crisis should be overcome not only at the economic level, but also at the level of the national paradigms, since the markets transcend national views. The economic crisis might have made the citizens skeptical about a possible evolution as a whole or a successful EU project, but their confidence needs to be restored (Verhofstadt, 2012: 230).

Thus, the measures to overcome the euro crisis, to rescue the eurozone, to increase the competitiveness and the economic force in the context of global interdependence, to reinforce flexibility, openness and adaptation to change are all necessary to save the European project. Also, developing a political union and a cohesive level of identity are steps that the EU will have to take to be able to keep its status of a key global player within the current evolutionary processes. Overall, one can see the high importance of the topic and the need to explain the implications of the euro crisis at the level of citizen expectations and support for the EU and for the Europeanization process.

### **The Europeanization Process: Media and the Euro Crisis Influence**

The concept of Europeanization has received significant attention from scholars and researchers starting with EU adhesion and integration requirements. The concept consists of processes of “a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies.” (Radaelli, 2004: 3) The process is associated with the pressure of being an EU member and of having to synchronize with other Member States and it involves the diffusion of Europe-wide norms. It has an essential role in assuring the convergence of institutions and policies and in constructing a European identity (Hughes, Sasse, Gordon, 2004: 27). It also includes the influences of boundary elimination and of the common market which is seen as the mechanism that enables the destruction of differences within the EU space, the homogenization process especially at the level of political institutions (Eder, 2004: 97-98). Thus, the process of Europeanization has a significant impact on domestic processes, policies and institutions by determining changes at the level of Member States through new practices, norms, rules and procedures determined by the European system of governance (Börzel & Risse, 2000: 2). Europeanization can also be understood as a societal interpenetration since European societies become more and more convergent and mixed as a result of the common currency, migration, multiculturalism, common norms, educational exchanges, media broadcasts with European distribution (Delanty & Rumford, 2005: 18). Also, national media have a major role in distributing information and news about issues and events taking place at the EU level because people would otherwise be unable to participate in debates, to assign political accountability at the level of EU institutions and actors, or to strengthen the sense of a common identity (Schifirneț, 2011: 34-35).

Regarding the significant role of media in the process of Europeanization, there are differences in the way that European subjects are covered or broadcasted, and thus, according to the level of Europeanization of public communication, three models have emerged: *the emergence of a supranational European public sphere*: implies interaction among European institutions and actors on European subjects through the means of a Europe-wide media; *vertical Europeanization*: implies communicative linkages between the European and the national levels; *horizontal Europeanization*: implies communicative linkages between different Member States (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004: 6-7).

By mixing the vertical and horizontal dimensions of Europeanization, Michael Brüggemann and Katharina Kleinen-von Königslöw develop another four models of Europeanization: *comprehensive Europeanization*: both levels, vertical and horizontal Europeanization are present; *segmented Europeanization*: focuses on the vertical level, meaning an increased attention paid to EU as an entity, and not to member states; *Europeanization aloof from the EU*: focuses on the horizontal level, on communicative exchanges among member-states; *parochial public sphere*: in this case it cannot be identified neither a vertical, nor a horizontal Europeanization in the national media (Brüggemann, Königslöw, 2009: 29-30). Therefore, the Europeanization process can develop by an increase in reporting and broadcasting European topics in national media.

All in all, the crisis also has an important influence on the Europeanization process, either sustaining or obstructing it. Considering the fact that citizens tend to evaluate the economic situation of their nation (sociotropic evaluation) according to their personal economic situation (egocentric evaluation) (Boomgaarden, Spanje, Vliegthart, de Vreese, 2011: 355), the crisis might determine the outcomes and influence them in a negative manner. By extending this type of evaluation from the national level to the level of the European Union, the projection might be similar and therefore, the effects of the crisis both on egocentric and sociotropic evaluations might result in negative evaluations of the EU and its future. Implicitly, euro-scepticism will increase and the Europeanization process will be obstructed.

Additionally, in times of crisis, people tend to return to their own boundaries and pay more attention to national problems and to national solutions. However, another scenario is possible for the states with emerging economies that entered the EU in the last two waves since, in their case, the EU was perceived, until the crisis, as a messianic entity, a savior and a solution for lagging development (Pelinka, 2009: 23). After facing the economic problems caused by the crisis, these Member States might still turn to the EU for solutions of recovery and might still perceive the EU's future as more positive than that of their countries. In this case, the crisis might turn to be a catalyst for European integration. In this regard, knowing the results of the prospective evaluations of citizens and experts on the EU future is a basic step in determining the state of the Europeanization process or the popular support for the EU project.

### **Methodology and Measurements**

On March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012, 25 Member States of the European Union signed the Treaty for Financial Governance, as a response to the challenges brought about by the severity of the crisis in the eurozone. In this context, European issues become more prominent than before in the media, raising a particular interest in the future of the European Union. Therefore, the article tries to understand the impact of the crisis on people's expectations and estimations about the future of the European Union and also to compare experts' opinions about the impact of the crisis on the future of the European Union with ordinary people's perceptions.

The research questions guiding the study were:

RQ1. What are the economic experts' opinions about the future of the European Union, in the context of the economic crisis?

RQ2. What are the people's opinions about the future of the European Union, in the context of the economic crisis?

In order to answer the two research questions, we conducted 11 interviews with top level economic experts in Romania – the president of the Bucharest Stock Exchange; the head economist of the division of Economic Studies of the Romanian National Bank; a consultant of the NBR governor; a chief economist for the National Bank; the European Affairs Minister; the president of the Economic Commission, industries and services within the Senate and former Minister of Economy and Finance; a Secretary of State in the Ministry of Finance; an economic analyst; an editor at the Wall-Street; an editor-in-chief for a financial newspaper and a managing editor for a financial magazine. The interviews were taken from

the 25 March to the 11 April, 2012<sup>2</sup>. Experts were asked about the impact of the euro crisis on the future of the European Union, about predictions regarding the evolution of the European Union in the near future, and about estimates regarding the public opinion of the European Union and possible changes due to the crisis.

The public opinion was measured using a national survey (N=1002) on European related topics, conducted between the 28 and the 30 April, 2012<sup>3</sup>. We aimed to construct a predictive model regarding people's estimations regarding the economic situation in the European Union in the near future. The wording of the question on the dependent variable was: "On a scale of 1 to 7, where "1" means "much worse" and "7" means much better", if you think about the economic situation in the European Union, do you think it will get better or worse in the next 12 months?". The independent variables were related to regular socio-demographic data considered to have impact on people's attitudes towards the EU in general, to which we added three EU related variables in the first predictive model, "European identity", "EU knowledge" and "Impact factor". The European identity was recoded as a dummy variable (from an originally ordinal one), clustering as "European" all answers containing a European dimension ("I feel first Romanian and then European", "I feel first European and then Romanian", and "I feel only European"). "EU knowledge" measured, on a 10-step Likert scale, people's own estimations about how much they know about the European Union in general. The impact factor was measured following Habermas's idea of the extent to which people become conscious of the impact that common European decisions has on their life standards: "the more the national populations realize, and media help them realize, how deeply the decisions of the European Union pervade their everyday lives, the more interested they will become in making use of their democratic rights as citizens of the union." (Habermas, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/10/jurgen-habermas-europe-post-democratic>). The wording of the question was "To what extent do decisions made at the level of the European Union influence your life, in general", and was measured on a 5-step Likert scale.

People's estimations of their level of knowledge about the EU was relatively low (M = 5.30, SD = 2.15) In fact, the level is probably even lower (we take into consideration the fact that respondents may be inclined to give a higher response due to their aspirations, not necessarily due to reality). This is the reason why we considered that people's estimations about the economic future of the European Union were closely related to their predictions about Romania's economic situation in the near future (sociotropic evaluations) and/or to their predictions about their own economic situation in the near future (egocentric evaluations). We added each of the variables to construct two predictive models incorporating these dimensions.

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<sup>2</sup> Parts of the interviews were previously discussed in Bărgăoanu, A., Durach, F. (2013), "The Crisis of the European Union and its Reflection in the Romanian Public Sphere. Recent Findings", in *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, 13(1), pp. 5-24.

<sup>3</sup> Findings based on the data collected in the survey were also discussed in Bărgăoanu, A., Durach, F. (2013), "The Crisis of the European Union and its Reflection in the Romanian Public Sphere. Recent Findings", in *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, 13(1), pp. 5-24.

## Findings

The national survey results showed that people's opinion about Romania's economic future (sociotropic evaluations) and about themselves (egocentric evaluations) is neither optimistic, nor pessimistic, but rather moderate, with a more optimistic prediction about the European Union. On a scale from 1 to 7, the mean for how people see the economic situation in the next 12 months, the mean for the EU future was 4.30 (SD = 1.64), indicating moderate optimism concerning the future of the EU. At the same time, predictions about Romania and the situation of its citizens showed ambivalence, with a mean of 3.52 (SD = 1.74), and 3.73 (SD = 1.79) respectively.

As far as the future of the European Union is concerned, people do not build their opinions based on general knowledge about the EU and its problems (very low correlation level  $r = .115$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but rather in connection with their opinions about the economic future of the country ( $r = .527$ ,  $p < .01$ ), or about their own economic future ( $r = .419$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In other words, people do not know much about the European Union, but they (still) perceive the EU as a better and safer place than the nation state, with bigger chances of positive evolution in the near future. At the same time, their optimism is strongly correlated with a moderate attitude toward the economic future of the country and of themselves.

In order to understand to what extent people form their opinion about the future of the EU in relation to knowledge about the EU and sociotropic and egocentric predictions, we run three regression models (OLS) that predict people's opinions about the economic future of the European Union. (see Table 1).

The first model does not take into account sociotropic and egocentric evaluations, but only standard variables generally related to how people form opinions about the EU in general. As results show, gender is (and remains for the other models) a strong significant predictor; thus, women are more optimistic than men when thinking about the future of the EU. The strongest predictor in the equation is "European identity", which means that people who consider themselves European (usually as a second identity, after the Romanian one) are more inclined to foresee a better future for the EU. Knowledge about the European Union is a significant predictor, but weaker than the other two significant predictors. The explanatory power of the model is very weak (R squared = .036).

**Table 1. Regression models (OLS) for EU economic prediction**

|                              | Model 1     |       | Model 2     |       | Model 3     |       |
|------------------------------|-------------|-------|-------------|-------|-------------|-------|
|                              | B           | Beta  | B           | Beta  | B           | Beta  |
| (Constant)                   | 4.294**     |       | 3.121**     |       | 2.467**     |       |
| Impact factor                | -.043       | -.034 | .002        | .001  | -.003       | -.003 |
| European Identity            | .455**      | .138  | .315**      | .095  | .299**      | .090  |
| EU knowledge                 | .084**      | .111  | .065*       | .086  | .018        | .024  |
| Education                    | -.057       | -.061 | -.066*      | -.070 | .002        | .002  |
| Gender                       | -.403**     | -.121 | -.407**     | -.123 | -.258*      | -.078 |
| Income                       | -.001       | .004  | -.001       | -.025 | -.001       | .001  |
| Personal economic prediction |             |       | .346**      | .379  |             |       |
| Romania economic prediction  |             |       |             |       | .479**      | .502  |
| Adjusted R square            | <b>.036</b> |       | <b>.174</b> |       | <b>.276</b> |       |

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

However, adding egocentric evaluations of the economic future to the model increases its explanatory power by more than 13%, and adding sociotropic evaluations increases the explanatory power by 23%.

In short, people's opinion about the general direction of the EU's economic evolution is largely based on their evaluations about Romania's economic evolution and their own economic situation, and only to a small extent on their knowledge about the European Union. The general knowledge about the EU is low, with a mean of 5.30 out of 10 in self reported appreciations ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 2.15$ ). This is to say that people generally assess their economic situation and the country economic situation in terms of future trends, and consequently form an opinion about the economic future of the European Union based on these two predictors, generally situating European predictions to a higher level of optimism.

Even though the results of the last Eurobarometer released (July 2012) show a decrease in Romanians' optimism related to the EU, Romania remains one of the most optimistic countries in the EU regarding the future of the Union. A possible explanation is related to the fact that people usually tend to see the European Union as a stronger and safer player in the economic game, with better chances of economic success than their country or themselves.

Turning to experts' opinions about the economic future of the European Union, and the impact of the crisis on the future of the EU, there is no general consensus. Economic experts evaluate the European project in relation to the economic situation, and see positive effects (4 out of 11 experts), negative effects (3 out of 11), or changes of perspective, neutrally evaluated (4 out of 11).

In terms of the positive effects of the crisis on the future of the European Union, experts refer to a stronger financial union, capable of becoming a strong economic power to compete with the US or China, a stronger economic and political power (the crisis will regenerate the political unity of the EU), an increased solidarity among state members and citizens, as well as a great opportunity of growth through lessons learned.

"Europe can become a stronger financial and economic power, as powerful as the US or China." (C. Ș., managing editor, financial magazine)

"The European Union will not have a problem in staying united, because everybody needs a larger economic space." (L. A., president, Bucharest Stock Exchange)

"I hope there will be a positive impact, because Europe will learn a lesson here, and will not transfer the task of solving financial problems we are dealing with at present to future generations" (V. V., president, Economic Commission within the Senate, former Minister of Economy)

"It is possible that the present exercise of pan-European solidarity, if properly managed and explained, will lead to the rebirth of the euro-optimism." (V. L., chief economist, the National Bank)

Negative effects mentioned during interviews are related to the weak points of the Union: the lack of a united political and military system, the danger of colonialism, the rise of nation states which are not as open to solidarity during the crisis as in good times. "Bad future. Either the EU will become a German Empire and function as an empire in the future, or it will fall apart. It is the general problem of empires. This is an empire of a very special nature, created by mutual agreement, but it can no longer work in a functional way as it is." (I. Ș., economic analyst)

“If Greece falls at a certain point, the whole European project is in great danger” (A. V., consultant for the NBR governor)

“The crisis affects the European project. I do not think that the European Union will fall apart, but I believe that its survival will be much worse than we anticipated.” (R. S., head economist, division of Economic Studies, National Bank)

Four interviewees considered that it is very hard to estimate (at such an early stage) the impact of the crisis on the future of the European Union. Predictions about the future are only seen as possible scenarios that might change the structure of the European Union: a smaller European Union, an imperialist power, a Union divided by internal boundaries between areas with different rhythms of development, a possible exclusion of Greece or other countries from the eurozone or the Schengen Area etc.

Generally speaking, there is no agreement among experts about the future of the EU. It is impossible to see an optimistic or pessimistic overall prediction about the future. However, only one expert mentions the possibility of the EU’s fall in the near future.

When asked about how they think the crisis changed people’s attitudes toward the European Union, most of the interviewees (6 of 11) agreed that the crisis attenuated euro-optimism, but not to the point of changing it into euro-skepticism. (We should mention that the Standard Eurobarometer 76 was released before the last 3 interviews were conducted, and seems to not have impacted the experts’ answers regarding this particular matter). Myths about the EU diminished (EU viewed “as a Santa Claus all generous to Romanians); people became more conscious about the need of collective action to solve internal problems: euro-enthusiasm turned into a moderate (and more sensible) euro-optimism. Europe is still perceived as a sort of saviour: “The EU is still the train that moves us forward” (A. V., consultant for the NBR governor). The European Union is perceived in terms of “a better alternative” to the general situation of Romanians: “Romanians hate themselves, so they perceive the European Union as a self deliverance, a sort of mirage...” (R. S., head economist, division of Economic Studies, National Bank).

Four experts consider that the crisis did not change people’s attitudes in any way. If anything, in the long term, people will more strongly perceive the benefits of being part of the European Union. One expert proposes a different point of view, considering that people do not understand much of the crisis situation, in Romania or in the European Union.

Regardless of their knowledge on EU issues, people still perceive the Union as a more prosperous place than their country, while at the level of elites there is neither consensus, nor a prevalence of optimism. However, elites go beyond the economic dimension when developing scenarios for the future and they emphasize the political aspects as well. In the optimistic perspective they refer to the EU as a stronger financial and political actor due to lessons learned and due to changes imposed by the crisis, while in the neutral perspective the scenarios include structural changes in the Union. The negative perspectives outline EU deficiencies in the political system, namely its lack of unity, the lack of a military system and the danger of colonialism through the rise of the states with strong economies. The EU has to conduct changes and adapt to new realities, but as long as it benefits from popular support, it can still continue in a form or another. Therefore, by mixing the citizens’ and elites’ views of the EU, the predictions remain moderate but include a touch of optimism especially when compared to the prospects for Romania.

## Discussion

The European Union faces several changes and it is the subject of a set of challenges both at the economic level, through the measures that the EU has to implement in order to save the euro zone, and at the communication level when relating to its citizens, as it has so far proved unable to approach the ideal of a political union, of a European identity at the individual level or to address the democratic deficit with media support at the level of transnational communication. However, it seems that the crisis is an essential challenge since it may diminish citizens' trust in European leaders' ability to solve the crisis and therefore, in the very future of the Union. In addition, elites could also lose confidence in the future of the project and, along with the withdrawal of citizen support; this diminishing confidence would result in the collapse of European measures. Therefore, determining the impact of the crisis on citizen and elite expectations regarding the future of the European Union is an important contribution for estimating the general support for the project, the possibility for developing a European identity and for the EU to evolve into a political union.

Through our research, we tried to identify people's opinion about the economic future of the European Union in the particular context of the euro crisis. Utilitarian considerations, along with national economic satisfaction, are a key supporting force since citizens who perceive the EU integration as financially beneficial to themselves or to their country tend to support the Europeanization process more (de Vreese, 2010: 196). However, in times of financial recession and austerity measures, this support might decrease substantially and consequently, affect the evolution of the EU project. Therefore, sociotropic evaluations – those of a nation's economic state, and egocentric evaluations – those of citizens' personal economic situations (Boomgaarden, Spanje, Vliegenthart, de Vreese, 2011: 355) influence the economic evaluation of the EU as well as the views on the future of the project. In this case, the research findings showed that people's sociotropic and egocentric evaluations are neither optimistic, nor pessimistic, but rather moderate, while in regard to the EU's future, they show moderate optimism which is strongly correlated with the moderate attitude toward the economic future of the country and of their own. Also, the evaluations were based only to a small extent on their knowledge about the European Union and its problems and to greater extent on their opinions about the economic future of the country or about their own financial future.

The economic evaluations can be influenced by their knowledge on the matter, by media coverage of the crisis and by their own experiences. Media coverage is supposed to be greater in crisis periods as bad times are perceived to be more newsworthy than good times (Fogarty, 2005: 151). However, media influence can be diminished as, unlike other areas, the economy allows for personal experience and observation in people's everyday lives through unemployment issues or job satisfaction, market gains or losses, tax variations, inflation or other realities of the economic dimension that shape their perceptions (Hester & Gibson, 2003: 76). In addition, it is acknowledged that people do not need to know precise economic facts in order to make reasonably accurate judgments about the state of the economy, as they have quite an acute "overall sense of macro-economic improvement and decline" (Sanders, 2000: 276). In the present case, the citizens proved to have little knowledge of European issues, therefore their evaluations regarding the future of their own economic state and of the national economy were decisive inputs in making assessments and estimations about the EU's future.

Another observation is that people have more positive predictions for the EU than for Romania's economic future. There was also a correlation between the level of optimism and citizens' sense of European identity. This indicates that people who consider themselves European besides Romanian are more inclined to feel optimism regarding the EU's future. Furthermore, they are more likely to relate to a sense of being European if they perceive EU membership as beneficial, if there is a positive impact factor at the level of their country or of their lives. An instrumental approach towards the idea of a European identity, the references to costs and benefits, the pre-eminence of the civic dimension of the identity (Frunzaru & Corbu, 2011: 40) make the appropriation of an identity very exposed to variances in the economic context. Thus, the negative impact of the crisis might translate into a decrease in the adoption of a European identity.

However, as shown above, Romanians still feel optimistic about the EU's future, especially when compared to the evaluation of our country. The crisis influenced the perspectives on the EU but only by tempering optimism, turning it into a moderate view, not into pessimism. This way, a positive evaluation of EU membership in terms of costs and benefits supports the civic European identity. Furthermore, this sense of identity decreases the pessimism as there is the belief that, with the EU's help, the crisis will be overcome.

This scenario is encountered in our country as Romania is part of the EU enthusiastic countries and even though the crisis affected the positive views, people still perceive the Union as a better place than their country, with bigger chances of evolving positively ([http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb77/eb77\\_first\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb77/eb77_first_en.pdf)). In this regard, the crisis produced resembling effects at the level of citizen perceptions in the Central-Eastern states since this bloc contains developing countries (<http://data.worldbank.org/about/country-classifications/country-and-lending-groups>) that entered the European Union in the last two accession waves, former communist states with comparable economic paths that perceive the EU as a chance to bridge the gap between themselves and the developed countries.

In what concerns the experts' views, there is no general consensus as they are positive, negative and neutral in equal number. They seize a possible positive impact of the crisis in terms of financial cohesion as this obstacle might bring a stronger economic and political power thanks to an increased solidarity among member states. In what concerns the possible negative impact, they emphasized the danger of colonialism as the states with economic power impose measures and decisions, and the danger of returning to the prevalence of nation states since, in times of crisis, states are inclined to save themselves rather than the whole. Regarding the citizens, the experts evaluated correctly that the crisis attenuated euro-optimism, but not to the point of euro-skepticism.

Overall, at the level of our country, people lost some of their enthusiasm and confidence regarding the Union, but they still give credit to the EU future. Experts are quite moderate as well. They hope that this crisis will bring the states closer to each other in their attempt to save the Union, although they share some fears regarding the status of leadership of some countries. However, the optimism was higher at the level of citizens' perspectives when compared to elites' estimations. These aspects can also be extended for other EU optimistic countries in the Central-Eastern bloc, where history and economic issues made citizens perceive the EU as a chance at development.

## Conclusions

The present paper tried to understand the impact of the crisis on people's expectations and estimations about the future of the European Union and also to compare experts' opinions about the impact of the crisis on the future of the European Union with ordinary people's perceptions. The research took place in a special context as, one month before conducting the analysis; EU Member States signed the Treaty for Financial Governance in response to the challenges brought by the severity of the crisis in the Eurozone. Consequently, the issue of difficulties and negative consequences of the crisis came to dominate media attention. This likely increased the impact of the crisis at the level of citizen perceptions.

The research questions targeted economic experts' opinions about the future of the European Union and people's opinions about the EU's future in the context of the economic crisis. Therefore, we conducted expert interviews with 11 of the most prominent economic experts in Romania and a national survey (N = 1002). Especially in the euro crisis context, there is an increased need for citizen support, but at the same time, in periods of economic difficulties the support is withdrawn, and negativism increases. At the level of the EU, these consequences have a greater impact as the Union is facing a lack of public support already, as well as democratic and legitimacy deficits.

However, the results showed that people have little knowledge about EU topics and that they make evaluations based on utilitarian factors. Their opinions about the economic evolution of the European Union are largely based on their evaluations of their own and Romania's economic disposition, and only to a small extent on their knowledge about the European Union. The statement that people usually tend to see the European Union as a stronger and safer player in the economic game, with better chances of economic success than themselves or their country proved to be valid as people are more optimistic when it comes to the EU's future and economic evolutions, rather than the future of Romania or their personal situations. The crisis did lower enthusiasm, but Romanians are not pessimistic regarding the EU's future and, from this perspective, at the national level the Europeanization process is not jeopardized. This is consistent with other EU enthusiast countries and developing states from the Central-Eastern bloc that see a chance of growth in EU integration.

Economic expert perspectives are differentiated into negative and positive estimates. While a part of them try to see the positive in the effects of the crisis and hope for more cohesion and support among member states, others express their fears regarding a possible domination of the states with more economic power, especially Germany, or regarding the possible withdrawal within national borders.

Overall, experts indicate several possible scenarios about a smaller European Union, an imperialist power, a Union divided by internal boundaries between areas with different levels or rhythms of development or a possible exclusion of Greece or other countries from the Eurozone or the Schengen area. However, the key aspect is that beyond these variations they still refer to a Union and they give credit to the future of the European project. In all the unfolded scenarios, the European Union might face some changes, but it will not collapse or disintegrate. Whether expressed or not, optimism is still present and the crisis has added only a touch of moderation. Furthermore, due to former EU enthusiasm levels

and economic similarities, the crisis in the Central-Eastern states did not affect the integration process, and the level of confidence in the EU's future was not considerably diminished. The European Union remains the chance to reach progress in a global economy if the crisis issues are solved, for many people. However, in order to remain an important actor and ensure the project's success in the future, the European Union is conditioned by its political and identity development.

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