

Is the European social and economic model still sustainable? A pragmatic approach from Romanian students on the future of the Eurozone

Alexandra VIȚELAR¹

Alina-Daniela MIHALCEA²

Rodica- Maria SĂVULESCU³

Abstract. *In the light of recent events, the European project is still facing a series of crises on different levels: economic, political, social and identity based ones. Although Eurobarometers emphasize the fact that young Europeans are more optimistic than older generations considering the future of the European project, they are also the ones labeled “the Lost Generation” (European Commission, 2012) due to the economic hardships. This paper explores the impact of the economic crisis on Romanian students’ attitudes towards the future of the European Union as an economic project. In this regard, we approached the subject from a utilitarian perspective, focusing on the actual advantages of the Europeanization process and the sustainability of the European social and economic model in the current national economic context. The results of our study indicate that although Romanian youth perceives the European project as a necessity to the current economic pressures driven by the process of globalization and the increasing competitiveness of the international markets, at the same time emphasizes its concerns regarding the sustainability of the European economic and social model in the current context.*

Keywords: *economic crisis; European social model; euro; EU attitudes.*

1. Ph.D. candidate in Communication Sciences, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania, alexandra.vitelar@facultateademangement.ro.

2. Ph.D. candidate in Communication Sciences, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania.

3. Ph.D. candidate in Communication Sciences, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania.

Introduction

The European Union is facing a state of profound uncertainty, as the European project is being put under scrutiny. Under the influence of the financial and economic crisis of 2007 – 2008 the pillars on which the EU stands no longer satisfy the demands and necessities of the European citizens (Van Ham, 2005; Habermas, 2012). Among the most affected categories are the young people, as the economic crisis has left them with little or no opportunities in terms of finding a job, and building a future for themselves.

This chapter sets out to reflect on the attitudes of young Romanians towards the future of the European project from an utilitarian perspective. We begin by introducing the economic context that underlies all the challenges that the EU nowadays has to face. We discuss the effects of the financial and economic crisis on the young individuals, exploring the topic of self-interest in relation with the EU.

Although the economic crisis has raised many issues, highlighting the EU's vulnerabilities, our results show that young Romanians hold a rather favorable opinion about the EU as long as they feel the benefits and the concrete advantages that derive from being a European citizen.

The crisis of the European Union

The present day reality continues to be under the influence of the financial and economic crisis that started six years ago, and that still has serious effects on both the USA and Europe (Krugman, 2012; Verhofstadt, 2012). At the moment, the European Union has a heavy challenge to confront, as the crisis struck a Union that was under construction, and that had much vulnerability (Dobrescu, 2013; Bârgăoanu, 2011). Therefore, our aim is to highlight the key events that shaped the socio-economic context in Europe during the past six years, drawing attention, to the impact and effects of the financial and economic crisis on young people in Europe, and respectively in Romania.

The crisis of 2008 has highlighted great imbalances between the European Union member states (Kattel, 2010; Dobrescu, 2013). Radu, Boțan and Corbu (2013) argue that the EU is divided into regions. In this sense, there is a clear distinction made by specialists (Dobrescu, 2013; Dobrescu and Palada, 2012; Buitter, 2011) in terms of core vs. periphery. The distinction between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ is, therefore, made when debating the newly integrated countries, referring to old versus new member states, on the one hand, and on the other hand when discussing the South versus the North, in terms of economic performance (Radu et al., 2013). Other specialists (Dobrescu & Palada, 2012; Buitter, 2011) state that the concept of “periphery” is used just in relation to the countries facing serious financial difficulties. The economic crisis has underlined even further this division between member states, exposing the European project to much criticism in terms of the legitimacy of European integration (Wilde & Trenz, 2012).

The Union’s main weakness was caused by its common currency: the euro. In this sense, Stiglitz (2012) states that the EU member states adopted the euro without making the necessary political and institutional arrangements to ensure its success and for this reason Europe will have to face a high price. This viewpoint is shared by other specialists (Krugman 2009, 2011, 2012; Habermas, 2012; Costa Fernandes & Mota, 2011; Aslund, 2010), who also underlines that countries that share the common currency are highly vulnerable.

After 2007 and 2008 financial markets were greatly affected, and, as a consequence, the European Union was severely afflicted because of the increasing debt, while fiscal deficits rose for several countries with leading economies (Lapavistas, 2012). At the European level, the effects were seen in imbalances between member states that left the peripheral countries vulnerable to the crisis. Hence, the sovereign debt crisis that broke out was caused, as expected, by the financial and economic crisis of 2007-8, and in the same time, by the “precarious integration of peripheral countries in the Eurozone” (Lapavitsas, et al., 2012, p. 26). Nevertheless, Hall (2012, p. 361) comes with an explanation, stating that a “basic asymmetry was built into EMU from its inception”. This asymmetry was given by differences between institutional frameworks in northern and southern political economies. On the one hand, northern countries had well suited policies and growth strategies that led to their economic welfare, and, on the other

hand, southern economies entered the monetary union unprepared and ill equipped to the effective competition within the union (Hall, 2012). These imbalances that led to the sovereign debt crisis have brought about a great amount of stress concerning the cohesion of the Eurozone (Costa Fernandes & Mota, 2011). Similarly, Schmitz and von Hagen (2011) put forward the idea that while concerns about the sustainability of the monetary union have been risen, there is evidence that a deepening in financial market integration in the euro area is already taken place.

Moreover, the effects of the financial and economic crisis and the newly exposed flaws in the construction of the economic and monetary union made Eurosceptics to take a “reluctant step in the direction of integration” (Habermas, 2012, p. 129). This context, hence, fuels more and more skeptical concerns in reference with the European project and European integration. Consequently, recent studies (Pew Research Center, 2013; Gallup, 2013; Eurofound, 2012) show that the level of confidence in the European Union among its citizens has significantly decreased due to the economic and financial turmoil. Attitudes towards the European integration may, therefore, be affected by this economic context that highlighted the Union’s many vulnerabilities. This is in accordance with previous literature (Garry & Tilley, 2009; Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007; McLaren, 2006) that shows that economic factors are important determinants of citizens’ attitudes towards the EU. When it comes to attitudes in the European Union, they have always been divided, as there have always been supporters and opposers to the European integration. As Fliegstein (2008, p. 4) points out, the source of conflict may arise from the gap between those who “participate and benefit from Europe directly and those who do not”, especially at the moment, when this gap became more evident due to the disparities between member states caused by the crisis. Some authors (Wilde & Trenz, 2012) even put forward the idea the entire European project – with its basic purpose and rationale - is nowadays contested, along with its future trajectory.

The situation is all the more dramatic for the young European citizens, as the effects of the crisis had taken a great toll in their concern. Since one of the immediate consequences was the sudden rise in unemployment (Krugman, 2012), the young people were among the most vulnerable. Krugman (2012) states that, now, it is the worst time to be a young

individual in search for a job, especially if you live in Europe. If we take a look at the numbers, they illustrate an alarming situation: youth unemployment rate in EU28 is more than double than unemployment rates for all ages (Eurostat, 2014). According to Eurostat (2014) data the overall unemployment rate in the EU28 reached 10.8% in 2013, while youth unemployment reached at the end of the same year 23.1%. In what concerns the Romanian youth, their situation is even grimmer, as the rate of unemployment is higher than the EU youth average, reaching 23.6%.

As pointed before, young people are unemployed and due to the hardships and the labor market regulations, jobs scarce and unsecure. Moreover, Krugman (2012) underlines that about one in five graduates is unemployed or working part-time and is underpaid. This situation described by Krugman (2012) is also concordant with the Romanian reality, as “half of high school and university graduates cannot find a job” on the Romanian market (FutureLab, 2013, p. 24). The young people are “trapped in a limbo of unemployment, underemployment or an endless cycle of education because of a lack of job opportunities” (FutureLab, 2013, p. 4).

Hence, the young individuals, aged roughly between 18 and 35, belonging to the so called “lost generation”, are characterized to be overqualified, to have low salaries and low job security and satisfaction, in the best case scenario. On the other hand, in the worst case, young individuals have no qualifications, no employment, and have even fewer opportunities on the labor market. The major issues and concerns when it comes to the “lost generation” are that they face greater uncertainty and economic insecurity, that, in turn, cause them to be insecure about their future, to have a low self-esteem, to lose their sense of identity, to be disengaged from society and politics, to fail inadvertently to retain their freedom and independence, as they need to return to live with their parents (FutureLab, 2013, European Commission, 2012; Eurofund, 2012). Taking these facts into consideration, we can better understand the decline in trust when it comes to the European Union, as it is only natural for young individuals to become more pessimistic (Eurofund, 2012), as the Union’s promised welfare was not achieved in their concern.

An instrumental approach on the attitudes towards the European Union

By reference to the European Union and the enlargement process, identity represents a social construct and a catalyst for promoting peace, democracy and prosperity. The emergence of a European identity based on the formation pattern of nation-states remains questionable due to the fact that on the pressure of globalization, the geographical and psychological barriers that demarcate the European space haven't been clearly defined yet (Delanty & Rumford, 2005; Kaina & Karolewski, 2009).

The concept of European identity can be analyzed from different points of view taking into account its cultural, civic or utilitarian components (Jimenez, 2004). On the one hand, several theories emphasize that the individual's emotional sense of belonging to the European community is shaped by elements such as historical heritage and a common European culture (Bruter, 2003, 2005; Inthorn, 2006). In contradiction with the thesis mentioned above, the theory on constitutional patriotism stresses that European identity is based on civic elements and represents a form of attachment of citizens towards political institutions through universally accepted democratic values (Lacroix, 2002; Habermas, 2004; Mueller, 2007).

In line with the instrumental approach, European identity is being conceived as primarily pragmatic. Therefore, individual's membership towards the European community depends on the results of a cost-benefit analysis of the economic consequences of the process of Europeanization on their lives (Kaltenthaler & Anderson, 2001; Hooghe & Marks, 2004; Tănăsoiu & Colonescu, 2008; Frunzaru & Corbu, 2012). As a consequence, individuals define themselves as European citizens in accordance with the concrete advantages provided by the European integration process and their personal interests. When analyzing European identity, research indicates that young people internalize a sense of belonging to the European community mainly in pragmatic terms (Frunzaru and Corbu, 2012; European Commission, 2013; Udrea, Udrea & Țugmeanu, 2013). Tfasos (2006) states that young Europeans have the tendency to share a collective identity only in good times, while in times of social and economic insecurity rely on their national identity. This approach is inconsistent

with the results of the most recent European Commission Report (2013, p.16) suggesting that despite the negative economic trends affecting the Eurozone, young Europeans are rather optimistic concerning their future as European citizen due to concrete benefits that are relevant to their needs and aspirations: obtaining appropriate qualifications, building their professional career and securing good living conditions”.

When addressing attitudes of support or opposition towards the European integration process in relation to the utilitarian approach, we can distinguish between two divergent perspectives that take into consideration economic factors, respectively identity aspects. Lauren McLaren (2006) proposes two theoretical models that are predominant among utilitarian approach concerning individuals attitudes towards European integration: egocentric utilitarianism that emphasizes the fact that individuals support for the European project depends on the maximization of personal interests and economic benefits that directly impact the standards of living (Palmer & Gabel, 1999; Gabel, 2009); secondly, the sociotropic utilitarianism, that examines the attitudes of support towards the EU by taking into consideration the consequences of the European integration process on the national economy (Garry & Tilley, 2007). The egocentric utilitarianism approach indicates that the demarcation between the winners and losers of the European integration process is made through the differentiated economic costs and benefits for each European citizen. Therefore, individuals with higher education and professional skills (students, managers, entrepreneurs etc.) show a positive attitude towards the European integration process can adapt more easily and are able to identify significant opportunities in the context of the liberalization of capital markets. Conversely, European citizens with average education and low income express rather skeptic attitudes concerning the positive effects of the process of European integration on national economy (McLaren, 2006, p. 32).

Unlike the egocentric utilitarianism theory that analyses the political attitudes of individuals towards the process of European integration in relation to personal interests and social status, the sociotropic utilitarianism approach focuses on the consequences of the Europeanization process on national economy. The support or opposition attitudes towards the European project are influenced by two major economic factors: in the

first place, *the European Union budget* and the differentiated economic contribution of each member state causing a major gap between beneficiaries and main contributors; secondly, *the elimination of regulations and trade barriers* in order to establish free trade zones for increasing competition across markets (McLaren, 2006, p.44). Despite the positive effects of the European integration process on national economies, the current crisis has generated „economic xenophobia” (Garry & Tilley, 2007, p. 184) and a defensive European identity against immigrants.

The opposition attitudes against the European Union are grounded on utilitarian aspects, but are also influenced by the emotional attachment and loyalty of individuals towards the nation-state. Hence, the process of European integration represents a threat to the sovereignty of the nation-state, to national cultures and identities (Carey, 2002; Marks & Hooghe, 2003; McLaren, 2002, 2004; Netjes, 2004; Netjes & Kersbergen, 2004). Lauren McLaren (2002) emphasizes: „antipathy toward the EU is not just about cost/benefit calculations or about cognitive mobilization ... but about fear of, or hostility toward, other cultures” (p. 553). In specific contexts, through political discourses and the inference of politics in everyday life, national identity becomes dominant in relation to personal and economic interests. Therefore, the citizens perceive the process of European integration as a threat to the integrity of the nation state, the legitimacy of its political institutions and cultural heritage. This idea is also supported by some authors indicating that euro, one of the most representative markers of European identity and integration process is used as a tool for manipulating European citizens through the reproduction of national symbols (Bruter, 2003, 2004; Kaina & Karolewski, 2009). Conversely, Jacques Hymans (2004) suggests that euro currency represents an important indicator for the development of a European demos and not an instrument for indoctrination. Although, at a symbolic level, euro embodies the federalist vision on the European project, at present, values such as economic and political cohesion, no longer hold the same resonance and meaning for political elites and European citizens.

Research design

This article aims to analyze from a utilitarian perspective the impact of the economic crisis on Romanian students' attitudes towards the future of the Eurozone and, implicitly, towards their future as European citizens. Therefore, we focus on the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Romanian students imagine the future of the Eurozone?

RQ2: Do Romanian students perceive the euro as threat to national economy and national identity?

RQ3: In the aftermath of the European economic crisis, is the European economic and social model still sustainable?

In order to address these research questions we adopted a qualitative approach. Consequently, we conducted 3 focus groups. Our sample comprised 24 students, aged between 19 to 30 years, enrolled in Bachelor degree programs at the following public learning and research institutions: College of Management - The National School of Political Studies and Public Administration; respectively, Faculty of International Business and Economics - Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Thus, our analyses comprises several questions regarding: the process of Europeanization and its effects on national economy; the impact of the economic crisis on the stability of the Eurozone, business markets and standards of living; the competitiveness of the European social and economic model on the global market; euro adoption in Romania.

Results and discussion

Romanian students emphasize the fact that the process of European integration has improved the living standards and the economic development of the country but only at a small scale: *We don't need to wait for the EU to solve our social, political and justice problems... but we must admit that different aspects concerning corruption, unemployment have improved, but are not so noticeable (Bianca); It has helped Romania in certain ways, but Europeanization doesn't mean economic equality like in the communist period (Mihai)*. The negative references concerning the Europeanization process relate to the deliberate preservation of economic disparities and

competition between member states but also to the incapacity of national institutions to adapt to the new climate of change imposed at a continental level. In this context, the promised economic welfare is seen only as an utopia and the Europeanization process only another form of oppression: *The Europeanization process has helped other countries but destroyed most of the Romanian economy (Radu); There will always be countries that work for others and this system of oppression will never disappear (Alexandra); EU has its own interests, they wanted us only as a name, for a more positive image and credibility (Adela).*

For most of the respondents, the current economic situation has highlighted the fact that the European social and economic model is not sustainable and cannot be a source for gaining competitive advantage on a global market anymore: *We are moving towards social collapse (Oana); We are not competitive with Americans, we do not have the same ways of making business on an international level, we still have taxes between us so it isn't really a free trade zone. There is only a competition between member states (Andreea).* One of the respondents states that the consumerist European model has lost its relevance in the current economic reality and that citizens must support economic recovery of Romania through the consumption of traditional products instead of those labeled under „Made in the EU”: *The model itself is a problem. Each country must protect its industry and we must be aware that we can have jobs only if we encourage the consumption of Romanian and not foreign products (Ioana).*

The current struggle that Eurozone is facing has been generated not only by economic factors but also by the hostility and lack of solidarity between member states causing a gap between the core and the peripheral areas of the European Union. Romanian students emphasized that economic cohesion between member states is a double-edged sword used by the most powerful countries of the Union to run in debt the beneficiary countries: *I do not believe in solidarity between member states regarding the economic crisis. It will always apply the law of jungle: the lion is the king (Mihai); There can't be all for one and one for all. It's not right that only some countries get help (Mădălina); If to borrow money from the main contributors means solidarity this helps the country only in a short term ... with excessively high gearing and high rates of interest you can never recover (Călin).* Conversely, for some of the respondents solidarity remains a fundamental European value

that stands at the core of the European project: *The negative effects of the crisis can be exceeded only through economic cohesion and solidarity between member states. After all, what's the point of the EU if not unity? (Gabriela); The social and economic problems must be solved through cooperation, it's a partnership (Mădălina).*

A general opinion concerning the euro adoption in 2019 by Romania represents an unrealistic scenario due to the lack of economic competitiveness of the country and the fragile European economy. The major concerns of the respondents in relation to Romania's future status of becoming a member of the euro area are economic instability, high interest rates and higher prices, based on the major differences between Eastern and Western economies: *Romania should keep its currency because it's stable. Every time a national currency is changed a series of financial problems arise (Andrei); Romania adopting euro would mean national starvation (Călin); We are too poor to join the Eurozone (Bianca); The changes would be to high: the same wages, but higher prices of products ... Romania is not ready for this (Alexandra); Romania is not sufficiently prepared to adopt the euro (Ștefana).* Only one of the respondents states that *Euro currency itself cannot generate benefits or ruin national economy. Other factors are involved (Ana),* emphasizing the importance of politics on this matter.

In relation to the austerity measures that were taken by national governments and imposed at a continental level for the survival of the monetary Union, the respondents emphasized the fact that this measures were a necessity, such as the existence of the European project itself. At the same time, participants on this study appreciate that European Union interference in national economy through fiscal policies and collecting taxes results from the obligations and responsibilities that derive from the status of being a member of the Union and a European citizen: *As long as the future of the European Union is at stake they have the authority to impose certain rules (Andreea); When it comes to austerity measures you take it as a given (...) it is naturally to obey to this laws as a European citizen or you will not be part of the Union anymore (Laura); They have the right to collect taxes from citizens because we are part of the European economy... For example, most of the investors on FMCG industry are foreign, so the money returns to European Union (Călin).* In addition, participants stated that the economic crisis has affected them in terms of less job opportunities, less options

when it comes to choosing a faculty: *The crisis has limited my options in choosing a faculty. Now, I have to be much more careful when I choose a faculty, a career (Silvia).*

Conclusion

Even though the economic crisis has underlined many vulnerabilities of the European project, Romanian young people do not seem to be very pessimistic about its future, although they have some reservations. Interestingly, Romanian individuals put under scrutiny the weak solidarity between member states and from here some issues might emerge in terms of the feasibility of the European project. Young people consider that the economic crisis has brought disparities between member states, highlighting the incapacity of national institution to adapt to the regulations imposed at the EU level. Hence, we can infer their lack of trust in national institutional management and their disbelief in an economic welfare in what Romania is concerned. Their reservations are highlighted by the consequences of the economic crisis in terms of the unsustainable European economic and social model. The crisis has taken its toll in young people concern, as they are a generation labeled 'the lost generation', as they have to face many difficulties such as unemployment and lack of opportunities, all under the context of a great financial and economic turmoil.

In the same time, our research reveals that the economic crisis has underlined the dichotomy between 'core' and 'periphery', referring to the fact that young people perceive a gap between Romania, an emerging economy and Western Europe, and older, more stable economies. Furthermore, the economic crisis brought much instability in the Eurozone and in young Romanians opinion the country is not ready to adopt the euro, emphasizing the importance of politics in this matter.

In relation to attitudes towards the European Union, young Romanians are not skeptical, as they admit that that European integration has brought economic development and higher living standards. Moreover, when it comes to the way they perceive the membership of Romania to the European community, the research showed that young individuals correlate it with the cost-benefit of the economic consequences to the

process of integration. This finding is in accordance with previous literature (Kaltenthaler & Anderson, 2001; Hooghe & Marks, 2004; Tănășoiu & Colonescu, 2008; Frunzaru & Corbu, 2012), as young Romanians put a lot of emphasis on the benefits they gain as a result of the country's membership, such as mobility and studying opportunities. On the other hand, a few concerns appear as the costs of the European integration may highlight the economic and social imbalances between member states. Therefore, we notice, once again, that the gap between poorer and richer European countries becomes a matter of interest for the young individuals. These inequalities, as seen before, are a consequence of the economic crisis that has underlined the differences between the North and the South in terms of economic policies.

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