A tableau of historical evolution within the EU: on the brink of a distillation or on the cliffs of glory

Ivan Dragos Lucian

1 National School of Political Sciences and Public Administration (NSPSPA), Romania

Abstract. In what percentage does the identification with EU policy and values change in Western and Eastern countries, members of the EU? Has history and time change the way in which citizens from West and citizens from East see European values and identify with its institutions? How about demography? Does it have a diachronic evolution? It seems that a gap between the two European sides has formed and the way in which the European Union communicates to the new states may lead to a decrease in EU enthusiasm. Upon the socio-demographic challenges the European Union seems to display only a patchwork of measures, not a common policy and this is made apparent also in the way it communicates its policies. Europe’s current struggle with the economic crisis and with socio-demographic challenges seems to question the role of Central European states and maintains a tacit yet seemingly widespread fear of the new countries that have joined the European Union.

Keywords: cohesion, European Union, trust, demography, behavior

JEL Codes: J10, J11, J18

1. A turn in the context of European dynamics: a new European disorder or order?

A historical analysis leads us to believe that contemporary European dynamics confronted with the economic crisis may be in danger of heading on the road of viewing West and East, in this case Central Europe, as intractable. A communication decline, in itself is a looming crisis, because once a belief is followed by strict legislative measures and consequently represented in the press and in the official positions it can lead to deeply ingrained stereotypes. Judging the newly entered into the EU states obscurely can only bring additional congeries of a socio-demographic nature.

EU policy although has fine-tuned the union, it still has shortcomings, especially because there are some socio-demographic challenges that have surpassed their regional existence and moved on to a continental level. It can be argued, as Paul Dobrescu does in his book Geopolitica, that “În întreaga perioadă modernă, Europa a fost adevăratul centru al lumii” (During the entire modern period, Europe has been the veritable center of the world), but as he also continues “Secolul pe care l-am încheiat de curând a fost, din perspectiva istoriei europene, o perioadă de decădere fără echivoc”, (this last century has

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2 Paul Dobrescu, Geopolitica, Comunicare.ro, Bucharest, 2008, p. 134
3 Paul Dobrescu, Geopolitica, Comunicare.ro, Bucharest, 2008, p. 134
been from the European point of view a period of decline). The European Union has both advantages, but also shortcomings. For example, decoupling the demographic challenge and seeing it as an exclusive problem of the West shows a level of incoherence that is lacking and leading to a damaging gap between West and East. This gap in identity as Oskar Halecki saw it is no longer valid and can deepen even further. No longer, one single European actor can deal with a now continental challenge, such as demographics without being committed and willing to share responsibility and unity. One contemporary problem of the European Union is the lack of overlap of the main thorny issues, which should be treated at the continental level.

Central Europe is not willing to have a free riding role and it is prepared to become not only familiar with the new continental challenges, starting with socio-demographic issues, but, if it is strategically necessary, to play a more substantial and effective role in responding to EU challenges. Judging the Central European states obscurely can only bring additional congeries of a socio-demographic nature. Although there still remains an economic gap between West and East, currently the new countries to the EU are being outpaced by the economic strength of the West, the challenges they face have become continental and the burden of socio-demographic challenges such as immigration, employment, population decline and so on have impact upon the entire continent. The European Union, for the purpose of this argument, can be summed up not only as a melting pot of opportunities but also one of challenges. This outcome is not surprising, but it should prompt a broad European response, although it ostensibly puts West and East on the same plane. The central pillar of the European Union should be the acknowledgement of a European vision consisting of both opportunities and challenges characterized by three heightened concepts: united interest, whole union and joint action. Socio-demographic fragilities are no longer isolated and may destabilize European growth and enlargement. These challenges stage the scene for a large problem that can even further create a gap between West and East Europe, creating demographic challenges frontiers. Success in handling these challenges through but not limited to active involvement of the Central European countries and an acknowledgement that these countries are not part of the problem as in the past was considered, for example by Hugh Seton-Watson, but can be part of the solution holds out the hope for an invigorated Europe.

2. European position and the politics of representation

Meanwhile, Europe’s on going struggle with the economic crisis and with socio-demographic challenges seems to question the role of Eastern European states and maintains a tacit yet seemingly widespread fear of the new countries that have joined the European Union. It seems that contemporary European dynamics confronted with the economic crisis may be in danger of heading on the road of viewing West and East, in this case Eastern Europe, as intractable. This, in itself is a looming crisis, because once a belief is followed by strict legislative measures it can lead to deeply ingrained stereotypes. The economic crisis should be the impetus for a greater involvement of Central European states in the EU and an acknowledgement that the majority of socio-demographic problems should not create divergence, but rather bring countries together to instrument a common agenda and common broader solution.

The transnational European movement should be the starting point for a conscious and collective agenda. The European Union has both strengths and weakness. The trend in research has encouraged a focus only on the politics of EU prior to enlargement moments and on the economic policy afterwards (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002: 504-507; 2005c: 6-9). It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate

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5 Hugh Seton-Watson, The ‘sick heart’ of modern Europe: the problem of the Danubian lands, Univ of Washington Pr, 978-0295953601
that socio-demographic challenges should be ancillary to a common united policy, made out of both West and Eastern European states. Besides the political aspect, the European Union is a force multiplier of both opportunities and challenges for its members, thus it should realize that the new states would have to deal with similar problems and that their maturity is sufficient so as to handle the truth. The socio-economic model has represented the basis of EU enlargement it was devoid of any struggling challenges. The newly joined countries are mature enough to handle the presence of continental challenges and a sense of awareness should be established. Enthusiasm around the European Union was high among the countries that joined the European Union in the last couple of years. It is our intention to research whether this interest and enthusiasm surrounding the European Union, even when faced with a harsh environment has still kept a high value. We believe that despite harsh conditions, especially on the economic realm but also the presence of socio-demographic challenges, enthusiasm is still high surrounding the concept of the European Union. This research may encourage the European Union to believe in the maturity of Central European states and to understand that it is necessary to understand the impact of new continental challenges upon Central European states and especially upon youth communities. We hope that the outline for a more Central European participation in the European policy-making would become apparent. The European Union should consider changing perception upon the challenges it faces and that prerequisite to solving them it is to understand their impact not only on the West region, but also on the Eastern European region. The differentiation between problems in the West and problems in the Central European area no longer lives up and especially is not true that the problems in the West have a source in the East. European capabilities are closely linked with legitimacy from its citizens and the Eastern European youth community, with its enthusiasms can play a vital role as enablers. There is limited research upon the Eastern European communities and their way of coping with the present European challenges that have gone continental. Moreover it is this researcher’s belief that the EU should have a real interest in examining the way in which Eastern European youth communities have adapted nor not adapted to the new context created by both the economic crisis and by the enlargement process. In the face of socio-demographic challenges western and eastern countries should display cohesion and not a split on different levels of policy making. The existence of a split is counterproductive and even damaging to the overall EU performance. Currently, it is difficult for the European Union to construct a policy including Eastern Europe that could bring a breakthrough without proper research on the impact of enlargement and economic crisis upon youth communities, the most dynamic and active part of a population. Upon the socio-demographic challenges the European Union seems to display only a patchwork of measures, not a common policy. Considering the current European state of affairs in the greater context of the economic crisis and globalization it is most necessary to research the impact that enlargement, through the presence of socio-demographic challenges, the economic crisis has upon the youth communities in Eastern Europe.

3. Representation of part of the European dynamics through quantitative analysis

In order to investigate the current situation, our scientific curiosity led us to believe that such a paper should be also accompanied by a quantitative analysis of the contemporary context. Through this quantitative analysis, present in this article, we only try to underline the importance of this topic. It is not meant to provide a complete and detailed quantitative analysis of the current situation, but to be a starting point towards a better understanding of the context represented by the European Union. It was our intention to focus upon the trust placed by Romanian citizens in the European Union. We wish to investigate to go behind the scenes and pinpoint the factors what influence this trust. The purpose of this research was to determine the major factor behind trusting the European Union. Our hypothesis is that the trust and legitimacy placed by Romanian citizens in the European Union is not entirely linked with economic reasons. During this period of economic crisis, we believe that Romanians are more aware of other benefits tied with the European Union and less inclined to succumb to the pressure of the economic
crisis. The trust and legitimacy placed in the European Union is one that stems from something different. We are used to hear about the trust placed in the European Union, but not enough research has been conducted around the roots of this research. By understanding the modality, in which citizens provide legitimacy to the European Union we can better understand the values that should be regarded as essential. On one hand it is our purpose to start an investigation upon the nexus if any between the economic well-being of a Romanian citizen and belief and trust in the European Union. On the other hand we are interested to establish if there is a significant difference in the value of trust displayed towards the European Union, taking into consideration some socio-economic parameters, for example age, income, level of education and professional status.

The concept of trust towards national and international organizations is widely debated in current literature. This is due especially because of the many controversial issues regarding the concept of trust in general. There it has always been a sort of back and forward discussion between considering trust as either an innate feature of the human personality, extrapolated from the interpersonal area in relation to the institutional level6 or as a fundamental way of behaving, acquired after an analysis of the value for cost of the existing relationship with those national or international institutions7. In this paper we will see trust from the second perspective. Trust will be considered as the result of a rational thought coupled with a rational analysis constructed by the European citizen.

Before getting to the data itself it is the purpose of this article to draw a conceptual framework. In the contemporary literature there are two strong opinions regarding trust in the European Union. On one hand we have what Niedermeyer calls internationalized governance. Usually, discussions surrounding trust in different international organizations put next to the European Union institutions such as NATO. Niedermeyer Sinnot considers that one way of assessing the trust in international organizations is to ask people about different institutions and organizations so as to compare. The most widely known are EU and NATO, the most encountered options in questionnaires. The other way of approaching trust in the EU considers the nexus between the national government and the EU. It considers that everything that comes from the European Union gets a positive or negative twist according to the policy of the national government.

We have used the data base European Values Survey 1981-2008 Longitudinal Data File, ZA4804: pre-release v.1.0.0, available on the Gesis site (Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences) (http://info1.gesis.org/dbksearch13/sdesc2.asp?no=4804&db=e&doi=10.4232/1.4804).

The method used is linear regression with a dependant variable constituted by “Confidence in the EU” (e069_18). The options are “A great deal”, “Quite a lot”, “Not very much”, “None at all”. The independent variables are “age recoded” (x003r2), “Education” (x0253), “annual household income” (x047c), “satisfaction with financial situation of household” (c006), “employed” (c029), “interest in politics” (e023). This method is useful for establish the causality between dependant and independent variable and for establishing the relationship between the level of positive and negative link with the dependent value. Also this type of method is perfect for the construction of a hierarchy of the most determining factors out of the variable set selected for research. The data has been collected after Romania became an European Union member. The questionnaires were constructed through direct contact with the person.

The results lead us to believe in some interesting conclusions, especially when comparing them with most of the results researched in some Western countries. According to the replies given to the question “How much trust do you have in the European Union?” a percent of 13.8 considered that they have a lot of confidence/trust in the European Union. This percent is followed by the answer “pretty much trust” represented by a high percent of 37.2 with only 16 percent of Romanians considering that they have

very little confidence in the European Union. Considering that the percent of those that have a lot of trust together with those that have plenty of trust in the European Union surpasses the value of 50% it is easy to establish that the Romanian citizen offers is an European enthusiast. When we add the percent of those with little trust, but still hoping in the European Union’s promises we reach a very high figure of 84 percent of people with trust in the power of the European Union. In the ANOVA TABEL SIG has a small value of only 0,05. This demonstrates that the model is correct. Upon a careful analysis upon the Coefficients Table we easily notice that all the tolerance coefficients are greater than 0,5. This means that the variables are relevant for the study. We did not have to eliminate neither of the variables from the model. We have not established the existence of colinearity. Our desire that the model should be relevant for the entire population was also achieved because the value for sig (t) demonstrates that b and β are significant in this research. Looking at the adjusted Model Summary R² we notice that it has a small value. It displays that only a 1,7% out of the total dependant variation is explained by the predictors used. We can draw the conclusion that the limitation faced by this research is represented by the limited number of predictors used. For further studies it is our intention to use a lot more predictors.

Next we look at the values of the predictors so as to determine which is the most important. According to the Beta value “Interest in politics” (0,11) is the most important. The next two according to importance are “Annual household income’ (0,078) and “Education Level” (0,074). In accordance with this value the most important parameter is the level of political participation, democratic participation and citizenship awareness.

Next we wished to investigate the impact upon trust in the European Union if some of the predictors undergo changes. We have followed the values of the coefficient b. As the age, level of education and interest in politics raises, so does the trust in the European Union.

The results of the constructed regression partially confirmed the hypothesis. The level of education coupled with the one regarding income are the main predictors from the selected set for the trust displayed by Romanian citizens in the European Union. But, we notice that this applies only in accordance with the variable regarding interest for political activities. The parameters of age and education are directly proportioned with the level of trust displayed by Romanian citizens, but do not constitute into sufficiently strong arguments to explain this relation. The persons considered better educated and therefore better informed have the tendency to display a stronger sentiment of trust towards the European Union and also to legitimate its policy in more cases. What is surprising is that income is inversely proportional. This is surprising because most of the people seem to believe that people with higher income tend to display a higher level of trust in the European Union. The fact that the level of income is inversely proportional to the level of trust in the European Union brings into question a very serious question. It underlines the willingness of people to understand that the economic factor, although important is a lot less important than other values supported by the European Union. It brings into focus a totally new direction of investigation. The European Union has been created purely as an economical system, at least at first. Its main goal was to create prosperity and through prosperity it should allow all the European countries to come together into a close to ideal system. It seems that in the case of Romania, a new country to the European Union, the people seem to be more attracted by other values put forward by the European Union. This should not be interpreted as a forgetting of the economic factor. In foreign literature, it is a lot of debate around the subject of legitimacy and trust in the European Union. A lot of writers link economic prosperity with trust and legitimacy for the European Union (Gabel, 1998). Attempts are made to demonstrate that the European Union depends mostly on economic factors to gain support and legitimacy. Although this may have been true sometimes or maybe for some other regions, it seems that in Romania things have a different perspective. We do not wish to put forward a general truth, but to encourage further investigation into the matter. This is meant to be just a part of our research in this field and we wish to continue this investigation. Our findings encourage us to believe that something more is hidden and that trust and legitimacy for the European Union is not necessarily only an aspect strongly linked with
economical prosperity. In professional literature it was put forward only the situation in which those with low incomes displayed a weak interest in the European Union and a severe distrust towards its policies. We consider this an overstatement and wish to challenge this single opinion. In other words, the level of trust in the European Union is the result of something more than just pure rational thinking based only on economical aspects. The benefits of being part of the European Union, which are most of the time perceived unequally, cannot be separated from identity fears, the lack of a political culture which presupposes interest in politics and emotional involvements in the political life of a country.

4. Conclusions: putting reality together

The main conclusions are as follows. Trust in the European Union is not purely linked with economical interest, this is the case for Romania, a new country to the European Union. The research should be continued so as to obtain a more complex view. Secondly, in order for a citizen to display a positive view and a powerful sentiment of trust in the European Union, he should also have a political interest and a genuine interest in the political life of his country.

The transnational European movement should be the starting point for a conscious and collective agenda. The European Union has both strengths and weakness. The trend in research has encouraged a focus only on the politics of EU prior to enlargement moments and on the economic policy afterwards (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002: 504-507; 2005c: 6-9). It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that socio-demographic challenges should be ancillary to a common united policy, made out of both West and Eastern European states.

What of the region of Eastern Europe? This has started to become a region of strength through cooperation and with some major issues concerning the European continent, also an area of contrast of public opinion. It is very interesting how this region has started to fit its interests according to the values of the European Union but has continues to preserve some of its mentality, which sometimes is beneficial in a world of permanent change and movement. In parallel to this synchronization, it is easy to notice that the European Union, in turn takes a lot more care of the problems of Eastern European region, but it still has some difficulty managing the cultural differences. This European region, which is inhabited by around eighty million European citizens fits perfectly in the European big picture but with its own little changes, which can even strengthen the European Union or offer a model. The strengthening of bilateral ties in the region has offered growth to the region, political strength together, but also accompanied with proper representation in the European Union and legitimacy for its institution.

There has been a lot of debate around the European construct and the danger of loss of full cohesion due to the existence, in the classical sense, of two European regions, split by differences of economical and development growth. It has been widely discussed that the new countries may encounter a break-down in communication because of the economic discrepancy. Such studies come to complete this picture. The legitimacy and support offered by the new countries to the European Union do not always depend on the economic situation. Right, there is an economical development difference between the two regions of Europe. Right, this gap should be considered and proper solutions should be sought, but this does not affect the legitimacy of the European Union in the area, at least not for the time being. Although, there is an economic difference between east and west it can be filled through cooperation programs in the main areas of interest for both the newly adherent countries and the European Union. Let it be no mistake, the European Union is not in its own existence a justification, but it is a construct, under many forms, including economic, political, strategic, viable only as long as a constant interplay between the member countries exists. Admittedly, the economic discrepancy exists, but it does not put such a high pressure on the existence of the European Union, as long as other types of relationships exist. There is a gamble in our contemporary days. Too much emphasis on economical issues may lead to overlooking other important
issues. Gambling everything on the economic card can be very dangerous, because it ignores some of the core problems that slowly eat away in any union.

A bond is something more than just economic links between countries it should focus mainly on building together prosperity. Gambling everything on pure economical exchanges, without building together an apparatus that produces and assures wealth as long as the countries cooperate, means to destroy, along with values, that whole cooperation mode that should exists between member states. Although there are two distinct European regions, with different wages, different social systems and different economic performance, countries in the east can still produce even more added value to the legitimacy of the European Union, through strong cooperation. Anyone today who thinks about the problem of a rift between west and east Europe should not remain trapped in old disputes or old way of thinking of a union. What seems to be a gap between East and West must be translated and converted into a founding period for cooperation, brand new ideas and models.

The continuing support for the European Union from the people in the new countries to the European Union is a very important element for future stability. Demography plays an important role in our globalized community. The current international situation is filled to the maximum by economic problems, as also Paul Dobrescu notices in his book “Viclenia Globalizarii. Asaltul asupra puterii americane” “Tabloul lumii contemporane este ocupat pana la refuz de problem economice, indicatori, performante, ierarhii. Dincolo de problemele economice – foarte importante – intalnim o alta realitate, cea a populatiei. Populatia este un factor fundamental al cresterei economice si influnțează direct ritmul, calitatea si modernitatea dezvoltarii.”. (We are overwhelmed by charts, economic indicators, hierarchies. Besides the pressing economic issues, we are face with an even more pressing issues: that of demography, the importance of population. Population has the ability to legitimate a way of organizing and this is especially true in the case of the European Union. Population is a fundamental factor in any economic hierarchy and it directly influences economic growth, development and any form of institutional existence. Population has a direct and powerful effect upon the way in which power is distributed in the world)\(^8\).

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