

Romanians and the Idea of European Integration. An Analysis Based on Romanian Public Opinion Barometers

Horatiu Rusu

UNIVERSITY "LUCIAN BLAGA" OF SIBIU, ROMANIA

ABSTRACT. In Romania we trace one of the highest levels of support for the European Union and for European integration in Europe. However, in this article the author attempts to capture the profile not of the sustainers of the European Union and European integration but the profile of those people who do not favour it and those who have no opinion about the EU. The analysis reveals that the profile of these people is rather similar to the profile of the people who traditionally vote for leftist parties in the post-communist Romania.

Key words: EUROPEAN INTEGRATION, ATTITUDES TOWARDS EU, SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION.

In Romania we trace one of the highest levels of support for the European Union and for European integration in Europe and the highest from the central and eastern Europe countries: "current support for the European Union is highest in Luxembourg, followed by Romania, the Netherlands and Cyprus" (Eurobarometer 59 – Comparative Highlight Report, 2003: 3). In the following material, the author examines some of the attitudes and perceptions of the EU and EU integration in Romania based on Romanian Public Opinion Barometers.

Romania and the idea of European integration: A short introduction

Although the Romanians always called themselves and perceived themselves as Europeans, they never dreamed as much as now about (and maybe they were never closer than now to) European integration. Although Romania put forward its request for EU membership on 22 June 1995, up to the end of the 1990s¹ the subject of European integration seldom appeared in the public agenda and only somewhat more often in the political agenda (especially in

¹ In December 1999 the European Council invited Romania to start accession negotiations.

the electoral campaigns). European integration became a reality when the negotiation process was officially launched on 15 February 2000. In 2001, the new ruling party in the government the Social Democratic Party (PSD), established a Ministry of European Integration and a National Delegation for Negotiation of Accession to the EU. In 2002, Romania opened the negotiations for all the 30 thematic chapters. In June 2003 Romania temporarily closed 18 chapters²; the expected date for Romania to finish the negotiations is 2004 and the accession process – in January 2007.

Since the end of 2002 when NATO integration became an “achieved” target³, the cultural and political elites (no matter of right or left subscription) began to shift their interest, discourse and actions towards the process of European integration⁴. This shift became more prominent, at least in the political agenda, when in 2003 the government party promoted the idea of anticipated elections. But definitive and prioritised attention was given to this subject at the end of 2003 when the Country Report presented by the European Commission showed that Romania is the country without a market economy and with a high level of corruption. In other words, at least economically speaking, Romania of 2003 was still far away from the European Union’s standards.

In the following section I will try to sketch the changes⁵ that have taken place in the attitudes of the Romanian population towards EU accession and the profile of the “non-EU accession” population.

The evolution of perceptions and attitudes towards European integration

The earliest information regarding the attitudes of Romanians towards EU integration is from May 1998. In May 1998 the Public Opinion Barometer for the first time included two questions concerning EU integration:

1. How fast should the EU/NATO integration process go? (The answers: 1 – not at all; 2 – slower than now; 3 – like now; 4 – faster than now; 5 – don’t know / no answer)
2. How is the EU/NATO integration process going to affect your life? (The answers: 1 – it will be worse; 2 – no change at all; 3 – it will be better; 4 – don’t know / no answer)

² None of the negotiation chapters is definitely closed until all of the 31 chapters are closed. See more at: <http://www.mie.ro/english/mie.htm>

³ Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were invited to join NATO in November 2002. The entire process was completed in May 2004.

⁴ All parliamentary parties support European integration.

⁵ Albeit minor ones.

We can see that the problem of EU and NATO integration are bound together in the same question, so it is impossible to be sure about the significance of the answers. Therefore, an analysis of the answers is not developed here. In the Romanian political and public discourse, EU integration has been regarded as the “next step” or a consequence of NATO integration. This could be an explanation of why these two questions were connected in the Public Opinion Barometer from May 1998.

Starting with the May 1999 Public Opinion Barometer questionnaire and going up to November 2000, the following question related with the topic of European integration was included: “Do you believe that European integration for our country is: a) useful, b) not useful?” A comparative analysis of the answers to this question from 1999 to 2000 is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Variation of opinions regarding the usefulness of European integration in 1999–2000. The question: “Do you believe that European integration for our country is: a) useful, b) not useful?” (Percentages)

Month/ Year	Opinion	YES	NO	Don't know / Non response
May-99		69.5	13.9	16.6
Nov-99		66.9	12	21.1
May-00		67.8	7.6	24.7
Nov-00		68.1	10.8	21.1

Source: Romanian Public Opinion Barometers

It can be observed that a significant percentage of the whole population (an average of 68 percent over two years) considered European integration useful. A quite high number (20 percent of the people) were undecided or did not respond. A relatively small percentage of the population, averaging around 11 percent (over these two years), believed that the EU was not useful. The most significant change of attitudes in the segment of population who believed that it was not useful to become a part of the EU (a difference of approx. -4.4 percent) took place between November 1999 and May 2000. It was the period when Romania was invited to start negotiations to enter the EU and the period when the European Commission recommended (on 27 January 2000) the elimination of visas for Romanian citizens entering the Schengen space.

Considering the relatively important percentage of the population who were saying or tended to say that European integration is not useful, I further focus on the examination of the social profile of these people. In order to find an answer to this question, the data from May 1999 was analysed. The statistical procedure adopted was an analysis of the data in contingency tables using χ^2 and adjusted residual value (VRA) tests. A number of indicators⁶ were tested,

⁶ Residential status, number of population living in a locality, religious denomination, etc.

but only voting intention, education, occupational status, age cohorts, number of household members, ethnic background, and income per household member showed some results. The findings of the analysis are presented below:

1. *Presidency voters and party voters*

The majority of “no” voters are the electorate of leftist leaders⁷ (63.4 percent) and leftist parties⁸. In the category of Ion Iliescu’s electorate there were significantly more “no” voters (VRA 4.7) and significantly less “yes” (VRA – 4.7) voters than in other categories. In the category of Vadim Tudor’s electorate there were also significantly more “no” voters (VRA 4.3) and significant less “yes” (VRA –4.3) voters than in other categories.

In the category of the Social Democracy Party of Romania (further – PDSR)⁹ voters there were significantly more “no” voters (VRA=4.1) and significant less “yes” (VRA –4.1) voters than in other categories. In the category of Greater Romania Party (further – PRM) voters there were also significantly more “no” voters (VRA=4.6) and significantly less “yes” (VRA –4.6) voters than in other categories (p=0.99).

2. *Age category*

In the category of people over 65 years old there were significantly more “no” voters (VRA 2.1) and significantly less “yes” (VRA –2.1) voters than in other categories.

3. *Education*

Forty-five percent of “no” voters have completed elementary or secondary school. In the category of voters with an elementary school education there were significantly more “no” voters (VRA 4.8) and significantly less “yes” (VRA – 4.8) voters than in other categories. In the category of voters with secondary school education there were significantly more “no” voters (VRA 2.0) and significantly less “yes” (VRA –2.0) voters than in other categories.

4. *Occupation*

In the category of retired people there were significantly more “no” voters (VRA 2.1) and significantly less “yes” voters (VRA –2.1) than in other categories.

⁷ 47.2 percent of the “no” voters were I.Iliescu’s voters. 16.2 percent of the “no” voters were V.Tudor’s voters.

⁸ 51.1 percent of the “no” voters were the Social Democracy Party of Romania voters. 19.9 percent from the “no” voters were Greater Romania Party voters.

⁹ PDSR party is the actual Social Democrat Party (further – PSD).

5. *Number of household members*

In category of households with six members there were significantly more “no” voters (VRA 1.9) and significantly less “yes” (VRA -1.9) voters than in other categories

6. *Ethnicity*

In the category of ethnic Romanians voters there were significantly more “no” voters (VRA=1.9) than in other categories. Among Hungarians there were more “yes” voters than in other categories (VRA 2,5).

7. *Income per household member*

In the category of persons belonging to households with an income less than 250,000 lei per capita (in 1999), there were significantly more “no” voters (VRA=3.1) than in other categories.

Table 2 summarises these findings.

TABLE 2: The social characteristics of the population perceiving EU integration as not useful (May 1999)

More likely to say that EU integration is not useful	Significance
1. Political appurtenance: mostly sustainers of left parties (PDSR) & extreme left parties (PRM) and leaders (Ion Iliescu & Vadim Tudor)	Sig. 0.00; p=0.99
2. Age: mostly persons over 65 years	p=0.95
3. Education: mostly people with a lower level of education (elementary and secondary school)	p=0.99; p=0.95
4. Occupation: mostly retired people and housewives	p=0,95; p=0,95
5. Household: mostly people belonging to households with more than 6 members	p=0.95
6. Ethnicity: mostly Romanians rather than Hungarians	p=0.95
7. Income per household member: mostly people belonging to households in which the income per capita is lower than 250,000 Lei	p=0.95

Source: Romanian Public Opinion Barometers

From May 2001 to November 2002 we can find more questions dedicated to the topic of European integration in the Public Opinion Barometers questionnaires. However, the questions regarding the EU integration process in the 2001 and 2002 barometers differ from the question included in the previous barometers (1999, 2000). Therefore it is impossible to obtain a clear image of the perceptions of European integration over these four years. For descriptive purposes, we can concatenate the answers to the questions in the 2001 and 2002 barometers to the previous ones. The question sounded like this:

“If next Sunday a referendum regarding the accession of Romania to the European Union took place, would you vote for accession or against?” (The answers to choose: 1 – I would vote for accession, 2 – I would vote against accession, 3 – I wouldn’t participate, 4 – Don’t Know / Not yet decided, 5 – Don’t want to answer). The results are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Variation in opinion favouring / not favouring Romania’s membership in the EU (percentages)

Month /Year	Opinion	Vote for	Vote contra	Won’t participate	Don’t know	No response
May-01		76.97	4.33	7.42	7.99	3.28
Nov-01		76.35	3.65	9.09	9.86	1.06
May-02		75.99	3.53	10.31	9.40	0.77
Nov-02		78.01	4.37	7.00	9.68	0.94

Source: Romanian Public Opinion Barometers

Graph 1 presents the aggregated data of the answers to the questions included in the 2001–2002 Public Opinion Barometers, the answers to the questions included in 1999–2000¹⁰ Public Opinion Barometers, and the responses to May’s 2003 Eurobarometer 59.1¹¹. The image obtained can be considered somehow characterising the evolution of opinions favouring / not favouring EU accession for Romania.

No comments on the percentage rates could be suggested because I have illustrated answers to slightly different questions in each of the three segments of the diagram (Q1, Q2, Q3). Anyway, we should note that on 1 December 2000, the European Ministers’ Council of Justice and Internal Affairs announced that the Romanian citizens would be able to travel to the Schengen space without visas. We should also note the change of the ruling party (and the change of the president of the PDSR in January 2001¹²) associated with a shift in the political agenda of its leaders towards discourse on EU membership¹³: “the tendency of the PSD is to orientate the internal political life to-

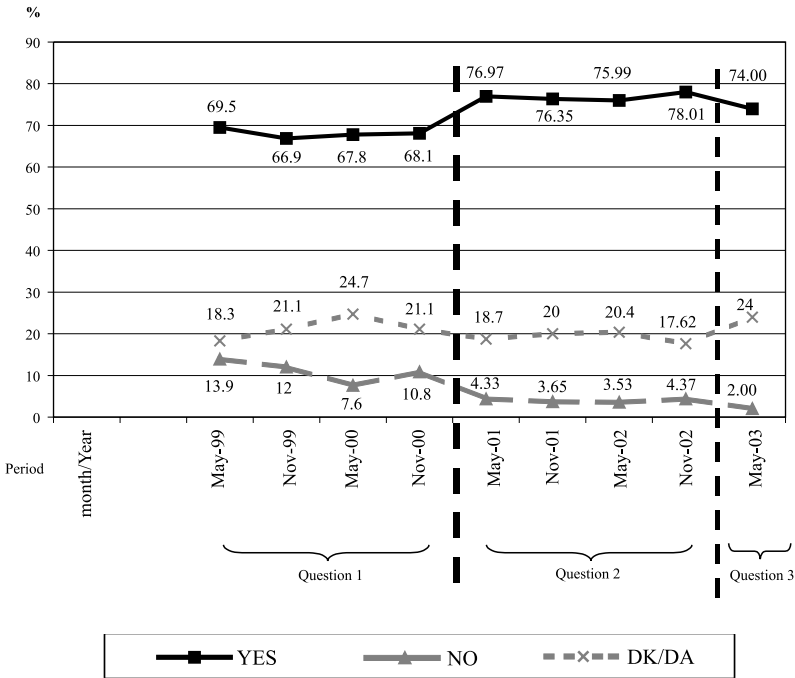
¹⁰ See Table 1.

¹¹ The answers to the following question: “Membership in the EU would be... a good thing/ a bad thing” included in Eurobarometer 59 (EB59 – CC-EB2003) – Comparative High-light Report, June 2003. P. 3.

¹² Adrian Năstase (the Prime Minister) became the leader of PDSR and the party’s name was changed to PSD. Adrian Năstase appeared to the public as a younger, reformist leader compared to Ion Iliescu, who was the leader of a reformed communist party.

¹³ I would say that the former government was a “pro NATO discourse” government and the current government is a “pro EU discourse” government. This is probably due more to historical conditions than to traditional political orientation – the PDSR, currently the PSD – the Social Democratic Party – is known as being the “child” of the party of the reformed communist leaders.

GRAPH 1. Opinions favouring / not favouring Romania's integration in EU between 1999 and 2003



Source: Romanian Public Opinion Barometers

wards the external stake of the governing. EU and NATO integration have become central poles on the political agenda” (Pârvulescu 2003: 10).

According to Manuela Stănculescu (2002: 21) the profile of the 4 percent of people who were against joining EU in November 2002 was qualified workers, technicians and unemployed people, those with education of ten classes or vocational school, 40–54-year-old men, voters for the extreme left, and people from the southern regions of the country (Muntenia and Oltenia).

The social representation of the EU

Social representation is considered a group’s shared “image” of a social reality. I have tried to see in the following analysis if there is such an image vis-à-vis the European Union in the group of Romanian citizens. In May 2001 Public Opinion Barometer asked the following question: “When you think of the European Union, what is the first thing you have in mind?”

The data shows that 20.31 percent of respondents state that they ‘don’t associate the EU with anything’ and 20.07 percent ‘don’t know how to answer’, while

1.18 percent did not respond. So a total of 41.45 percent of the population says nothing about EU. Who are these people? We have tried to obtain a profile of them¹⁴ considering the following categories: ethnicity, sex, age, education, residential status, number of household members, occupation, electoral vote, and income. The image obtained (for a $p \geq 0.95$) is presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Romanian citizens groups who express no opinion of EU

People who don't make associations	People who don't know what association to make
	More likely Roma / Gypsies (VRA 2.7)
More likely women then men (VRA 3.1)	More likely women then men (VRA 7.6) More likely people over 65 years of age (VRA 6.8) More likely people living in a rural area (VRA 10.0)
More likely people with a secondary school education (VRA 2.7)	More likely with only primary (VRA 9.7) or secondary school education (VRA 4.2)
More likely one-person households (VRA 2.6)	More likely one-person households (VRA 3.9) and households over six people (VRA 5.1)
More likely housewives (VRA 2.7)	Retired persons (VRA 7.8), housewives (VRA 2.9), and people working their own land (VRA 4.0) PDSR's voters (VRA 5.3) and I. Iliescu's voters (VRA 7.0)
More likely persons with no income (VRA 3.5)	More likely persons earning maximum 1 million Lei (VRA 6.4)

Source: Romanian Public Opinion Barometer, May 2001.

However, 58.55 percent of the population make various positive associations which can be grouped into four main categories:

1. The first category of associations refers to the living conditions in the EU: the overwhelming majority of the population refer to a better life or wealth.
2. The second category of associations refers to the process of Romania's integration in the EU.
3. The third category refers to civil rights: freedom of movement.
4. The fourth category of associations is related with organisational descriptions of what the EU is.

¹⁴ Applying the Adjusted residuals value tests.

Conclusion

The social characteristics of the population who did not support EU integration (both in 1999 and 2002) are rather similar to the social characteristics of the traditional supporters of the left party (see Pârvulescu 2003) in post communist Romania: people with a low level of education, elderly people, people with low income, retired people.

In May 2001 a significant percentage of the Romanian population (41.45 percent) was not able to make any associations about the European Union. This may suggest that they have no image about what the European Union is. In addition to this, the range of associations made by the rest of the population (58.55 percent) was not very wide and the image was not very clear.

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RUMUNAI IR EUROPOS INTEGRACIJOS IDĖJA. RUMUNIJOS VIEŠOSIOS NUOMONĖS APKLAUSŲ DUOMENŲ ANALIZĖ

Horatiu Rusu

LUCIAN BLAGA UNIVERSITETAS, SIBIU, RUMUNIJA

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