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THE CHALLENGES OF EUROSCPETICISM IN CROATIA: TEN YEARS AFTER EU ACCESSION

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Abstract: *This article addresses the issue of Euroscepticism in Croatia after its 2013 EU accession. It starts with a theoretical section that explores the phenomenon of Euroscepticism and particularly examines the insufficient agreement between elites and citizens on the issue of European integration. The central section starts with the analysis of the general lack of support for the EU integration in the form of regime and exit scepticism in the opinion polls. Subsequently, the general party-based Euroscepticism is analysed primarily through the lens of the 2019 European Parliament election campaign in Croatia which emphasized profound divisions between its mainstream and populist parties. Separate section of the article is dedicated to the analysis of elite and public Euroscepticism towards specific EU policies: Eurozone membership, enlargement policy, common security and defence policy as well as the rule of law. The analysis of the public opinion in all sections of the article relies mostly on standard Eurobarometer reports and compares the results for Croatia with the EU average. The article shows that after Croatia's EU accession, public sentiment about the EU has not significantly changed, with opinion polls still showing a high degree of Euroscepticism on selected topics. Simultaneously, there is an increase of party-based Euroscepticism.*

Keywords: European integration, Euroscepticism, public opinion, political parties, populism

1. Introduction

Croatia is the EU's newest Member State, having joined on 1 July 2013 after more than six years of negotiations. Croatia's EU accession process was characterised by a consensus among all major political parties on the strategic importance of EU membership. The citizens, however, were less enthusiastic about EU membership throughout the accession period, as seen

in the public opinion polls held at the time. In 2010, one year prior to the conclusion of accession negotiations, only 27% of respondents in Croatia considered that membership in the EU would be a good thing for their country, while 29% said that it would be a bad thing and 41% thought that it would be 'neither good nor bad'. Similarly, 46% of respondents in Croatia thought that their country would not benefit from joining the EU, while 39% took the opposite view (Eurobarometer 2010, p. 35).

The results of the EU membership referendum held in 2012 pointed towards polarisation between the elites and citizens. The referendum had a low turnout, 43.5% of the electorate, and of those who voted, 66.3% voted for and 33.1% voted against (DIP 2012). Such results were in contrast to the advice offered by almost all political parties, which overwhelmingly expressed their unreserved support for EU membership and exhorted the electorate to vote for accession.

The polarisation between elites and citizens on EU membership has continued nearly a decade after Croatia's accession. This article aims to delve deeper into the reasons behind this divergence of opinion through the analysis of several important EU-related discussions held in Croatia since 2013. In so doing, the article will present the broader national context within which the debates were undertaken. The paper argues that in order to contain and eventually reduce the present level of Euroscepticism among the public, the elites in Croatia need to engage in open and frank discussions with citizens, and to become more responsive to their EU-related concerns.

The methodology of this paper is based primarily on the analysis of secondary sources: public opinion polls, academic articles and media sources. To examine the public perception of the EU during the past decade we rely mostly on standard Eurobarometer surveys, which offer comprehensive coverage of the period since Croatia's EU accession. In conceptual terms, we adopt the distinction previously used by De Vries (2018, p. 44) that EU attitudes are constructed along two principal dimensions: the first refers to institutions and the second concerns the policy dimension.

Our aim is to verify whether public and party-based Euroscepticism has decreased since EU accession. In that context, the primary research question is: What is the level of EU-related consensus within and among elites and citizens in Croatia after EU accession? The starting hypothesis is that the level of consensus is highly dependent on the topic being discussed, and

that greater levels of polarisation could be expected on issues that have a direct impact on the people's economic and social situation.

The article starts with a theoretical section that explores the insufficient agreement between elites and citizens on the issue of European integration. The central section of the article firstly examines the general lack of support for the EU integration, i.e., the citizens' negative perceptions of principal EU and national institutions and their exit scepticism or degree of agreement with the idea of leaving the EU. Party-based Euroscepticism is also examined here primarily through the lens of the 2019 European Parliament election campaign in Croatia. The issue-specific expressions of Euroscepticism are subsequently addressed through an analysis of the opposition of Croatian public opinion to specific EU policies. These concern Eurozone membership, the EU's enlargement policy, its common security and defence policy, and the implementation of the EU's rule of law principles at the national level. The article ends with a section that presents conclusions and some recommendations.

1. Theoretical background

European elites tend to display varying levels of support for European integration, i.e., the EU institutions, their policies or goals. However, they are generally stronger supporters of the EU than the population (Best 2012). The elites are not a homogenous group. For the European political elites, support for the EU is founded on the fact that it offers opportunities to accomplish political goals that cannot be pursued at the national level. Furthermore, the EU has created many new political posts and career paths within its institutions (Haller 2008, p. 76). The economic elites were strong advocates of EU integration from its inception due to the dominance of neo-liberal economic theories within this process (ibid., p. 78). Finally, the bureaucratic elites represent a significant driving force behind EU integration, and suffice it to say that EU officials are among the most privileged public servants in the world (ibid., p. 83).

Despite their differences, individual members of elite groups often adjust the extent of their support for EU integration according to the level of support shown by the other national elites. It is therefore unsurprising that perceptions of the EU are more closely aligned among members of the three groups of elites than they are with those of the citizens (Müller et al. 2012).

The level of support for EU integration among elites also depends on the social and political context within each country (Best 2012). According to Max Haller, while in Sweden the EU is commonly perceived as a necessary evil, in Germany it is viewed as a substitute for a national identity. Whereas the French tend to view it as a means to gain global influence, in the new post-communist Member States, EU integration is commonly understood as an end in itself (2008, p. 87).

In policy areas that take a long-term perspective and deal with transnational issues, elites tend to be pro-European (Real Dato et al. 2012). However, typically, mainstream parties in Europe have tended to focus more on traditional left-right dimensions rather than on EU-related polemics. In contrast, EU politicisation is frequently driven by smaller Eurosceptic parties, especially from the radical right (Grande-Hunter 2016). Categorical federalists and radical Eurosceptics used to be uncommon, with the vast majority of elites being weak advocates or weak opponents of European integration (Best 2012). Today, while this broad categorisation still applies, the picture is changing with an overall increase in political polarisation (Casal Bértoa-Rama 2021).

Pro-Europeanism is generally stronger among the elites than among the general population, since there is a sizeable minority of citizens that reject the idea that European integration is beneficial for their respective countries (Mattila-Raunio 2012). The root of the problem is that the EU was designed as a protected sphere of policymaking, free from direct democratic pressures (Hix 2008, p. 3). For this reason, some scholars qualify it as an elitist or Schumpeterian model of democracy, characterised by the strong dominance of politicians and bureaucrats, with only a minor role for the citizens (Pausch 2014). The polarisation of attitudes between elites and citizens has intensified over the last 30 years. Political parties have become less representative and have drifted further away from citizens at the EU scale (Mattila-Raunio 2012). On the one hand, citizens are becoming more educated about and critical of this process, while on the other, the EU has increasingly taken on competencies from the national states (Haller 2008, p. 89).

Citizens are more polarised than parties on a range of issues across EU Member States. Higher income earners tend to benefit from EU integration as it creates increased investment

opportunities, while lower income earners are subject to diminishing levels of socio-economic support brought about by increased capital liberalisation. Similarly, younger Europeans seem to be more pro-European as they are more cosmopolitan, mobile and flexible (Loveless-Rohrschneider 2011, p. 10). Still, there are obvious differences between citizens and elites on particular topics. For example, while elites are more pro-integrationist on issues such as foreign policy or the EU army, the general population is often more pro-integrationist about taxation and social security systems (Müller et al. 2012). Overall, it seems that citizens who are less knowledgeable about the EU tend to be more closely aligned to their preferred party's positions on EU-related topics, compared to those that have a more in-depth understanding of the issues (Goldberg et al. 2020, p. 316).

This division between elites and citizens is problematic for the EU's legitimacy. As with any political system, if the public supports it, endorses its institutions, and evaluates its performance positively, the system is considered robust. If the public rejects the core principles of a political system and is unhappy with its outcomes, the system is in a dire condition (Loveless-Rohrschneider 2011, p. 7). The Treaty of Lisbon (2009) represented a positive step towards addressing the polarisation between elites and citizens by attempting to improve the democratic accountability and effectiveness of many of the EU institutions.

Nevertheless, over the past decade, the EU's crisis of legitimacy has arguably deepened. Faced with financial, migration and health crises, as well as the Russian military aggression on Ukraine, EU decision-making has become even more technocratic (Behr 2021). To reverse this process, some authors argue that national conversation on the EU should be strengthened to encourage a process of citizen socialisation, i.e., the internalisation of norms within the new political reality of supranational EU governance (Loveless-Rohrschneider 2011, p. 20). Moreover, some have suggested that EU decision-making will need to become increasingly responsive to the needs and concerns of citizens (Schmidt 2016). In practical terms, this means that some responsibility for policies will probably have to be decentralised to the national level, without jeopardising EU-level coordination.

When discussing support for European integration, it is crucial to address the meaning and implications of the term "Euroscepticism". This term was coined by the British media in the 1980s and has since been adopted and widely used by many scholars and commentators (Spiering

2004). The most widely known effort in defining Euroscepticism has been given by Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak. These authors recognise two kinds of Euroscepticism, 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism. The former implies outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration and opposition to one's country joining or remaining a member of the EU. The later, by contrast, involves contingent or qualified opposition to European integration. It may take the form of 'policy' Euroscepticism or 'national-interest' Euroscepticism, although these often overlap (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004).

More recently, Catherine De Vries (2018) introduced a novel typology of EU support and scepticism that intends to capture public opinion in its full complexity. De Vries contends that public opinion can be divided into four types: Exit Scepticism, Regime Scepticism, Policy Scepticism and Loyal Support. Exit sceptics oppose the EU because they view that a more viable alternative political system exists, namely their nation state. The opposite type, loyal supporters, more positively evaluates EU policy and regimes compared to the national ones. Regime and policy sceptics sit in between these two opposites. On one hand, regime sceptics evaluate the ways procedures operate at the EU level as less positive compared to the alternative of their country being outside of the EU. However, they feel that EU membership entails significant policy benefits. On the other hand, policy sceptics are sceptical of policies at the EU level but supportive of the regime.

For De Vries the EU support and scepticism are a result of a comparison between two sets of evaluations, between how people evaluate the perceived benefits of their country's EU membership vs. the perceived benefits associated with their country being outside the EU. Looking at Euroscepticism from this perspective, she concludes that in countries with high unemployment and low quality of government, people tend to be less Eurosceptic because they are unsure about the ability of their nation state to deliver public goods and services if it were to exit the EU (De Vries 2018, pp. 36-38).

2. General lack of support for EU integration

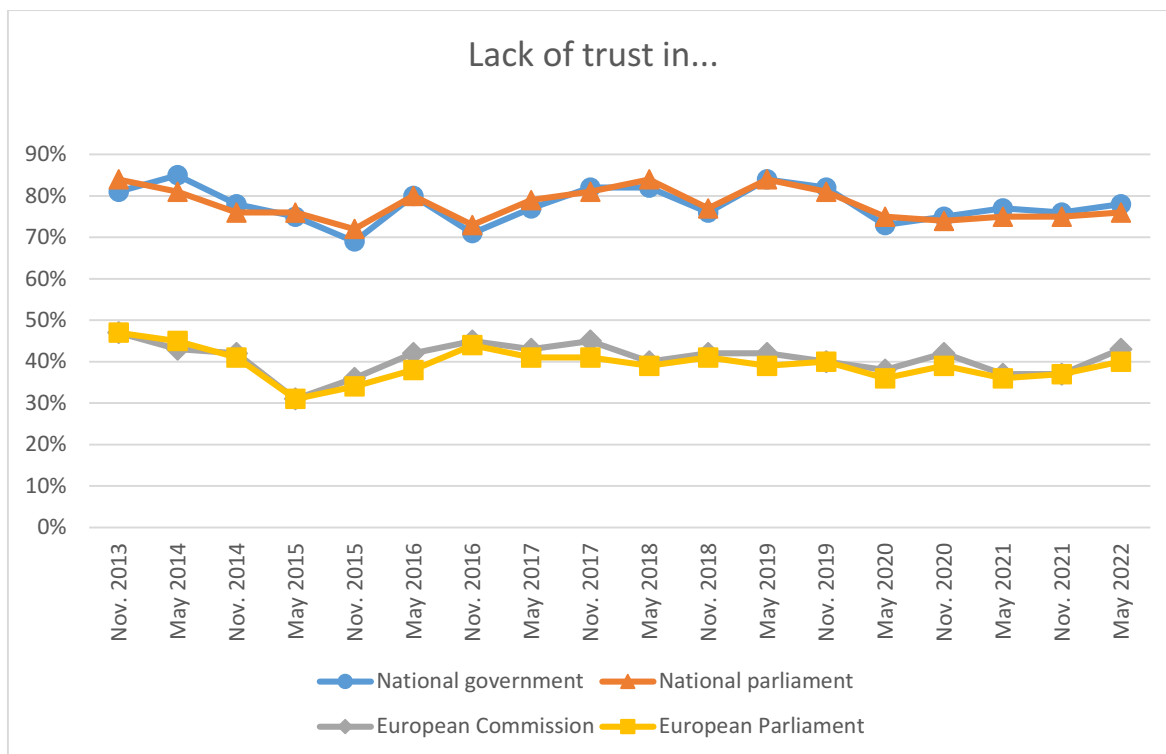
2.1. Regime and exit scepticism

The exploration of public opinion in Croatia since its EU accession demonstrates a sharp distinction between the level of trust expressed towards the main national and EU institutions. Throughout the past decade, the lack of trust in the national institutions has always greatly surpassed that expressed towards EU institutions. Generally, it can be stated that the lack of trust in the national institutions was twice as high as that expressed towards the EU institutions (see Figure 1). A comparison with the EU average shows that while the lack of trust in EU institutions in Croatia is similar to the EU average, EU citizens at large show much lower distrust (for some 20%) of their national institutions (see Figure 2).

When we evaluate the two sets of attitudes together, it is also notable that from the year 2016 onwards, EU citizens started to express slightly more trust towards both their national and EU institutions. The same general trend however cannot be as clearly observed in Croatia, where greater fluctuations in the level of trust are present. The increase in the level of trust among EU citizens could possibly be attributed to the end of the recession caused by the 2008 financial crisis, which began to be visible in around 2016. The same economic reality also affected Croatia, though recovery in the country was particularly slow due to severe effects of the financial crisis, which brought negative growth trends throughout the 2009–2014 period (Samardžija et al. 2017, p. 32).

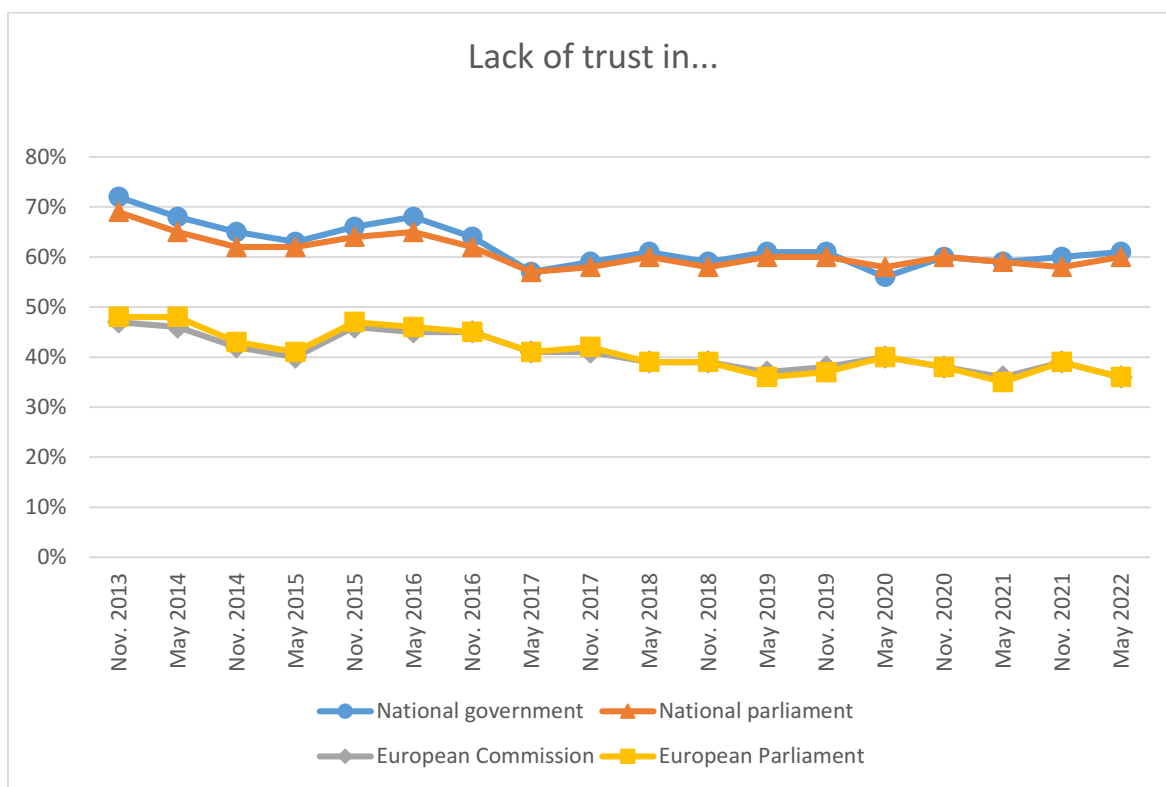
As a new EU Member State, Croatia has immensely profited from EU funds but was also exposed to certain negative side effects of EU membership. Namely, the opening of the European labour market to Croatian citizens has led to a mass emigration of a sizeable proportion of the labour force (around 10%), leading some to question the apparent benefits of EU membership (Butković et al. 2022, p. 107). A noticeable increase in trust in 2020 could likely be attributed to the efficient response to the health and economic challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1: Regime scepticism in Croatia (2013–2022)



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 2013–2022. All data downloaded from the Eurobarometer portal

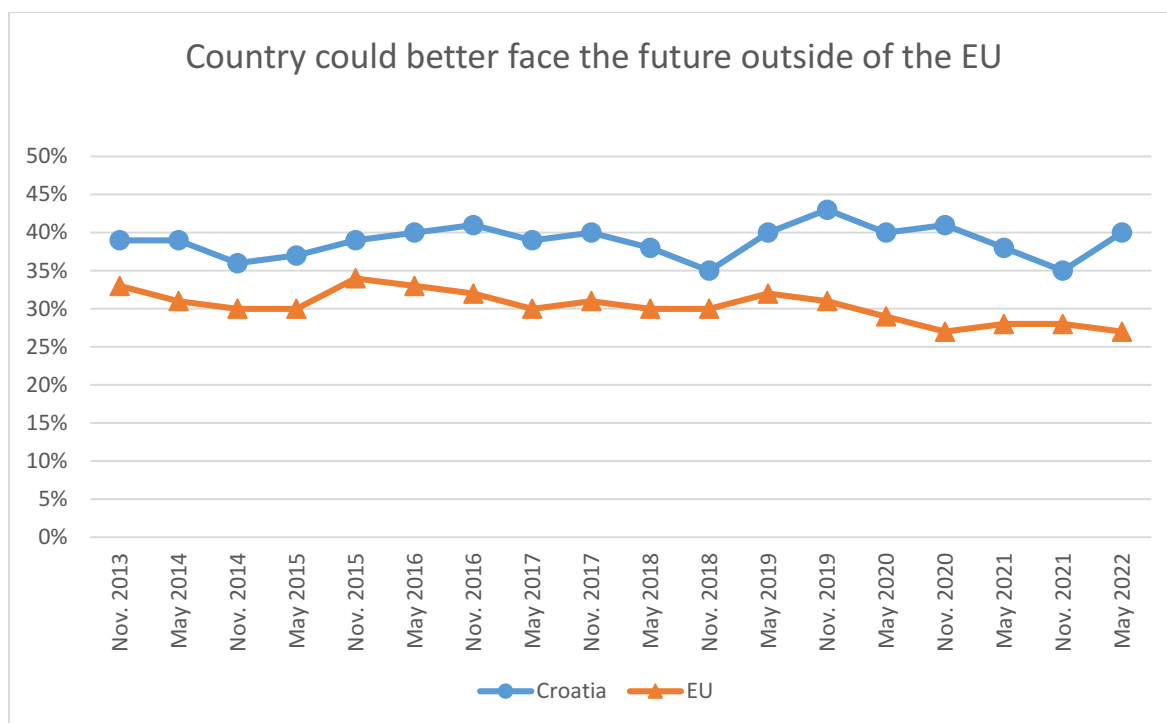
Figure 2: Regime scepticism in the EU (2013–2022)



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 2013–2022. All data downloaded from the Eurobarometer portal

Exit scepticism can be considered an indicator of hard Euroscepticism among the general public. In Figure 3, this kind of scepticism is presented as the share of citizens that believe their country could better face the future outside of the EU. The comparative data show that throughout past decade, the percentage of Croats who agreed with this claim has generally been around 40%, or some 10% above the EU average. The slight trend of declining support for exiting the EU, observable in the EU since 2018, cannot be as clearly established in Croatia. Nevertheless, support for exiting the EU remains a minority position in the country. The number of indecisive responses to that question tends to be minor while over 50% of Croats consistently oppose it.

Figure 3: Exit scepticism in Croatia and the EU (2013–2022)



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 2013–2022. All data downloaded from the Eurobarometer portal

2.2. Party politics

The fact that Croatia's EU accession process was characterised by a consensus among all the major political parties on the strategic importance of EU membership fits into the broader picture of a post-1989 Europe, where a pro-European stance was a general rule that determined the behaviour of legitimate political actors (Neumayer 2009, p. 184). After joining the EU, the Eurosceptic discourse within the two major mainstream parties, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), became more visible, especially when these parties were in the opposition, though in general it was confined to isolated cases and rare occasions (Arapović, 2020). Eurosceptic arguments became more common within protest parties located on the fringes of the political spectrum, which used it as an element of wider discourse against the existing system (see Grande-Hunter 2016; Pirro and Taggart 2018).

Ever since Croatia's EU accession at the national level two protest parties strongly established themselves: the Bridge (Most) and the Human Shield (Živi zid). It is common to place the Bridge party to the right of the political centre and the Human Shield party to the left, although leaders of the latter often claim that they cannot be placed on either side. Both of these parties could be considered populist in accordance with the definition of Cas Mudde, for whom populism represents an ideology that considers society to be separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' (2004, p. 543). One prominent analysis of the activities of these two parties differentiates between the kind of populism they represent. It argues that the Bridge party represents a milder variant of populism since its anti-elitism is targeted only towards the political elites that were or are in power. The populism of the Human Shield party is considered to be of a stronger kind since it is critical of all political elites (Grbeša and Šalaj 2018, p. 22). This distinction is logical because the Bridge party, unlike the Human Shield party, participated as the junior partner in two short-lived HDZ led governments in the period 2016–2017.

The Euroscepticism of the Bridge and Human Shield parties is not entirely consistent, but rather appears in waves as it intensifies in the run-up to the elections (see Grbeša and Šalaj 2018; Arapović, 2020). It was particularly strong during the 2019 European Parliament elections. At that time, the president of the Bridge Party Božo Petrov stated that bureaucrats in Brussels want to turn the EU into a superstate to the detriment of national identities. He also pointed out that if elected, their MEPs would not be loyal to European political families but instead the 'Croatian interest' as defined in their programme (Petrov 2019). The political secretary of the Bridge party, Nikola Grmoja, was even more resolute, "We don't want new joint institutions that should replace national institutions, we don't want deeper political integration, we don't want European taxes, or a European army, or a European federation in which the Brussels bureaucracy would shape Croatia's destiny. We want a Europe of nations, not a European nation!" (Tokić 2019).

The Human Shield party stated in its programme for the 2019 European Parliament elections that it is not, in principle, against the EU as a community of equal states and peoples that develop democracy and human rights, but that such an image of the EU seems utopian. The EU for them represents a project of neo-feudalisation and totalitarianisation of relations in

society. They accuse the EU of not working for the benefit of the Croatian population, but of only being interested in the resources and wealth of the Croatian territory (Arapović 2020). The presented rhetoric of the Human Shield party is sharper than that of the Bridge party, and could even be positioned at the border between soft and hard Euroscepticism. However, not even the Human Shield party has explicitly stated that it advocates Croatia's exit from the EU.

At the 2019 European Parliament elections, the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the strongest opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP) each won four of a total of 12 seats allocated to Croatia. One additional seat was won by the liberal Amsterdam Coalition. The Eurosceptics won a total of three seats: one by the Human Shield party, one by the far-right Sovereignist Coalition, and one by the independent candidate Mislav Kolakušić. It should however be underlined that with the possible exception of the borderline case of the Human Shield party, all other parties adopted a soft Eurosceptic stance, avoiding straightforward rejection of European integration. In other words, they promised their supporters that as critical insiders they would "change the EU from within".

In terms of percentages, things at first appeared grim for pro-European parties because Eurosceptic parties and candidates won 36% of the popular vote (European Parliament 2019). This was much higher than the usual result of Croatian Eurosceptic parties at the national elections, where they hardly ever surpass 20% of the total vote (see SEC 2023). Nevertheless, it should here be added that the phenomenon of stronger voting for the Eurosceptic parties in the European elections compared to the national elections is not a Croatian specificity, but is observable everywhere. Some authors explain this by the fact that since the European elections are generally perceived as second-class elections of a lesser political importance, voters are more inclined to express their frustration with the mainstream parties (see Freire and Santana-Pereira 2015).

The problem of Croatian Eurosceptic parties at the 2019 European Parliament elections was their fragmentation, since many of these parties and candidates came close but failed to cross the 5% electoral threshold (European Parliament 2019). Furthermore, the low turnout in these elections of only 29.9% compared to the EU average of 50.6% shows that despite their strong rhetoric, the Croatian Eurosceptic parties ultimately failed to mobilise a significant portion of their electorate (ibid.). A large number of citizens who express Eurosceptic views in opinion

polls decided to stay at home, confirming widespread distrust of the political parties, both the mainstream and protest ones.

3. Policy based scepticism

3.1. Eurozone membership

Croatia is the newest newcomer to the Eurozone, joining on 1 January 2023. The journey towards that goal started in 2017 when the centre-right HDZ government, led by Prime Minister Plenković, concluded that Croatia was ready to start the process to adopt the euro. In April 2018, the government, in cooperation with the Croatian National Bank, published their strategy for the adoption of the euro as Croatia's national currency, underlining that the benefits for Croatia of introducing the euro outweighed the costs. It argued that adopting the euro would eliminate foreign exchange rate risks, reduce interest rates and transaction costs, and support investments (VRH 2018).

The 2017–2023 period has been marked by discussions among Croatian economic experts on the potential benefits and negative impacts of joining the Eurozone. Most experts supported the government's programme, noting that in small, open and integrated economies with a labour force that is mobile across borders, monetary union is the logical final stage of integration (Šonje 2019). Furthermore, they argued that the euro in Croatia is already omnipresent because most citizens save in euro and most remittances sent from abroad are also in that currency (Žigman 2018, p. 36).

Critics of the government programme argued that the Croatian economy is not structurally ready to adopt the euro. The problems, in their view, lie in the lack of structural reforms, low labour productivity growth, and the lack of structural convergence that would make the Croatian economy more aligned to those in the Eurozone (Vizek 2021). They acknowledged that according to the 2013 Treaty of Accession, Croatia was required to introduce the euro once it fulfils the convergence criteria. They noted, however, that Croatia could have easily delayed adopting the euro given that other non-Eurozone Members States deliberately fail to fulfil their convergence criteria so as to not be required to start this process (Hadulka 2019).

Croatian industry leaders and banking associations supported the euro project. They believe that Eurozone membership will lead to improved economic policies and increased institutional reforms, which will outweigh any potential costs relating to the loss of monetary sovereignty (Šonje 2019). The trade unions never formed a united position on this issue. However, the leadership of MATICA, one of three representative trade union federations, was very critical of the move towards euro adoption. They argued that the euro is potentially a suitable instrument in economically prosperous times, but that it is far from optimal in times of crisis when not being able to devalue the currency leads to wage reductions and job losses (NSZVO 2022).

In 2019, the largest opposition party, centre-left SDP, expressed their concerns about the rapid introduction of the euro. However, smaller parties have voiced much stronger opposition in the national parliament. On the right of the political spectrum, parties such as the Homeland movement, the Sovereignists coalition and the Bridge party have expressed dissent, while on the left, this has been voiced primarily by the We Can party (Raos 2021). This situation reaffirms the notion that EU politicisation is frequently driven by smaller Eurosceptic parties from the radical right (see Grande and Hunter 2016). Nevertheless, over time, criticism of the Croatian government on this issue has lost some of its momentum as several MPs from left-leaning opposition parties have started to actively support the euro adoption process (Zebić 2021).

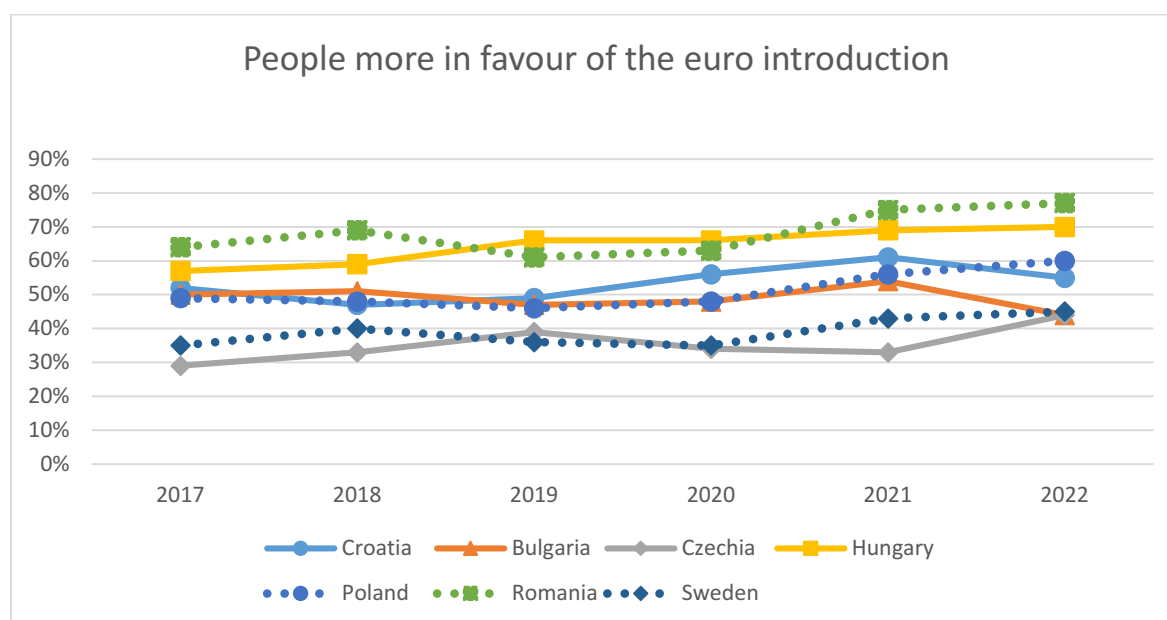
The results of Eurobarometer reports between 2017 to 2022 on introducing the euro show that Croatian public opinion has gradually shifted in favour of the process, although in the year prior to introduction, support dropped significantly to only 55% for and 43% against, returning very close to 2017 levels, when 52% Croatian citizens were in favour of adoption and 43% were against (see Figure 4).

According to a 2022 Eurobarometer report, only 37% Croatian citizens polled believed that the country was ready to introduce the euro, whereas 58% expressed reservations (Eurobarometer 2022). An even worse result from perspective of the government policy, was obtained on the question of when the euro should be introduced. Only 25% answered 'as soon as possible', 34% opted for 'after some time', while 39% replied with 'as late as possible' or 'never'. Sharp polarisation of public opinion was seen in the question of whether Croatia would

lose control over its economic policy with the euro as its national currency: 49% agreed with that statement and 47% opposed it.

One of the major issues throughout the process of euro introduction was price stability. The government claimed that prices would not rise, but the public was largely sceptical. The 2022 Eurobarometer report clearly showed this, with 81% of respondents saying that ‘prices will be increased’, 16% replying that ‘prices will be stable’ and 1% believing that ‘prices will be reduced’. However, it seems that these fears were exaggerated since a preliminary analysis of the European Central Bank and Croatian National Bank issued in March 2023 concluded that the impact of the introduction of the euro on consumer prices in Croatia has been in accordance with the experiences of other countries that have already introduced the euro (Falagiarda et al. 2023).

Figure 4: Public support for the introduction of the euro in countries that have not yet entered the Eurozone (2017–2022)



Source: Compiled by author using Eurobarometer result on the introduction of the euro 2017–2022

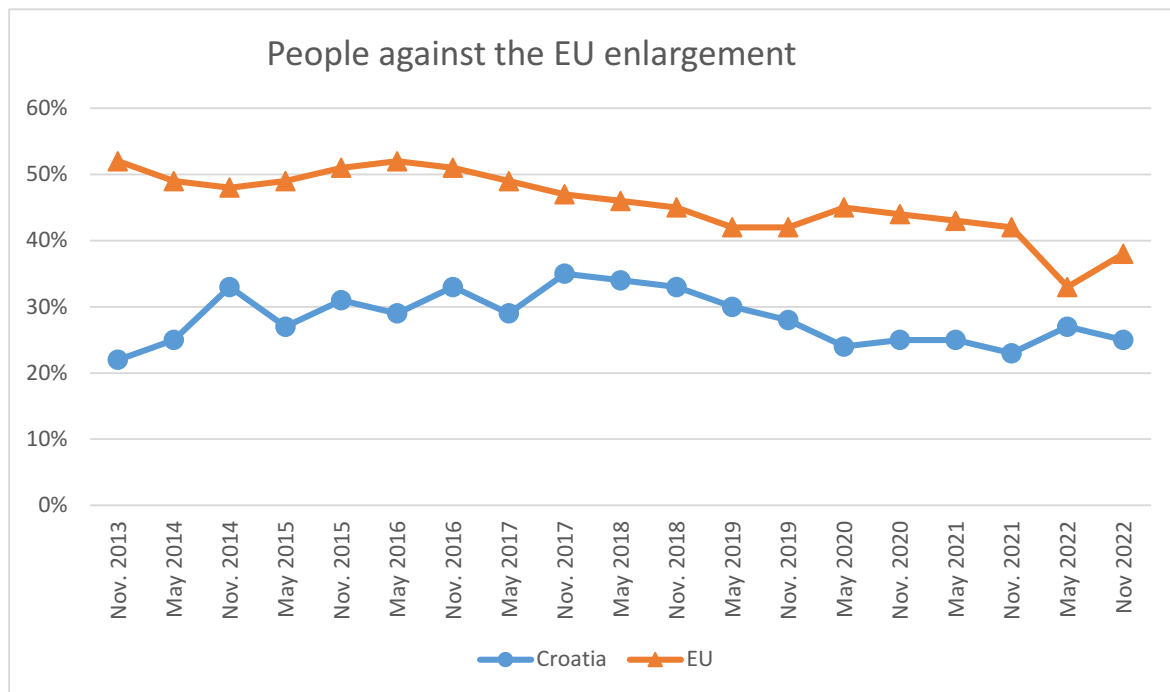
From the outset, the government argued that a referendum on the euro was not needed because this issue was settled in 2012 with the referendum on EU membership. To challenge this

view, the Sovereigntist coalition attempted to collect enough signatures to trigger a euro referendum in late 2021. After two weeks, they collected over 90% of the required number (334,582), however, they ultimately failed to assemble enough signatures. Part of the problem was that other parties on the right did not support this initiative (Thomas 2021). This shows that opponents of the fast-track Eurozone route were unable to generate the synergy needed for postponement of this government programme.

3.2. Enlargement vs. common security and defence

Croatian governments have always viewed the continuation of the EU enlargement as an important factor for stabilising the Western Balkan region (Butković and Samardžija 2014). The reasons for the support for the EU enlargement policy are both economic and political, because with three of the Western Balkan countries, Croatia has the longest external land border of any EU member state. If one were to select the topic that the 2020 Croatian Presidency of the EU Council pledged the most, this is definitely further enlargement in the Western Balkans. Back then, the EU Council reached an agreement on the new enlargement methodology, allowing for the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia.

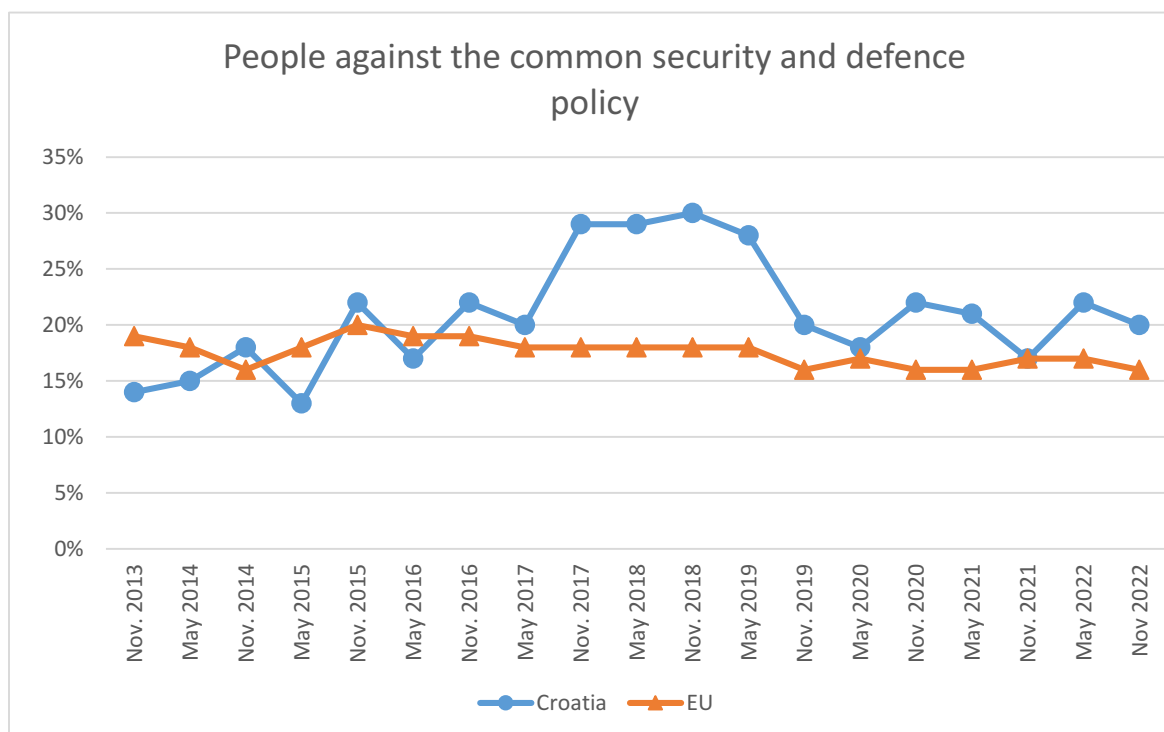
Figure 5: Opposition to further EU enlargement (2013–2022)



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 2013–2022. All data downloaded from the Eurobarometer portal.

Croatian support for the continuation of enlargement is not just an issue driven by its political and economic elites. The results of the Eurobarometer surveys conducted over the last decade show that within the EU, Croatian citizens are among most enthusiastic supporters of further EU enlargement (see Figure 5). Although public opposition to enlargement varied over the years, in Croatia it clearly represents a minority position with an average of 30% of citizens taking such views. Moreover, as shown in Figure 5, since 2019 there has been a clear trend of further decline in such opposition. All this stands in clear contrast to the EU average where the percentage of people opposing EU enlargement has been much higher. Prior to 2017, such opposition was around 50%. Since then, the trend has shifted and opposition is weakening although it remains higher than in Croatia.

Figure 6: Opposition to the common security and defence policy (2013–2022)



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 2013–2022. All data downloaded from the Eurobarometer portal.

Since 2008, Croatia has been a member of the NATO alliance and since its EU accession, it participates in developing the common security and defence policy. As shown in Figure 6, public opposition to the common security and defence policy revolves around the EU average of about 20%. However, increased public opposition became noticeable in the 2017–2019 period, which corresponds with the launching of the idea of a European army by French President Emmanuel Macron. The public in Croatia is sensitive to the topic of the Croatian Army and its possible transformations, since in the 1990s Croatia gained its independence through a defensive war. Negative public sentiments around the idea of launching a European army were used during the 2019 European Parliament elections by the protest parties in order to rally support (see Tokić 2019; Arapović 2020).

Despite differences concerning enlargement and the common security and defence policy, it is common in both cases that critical views were held by a relatively small number of

Croatian citizens. This stands in contrast to the opposition towards a common currency where the public opinion was much more divided.

3.3. Rule of law

Although at first glance it may seem that implementation of the rule of law is not closely related to EU membership, that impression is incorrect. This is particularly true in the case of Croatia which negotiated these issues under a separate chapter (Chapter 23 “Judiciary and Fundamental Rights”) which as such did not exist in the previous enlargement rounds. The closing of Chapter 23 was associated with the implementation of numerous reforms that were generally difficult to negotiate (Goldner Lang 2012). These reforms were closely followed by the media and civil society, which raised the awareness of the general public that implementation of reforms in this area represents one of the most important preconditions for joining the EU.

According to the European Commission (2021), the EU accession of Croatia created a solid legal framework for securing the rule of law, though problems remain with its implementation. Also, more work remains to be done as some laws are over-regulated while other seem insufficient. The governing politicians in Croatia never stopped claiming that in the last 20 years, the country has been making progress within the EU’s rule of law framework. The mainstream parties in the opposition criticised this standpoint, though their criticism was mostly directed at isolated issues such as individual appointments rather than at larger systemic issues. The citizens never agreed with the government’s claims (see Malenica and Jeknić 2010).

The special Eurobarometer on the perceived independence of the national justice systems in the EU, which represents an important segment of the rule of law, reveals that Croatia is situated at the very bottom (Eurobarometer 2021b). In Austria, as the best performing state, 60% of surveyed citizens believe that there is no interference or political pressure from the government on the national justice system, while in Croatia only 12% of surveyed individuals agree with that claim. Similarly, 58% of Austrians think that there is no interference with their justice system from economic or other special interest, while in Croatia only 11% of the public agrees.

Commenting results of several similar polls, a group of Croatian legal scholars concluded that the popular perception of judicial independence in Croatia is the lowest in the EU. They noted that this is a longstanding trend that has not been altered with EU membership (Bečić-Selanec et al. 2020). On the contrary, the scepticism of Croatian citizens concerning their judiciary is rising. The government for its part is trying to downplay the significance of these figures by claiming that, unlike perception, the real situation is not as problematic. Nevertheless, even if this government's claim is partly true, the figures on the perceived independence of the national justice systems seem indeed worrying (ibid.).

Much like judicial independence, the fight against corruption could be characterized as a subset of the rule of law principles. Croatia recently adopted the new ambitious Anti-Corruption Strategy 2021–2030, complemented by a three-year implementation plan. The push towards this new strategic framework was caused, among the other things, by the highly negative public perception of the government's efforts to fight corruption. Findings of the Special Eurobarometer on Corruption published in June 2020 show that 97% of Croatians surveyed said that they thought corruption was widespread in the country. At the EU level, an average of 71% agreed with that statement, while in Finland, at the very top, only 22% agreed (Eurobarometer 2020b, p. 21).

The results of these public opinion polls indicate that Croatian citizens are united in their scepticism towards national level policies conveying the European framework in the ambit of the rule of law. In other words, they are not satisfied with their government's attempts to promote the rule of law, regardless of their political orientation or whether or not they have personally benefited from European integration.

5. Conclusions

Croatia was required to make significant transformative efforts in order to join the EU. However, as in other Member States, EU accession was essentially an elite-driven process that encountered a combination of resistance and indifference from sizeable segments of the population. The article has shown that after entering the EU, public sentiment about membership

has not significantly changed, with opinion polls still showing a high degree of Euroscepticism and polarisation on selected EU-related topics.

Analysis of the general level of support for the European integration shows that in Croatia, the lack of trust in the national institutions has greatly surpassed that expressed towards the EU institutions. The same phenomenon is visible when observing the EU average results, although there this discrepancy is less pronounced. Therefore, we conclude that regime Euroscepticism in Croatia at least in part represents a reflection of a more general crisis of trust in political institutions following the 2008 financial crisis, which was particularly severe in the country.

Exit scepticism can be considered an indicator of hard Euroscepticism of the general public and is relatively high in Croatia compared to the EU average. This runs contrary to observation of De Vries (2018) that economically and institutionally underdeveloped countries tend to be less Eurosceptic. Nevertheless, support for exiting the EU remains a minority position in the country. Much like regime Euroscepticism, exit scepticisms could probably be attributed to the general loss of trust in political institutions but also to some negative economic side-effects of EU membership, such as the movement of key skills and labour towards wealthier EU countries.

The EU represents a low-salience issue for Croatian mainstream parties, although party-based Euroscepticism has increased somewhat during the past decade within mainstream parties that find themselves in the opposition. Avoiding polemics on EU issues by the mainstream parties was used by the protest populist parties such as the Bridge or Human Shield parties. These parties developed various EU critical positions as a rule during election campaigns, disclosing their Euroscepticism as part of an election strategy rather than a genuine ideological standpoint. However, this approach taken by the populist protest parties was only partly successful because at the national elections they continuously failed to gain more than 20% support. Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections in Croatia indicated comparatively higher support for the Eurosceptic parties and candidates, which is in line with the experiences in other countries. Still, due to the inability of these parties to create pre-election coalitions, their support was transferred into just three out of 12 seats assigned to Croatia in the European Parliament.

The most widespread EU policy related debate was on Eurozone membership, which started in 2017 and ended in 2023 when Croatia adopted the euro as its national currency. The national-level political and economic actors were overwhelmingly in favour of introducing the euro, while those who opposed it were unable to create a united front. Yet, from the start of the process, opinion polls have shown a fairly high level of resistance and scepticism (over 40%) among the public. It could be argued that the initial change in public sentiment was due to a one-sided government campaign which has accentuated the potential benefits and underplayed all the potential risks. Nevertheless, in the last year prior to joining the eurozone, many citizens faced with the immediacy of the currency change shifted their views towards more sceptical positions. With that in mind it remains highly uncertain whether a referendum on the euro if held would be successful.

Public opposition towards the EU's enlargement policy in Croatia clearly represents a minority position, with levels far below the EU average. The opposition towards the EU's common security and defence policy is somewhat within the range of the EU average. Relatively mild opposition towards these two prominent EU policies, reinforces this article's initial hypothesis that the level of agreement between Croatian elites and citizens is contingent on the topic, and, specifically, that greater levels of polarisation occur around issues that have a direct impact on the citizens' economic and social situation.

From the results of opinion polls, it is evident that on the application of the rule of law, there is a profound division between representatives of the government, who tend to act as though Croatia does not have a problem, and the overwhelming majority of citizens, who are sceptical about the government's accomplishments in this realm. This sentiment is in line with our earlier conclusion that Euroscepticism in Croatia is partly rooted in the crisis of confidence towards national political institutions. Therefore, it could be assumed that both general and policy-specific Euroscepticism among the general public is likely to decline if confidence in the national political institutions can be restored.

Our analysis suggests that the blame for the Croatian citizen mistrust of the EU lies largely with the mainstream political parties that have avoided engaging in honest and transparent EU-related discussions with the public. Yet, such discussions are needed as they may

lead to a greater understanding of the EU among the population and speed up their socialisation within its political system. This means that the citizens must occasionally be trusted with complex issues and consulted according to the bottom-up principles of direct or participatory democracy. The fact that much of the Eurosceptic argument is grounded in populist misconceptions, which does not offer realistic alternatives in the modern globalised context, is not a valid reason for avoiding such debates or excluding critical perspectives.

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