

A Critical Assessment of a Eurosceptic Party Group on European Integration: A Case Study of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group

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Abstract: *The article explores Euroscepticism and the way it is utilized within the politics of Europe, analyzed upon evidence from a Eurosceptic Euro-party located in the European Parliament, namely the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR). The aim of this article is to clarify that the selected party disproves the argument of EU-criticism being an unfavourable condition, and, more importantly, its contribution to the political contestation in the EU. For such an assessment, a survey of the party manifesto, party working documents, as well as the discourses of the Member of the European Parliament (MEPs) will be analyzed, and the concept of Euroscepticism will be once again in the centre of this analysis. This argument is evaluated based on the transnational-level analysis of the aforementioned party, focusing primarily on three specific issues—the democratic deficit, the issue of sovereignty and anti-immigration rhetoric.*

Keywords: *European Conservatives and Reformists, European integration, European Parliament, Euroscepticism, party politics*

1. Introduction

In the 1990s, criticism, resistance, and a certain amount of backlash—henceforth referred to as Euroscepticism—started gathering pace, and was mostly geared towards the European integration, or more broadly, towards globalization. Just as the transformation of the European Economic Community (EEC) into the European Union (EU) signaled the end of the ‘permissive consensus’ among the European elite, Euroscepticism started to emerge. Nevertheless, as was soon realized, Euroscepticism is not an isolated movement, but one settled within a remarkable number of political parties in Europe. Bartolini (2005), who made reference to *anti-Europeanism* (although the paper finds this term ill-suited), emphasized that “[i]n the European post-war electoral history there is no other single theme which has had similar large and standardizing effects across the European party system” (Bartolini, 2005, p. 319), signifying its ubiquity across Europe.

Numerous studies have been conducted, aiming to define the concept of Euroscepticism (Taggart, 1998; Sitter, 2002; Flood, 2002; Sorensen, 2009), theorizing it (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2003; 2008), or underscoring its causes and consequences (Andersen & Reichert, 1996; de Vreese, 2004). Despite the increasing amount of academic interest in Euroscepticism, very few authors (see, e.g., Milner, 2000; Topaloff, 2012) attempted to justify its positive as well as constructive character. In hoping to fill this gap, the current paper seeks to further the debate, aiming to enhance the current understanding of Euroscepticism in a political discourse, demonstrating its pro-European stance, serving in benefit for the increasing political contestation. The aim of this endeavour is to clarify that Euroscepticism is not only about “the politics of opposition” (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2003; Berglund *et al.*, 2006; Sorensen, 2008). Rather, the paper aims to highlight that, surrounded by this general definition, and linking Euroscepticism directly to a negative meaning of pure opposition, would hinder not only the understanding of Euroscepticism but also the European integration. Many have chosen different terminology in reference to the Eurosceptic parties, such as “pro-European realists” (Brown, 2005) or “alter-EU” (Leconte, 2010) parties, which further underscores the need to provide a clear definition and broaden the understanding of these concepts. For that reason, there is a need to clarify what Kopecky and Mudde (2002) have termed ‘Euro-rejectionism’, rather than avoiding the concept ‘Euroscepticism’ (see Flood, 2002). In his study, Katz (2008, pp. 154–155) implied that “a different term may be appropriate for principled opposition to the European project given that ‘scepticism’ ordinarily refers to doubts or reservations rather than outright opposition”. This is an

interesting proposal, as conceptualizing Euro-rejectionism in conjunction with anti-Europeanism would benefit from finding the correct place for Euroscepticism within that spectrum. While this is not the debate that would be pursued in this paper, in order to clarify the argument of the study, it should be pointed out that Euroscepticism is not marginalized with the disagreements and, as a result, it is not linked to negative connotations with an anti-European attitude.

In order to locate Euroscepticism in parallel with the argument in this article, it is important to emphasize that the article explores Euroscepticism according to the typology¹ introduced by Kopecky and Mudde (2002) in evaluating Euro-enthusiasm and Euroscepticism as the two sides of the same coin, namely a part of the Europhiles. It is important to underscore that the focus of this study is to locate Euroscepticism and its role in the political contestation in Europe, rather than evaluating it as a marginal soft or hard type of opposition acknowledged by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2008). Euroscepticism is approached on the definition made by Kopecky and Mudde (2002, p. 303) as “Euroscepticism contains Euro-enthusiasts and EU pessimists, who favour European integration in principle, but criticize the actual development of the EU”. Hooghe and Marks (2007, p. 2) propose a similar definition on Euroscepticism, referring to it simply as “scepticism about some aspects of Europe or European integration”. Euro-enthusiasm, on the other hand, includes the Euro-optimists, who favour integration in both principle and in the future trajectory. They support the federalization of the EU and believe that solutions in the name of improving the European project require supranationalism. In the current study, Euroscepticism is not treated separately from pro-Europeanism. Nonetheless, the concerns of the Euro-enthusiasts that are not shared by the Eurosceptics are included, and the article perceives this antagonism as constructive and positive.

In support of this argument, the party case study detailed below provides some insight into how the issues are politicized, while developing common motives

¹ According to the typology of Kopecky and Mudde (2002), four general types of party position are put forward: *Euro-enthusiasts*, *Eurosceptics*, *Euro-pragmatists* and *Euro-rejects*. *Euro-enthusiasts*, who are simultaneously Euro-enthusiasts and EU-optimists, approve of European integration and are optimistic about the trajectory of EU development. *Eurosceptics*, who are Euro-enthusiasts and EU pessimists, favour European integration in principle, while criticizing the actual development of the EU. *Euro-pragmatists* are Europhobes and EU optimists, who are not supportive of the broad project of European integration, but are nevertheless positive about the current EU insofar as it is deemed to serve particular national or sectoral interests. Finally, *Euro-rejects*, who are Europhobes and EU pessimists, simultaneously criticize the idea of integration and the specific form it has taken in the EU (Kopecky & Mudde, 2002, p. 303).

among the Eurosceptic parties. Thus, the article gives a certain amount of space to multiple sources of documentation, including party declaration, party working papers and manifestos, as well as the speeches given by the MEPs in laying down the common motives driving their Euroscepticism. In using the data collected, framed within a period of 2009–2014,² the article interprets these sources of information in order to identify links between the outcomes and the research question. The case study, as the research method used in the article, is appropriate, as it enables inquiry into a particular phenomenon, namely Euroscepticism with an evaluative and interpretative outlook. The paper proceeds through clarifying firstly on how Euroscepticism has come to play an important role in transnational party formation across Europe, and then moves on to understand its occurrence and its very representation by a political party.

2. Transnational collaboration: Euroscepticism

In particular, starting in the 1990s, a challenge to European integration has come into existence in the form of Euroscepticism. This challenge is a reaction and direct response to Euro-enthusiasm, rather than specifically to the European integration process. In fact, the resistance hidden in the arguments of the ECR group is in the name of democracy, sovereignty and migration, not directly towards the existence of the EU itself, which the party seeks to reform.

Euroscepticism has become an important indicator in shaping European politics, and it benefits the developing political contestation in the EU alongside the integration. According to Shabani (2006, pp. 704–705), “the national arenas can be so opened up to each other that a self-propelling process of shared political opinion and will formation on European issues can develop above the national level”. This “political opinion” and “will formation” does not only refer to a full support of every aspect of integration, as it can also include certain criticism and opposition towards specific policies and developments. It is important to focus on how these party formations affect the overall European integration. It shall always be remembered that European integration is a unique as well as a dynamic construct, embodying a divergence of objectives. For that reason, the

² Although the European Conservatives and Reformists Group was established in 2009, the arrangements for the Euro-party trace back to the Movement for European Reform (MER), established in 2006, operating outside the EP. The latter was later succeeded by the pan-European Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists and the establishment of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party Group in the EP in 2009.

Euro-enthusiasts should not be taken for granted, nor are the Eurosceptics in an absolute denial of the EU.

European integration, as well as globalization, is forcing political parties to differentiate their positions or the ideology they defend. European integration specifically requires legal and political actions that fall under the community law, and success of implementation of these laws and regulations cannot be achieved without certain costs. Finding common grounds in establishing Euro-party groups, the Eurosceptic parties, just like the Euro-enthusiasts, are trying to influence the ongoing European integration. For this reason, the parties have to recognize political collaboration in order to effectively and actively participate in the integration process. The liberal democratic European states need to move towards a transnational understanding of integration if they are to establish equality and individual rights for Europeans under the Single Market, which the ECR group fully supports. Thus, as acknowledged by the group, assuming this as a part of their role, they are to defend the citizens against the bureaucratic structure of the EU. The role, the party group assumes, is important in emphasizing the EU not only as a community of the States but also of the Citizens.

Thus, at this point, the question of ‘what characteristics of the ECR group define it as Eurosceptic’ requires clarification. Firstly, it is the approval of the EU, rather than denial, indicating a proactive attitude aiming to penetrate into the policies the party group defends. The prominent concern motivating Euroscepticism in the ECR group is anti-federalism. However, it should be pointed out that the terms ‘anti-federal’ and ‘anti-European’ cannot be used interchangeably. Thus, the problem stems from the evaluation of Euroscepticism with a connotation of anti-Europeanism, mostly put forth by the Euro-enthusiasts. The Euro-enthusiast parties endeavour to marginalize the Eurosceptic parties by referring to them as anti-European, in order to justify their own causes. On the other hand, owing to the lack of democracy, transparency and accountability, the ECR group interprets the European integration as being anti-European in essence. As argued by the ECR group, if the integration is to proceed in becoming federal or pursue any other direction, it primarily requires the consent of the people. This is because the more central and bureaucratic the EU becomes, according to the belief of the party group, the more it moves away from the people. For instance, the former President of the European Parliament Hans-Gert Pottering has demonstrated that the term federalism has come to be synonymous with domination, centralization and bureaucratization. In his words,

I am a federalist, but I prefer not to use this word, which has become almost synonymous with centralization [...]. I prefer to speak of

a system of European communities; [...] one does not speak of federalism as such any more, but the system moves in the direction we intended. (Pottering, 2010)

The term federalism has become closely evaluated as that conveying the move towards centralization and domination. For that reason, Eurosceptic parties approach federalism negatively, linking it to the issue of sovereignty. The debate of preserving and protecting the sovereign nation state comes along with the well-known issues of the democratic deficit and anti-immigration. It is interesting that all these domains, once under the discretion of the nation states, have now formulated into integral arguments linking the parties in Europe to form Euro-parties. Having access to a wide range of resources—from financial to social and political—allows the party groups to develop different strategies pertaining to the European integration process. The ECR group employs these to consolidate, as well as to justify, their arguments, whether in support of the success or failure of the EU. Thus, detailing these will help understand how the ECR group shares as well as forms these common views at transnational level. The aim is to explain the reasons behind their criticism, as well as to explain that these views are not directly linked to anti-European stances and do not reflect a Euro-rejectionist attitude. Approached on the typology developed by Kopecky and Mudde, the ECR group is evaluated as pro-integration and anti-trajectory. In the name of testing this argument, the paper proceeds on to analyze some empirical evidence collected from the ECR group.

3. European Conservatives and Reformists Group

An initiative commenced in 2003 was the first step taken by the Czech Civic Democratic Party, the British Tories and the Polish Law and Justice Party, in issuing the ‘Prague Appeal’. The document laid down the rejection of the draft European Constitution, which was a step towards creating a “centralized and federal European super-state, serving the interests of the bureaucrats and politicians, rather than those of the people” (*‘Pražská vyzva’*, 2006 cited in Hanley, 2008, p. 209). In 2006, the British Conservatives and the Czech Democrats delivered this initiative into the ‘Movement for European Reform’. The formation of the movement, in the words of David Cameron, was “dedicated to the ideals of a more modern, open, flexible and de-centralised EU” (Cameron, 2006). The movement revealed the need for creating a new parliamentary grouping in the EP. At the time, the British Conservatives and

the Czech Civic Democrats were seated in the ‘European Peoples Party – European Democrats Group’, and the Law and Justice Party remained in the ‘Union for Europe of the Nations Group’. After the 2009 EP elections with the attendance of other parties across Europe the parliamentary group came alive, with the aim of uniting around common interests, such as Atlanticism, de-centralism, free-market and anti-bureaucratization. The largest national parties³ forming the group are the Conservative Party of the United Kingdom, the Polish Law and Justice Party, and the Civic Democratic Party of the Czech Republic. After lengthy negotiations, the member parties compromised on the Prague Declaration reflecting the group’s vision.

The ECR group comprises 54 MEPs, making it the fifth-largest group in the EP. As its name implies, the European Conservatives and Reformists is a conservative anti-federalist political group in the EP. The conservative philosophy supports maintaining the status quo by demonstrating respect for authority and political and cultural traditions. Although there are varieties of conservatism, the parties forming the ECR group are mostly modern liberal conservatives (e.g., British Tories, the Czech Civic Democrats) or social conservatives (e.g., the Polish Law and Justice Party). While the use of the term ‘conservative’ is understandable due to the party’s political fraction and the willingness to engage with their counterparts, that of ‘reformists’ requires further clarification of what exactly the party group seeks to reform. The party’s political headlines give hints about the reforming aspiration of the party as can be seen from the guidelines given below:

We should find the courage to present new and strong leadership that is ready to redefine the current EU paradigm and to articulate a new EU vision—to prove that we are not trapped in the thinking of the past but rather that we are willing to propose positive solutions for the future. Such leadership must be facilitated with the appropriate institutional and political background. (ECR, 2011b, p. 7)

Reformist designates the group’s strong voice for change, optimism and hope in Europe, and thus aims to motivate it to confront its failings (Cameron, 2006). The party group frames certain issues—sovereignty, democratic deficit, and immigration—making them salient in order to promote action in the name of reform. This might seem contradictory, as the Conservatives have strong morale

³ Apart from the largest parties seated in the group, the European Conservatives and Reformists also include MEPs from Ulster Unionist Party (UK), United Poland (Poland), Poland Comes First (Poland), Christian Union (Netherlands), Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (Lithuania), For Fatherland and Freedom (Latvia), Libertarian Direct Democratic (Belgium) and Independent (Denmark).

in preserving traditional values and social norms through law and regulations in which they approach social change as often suspicious (Henry, 1982, p. 1), which brings us to the issue of Euroscepticism.

The ECR group is centre-right to right wing and a Eurosceptic party. However, the party defines itself as Euro-realist, rather than Eurosceptic. After the founding of the Euro-party, two MEPs of the group described their difference as:

We see the EU differently for just one single reason—we want it to reform and therefore succeed. That is why we cannot call ourselves eurosceptics in the way the media, especially in the UK, use the term to describe destructive secessionists who argue for our countries' withdrawal from EU membership. We nevertheless remain constructively sceptical of many of the ideas and current EU policies being put forward. The more accurate and neutral term we have adopted, and therefore used in our Prague Declaration setting out the main principles of our new European Conservatives and Reformists Group, is 'Eurorealist'. (Szymanski & Tannock, 2009)

The party is willing to distance itself from what they see as Euroscepticism and thus involving “destructive secessionism for the country’s withdrawal from EU membership.” While none of the parties located in the group seeks withdrawal from the EU, the term Euro-realist is a way for distancing oneself from the other Eurosceptic groups (e.g., Europe of Freedom and Democracy) within the EP. However, as debated in this article, although the party perceives itself as Euro-realist, their critical attitudes will be evaluated as Eurosceptic, as commonly known by the public, as well as acknowledged in the literature about European integration. Next, the paper outlines the main party positions on the issues of sovereignty.

3.1 The arguments of sovereignty

Owing to the dynamic nature of the EU, from the view of the ECR group, the EU can still be shaped and reformed. This can be clearly seen in the party’s Prague Declaration, which starts with defining the aim of the party as “conscious of the urgent need to reform the EU on the basis of Euro-realism, Openness, Accountability and Democracy, in a way that respects the sovereignty of our nations and concentrates on economic recovery...” (Prague Declaration, 2009). The sovereignty issue is always salient among the party members. For instance, MEP Ryszard Antoni Legutko, sharing the view of the party group, spoke that “Europe’s strength lies in the freedom, enterprise and culture of

Europe's nations and states" (Legutko, 2011). These views are reminiscent of Alain Finkielkraut's argument "it is at the expense of his culture that the European individual has conquered, one by one, all his liberties, it is also, and more generally, the critique of tradition which constitutes the spiritual foundation of Europe" (cited in Müller, 2007, pp. 105–106). Throughout the European history, this aspiration of change and reform-seeking progress has become a norm of Europe's nature.

The party defines itself as "constructively sceptical of many of the ideas and current EU policies" and is favouring a different type of EU, rather than its current trajectory. The party does support European integration, albeit with a different vision. Mirek Topolank, MEP from the ECR group, explains the party's vision as:

We are here and we are ready to defend our values together. We are ready to defend freedom. We are ready to defend ourselves against Euro Federalists. We are ready to defend common sense against the Euro-sense. We are ready to defend citizens against bureaucracy. We are ready to defend our conservative view of the world. We are ready, we have the will and the strength to demand changes, which will bring a fresh breeze into the European Union. (Topolank, 2010)

As understood from the above quotation, the EU is criticized on issues that include federalism, bureaucracy and defending freedom, demanding changes. However, it is important to acknowledge that the unifying stance of the group in defence of the European citizens is in 'common sense' rather than the 'Euro-sense'. The party's vision involves Europeanism clashing over that of the current EU policies and institutions (Müller, 2012), which contains diversity rather than a monotypic political movement. The Euro-party group embodies diversity, rather than a replication of uniformity and, for this very reason, it is pressuring against any uniform effects for the overall Europeans.

It is evident that the party group has shifted towards a more positive and constructive attitude. At least some, if not all, are working forward towards fulfilling their vision for Europe (apart from a federal one), rather than attempting to identify strategies for blocking policies to be carried out. Leconte (2010, p. 115), argues that the Eurosceptic party positions are self-contradictory in that "*normative integration* exacerbates the dilemma between their pro-market orientation and their concerns over *normative sovereignty*". It can be seen that the Conservatives have always been critical of a federal EU. However, while still being a part of this criticism, they approach the issue as a

level of social and political activity in which they participate to reform. That is why, as argued by Liang (2007, p. 13), “not only the Euro-enthusiasts but also the Eurosceptics are reinventing themselves”. This is clearly demonstrated by the Euro-party:

The creation of the ECR Group—the genuine and positive reforming force in the European Parliament—is the first step towards a reform of the European Union. It is an attempt to break through the political status quo in the Parliament and respond to voters’ desire to see changes made to the European Union institutions. (ECR, 2011a)

The party’s President Jan Zahradil has clearly announced their opinion in a speech in the EP as “we simply cannot live forever under a 50-year-old federalist vision of European integration. The paradigm has changed and the sooner everyone in this parliament understands that, the better for us all” (Zahradil, 2011). It is clearly understood that the ECR group acknowledges the EU as an intergovernmental ‘problem-solving’ organization. Whether proceeding towards intergovernmentalism or federalism, it is important to focus on the transnational level, with a core of the Single Market driving the economic integration. The ECR group is in full support of the Single Market project, but the point is that the Single Market is also penetrating deeply into other political domains such as competition policy, environmental policy, trade policy, which were once under the competence of the nation state. The arguments put forth by the ECR group focus on the Single Market project in particular, and on the European Community in general, which for the Euro-enthusiasts requires more federalization. In the view of the ECR group, the problem is not moving towards federalization, but rather the effects it would have on the sovereignty of the nation. As put forth by MEP Jan Zahradil, who claims that, apart from a federal European vision, political parties may contain an intergovernmental European integration, or a model based on ‘variable geometry’ as well as ‘multi-speed Europe’. In the name of these aspirations, Kaniok argues:

If we adopt the fact that European integration in its existing form is not the only possible variation as our starting point, a set of classifications begins to offer itself which considers pro-European forces (in the sense of supporting the idea of European integration) to mean both the supra-nationalist backers of European integration, as well as supporters of the inter-governmental model. The label Eurosceptic, then, will be applied only to the opponents of the very idea of European integration, and not to those who prefer integration in its inter-governmental form. (Kaniok, 2009, p. 166)

The above quotation by Kaniok fails to elaborate on why anti-federalism has become synonymous with anti-European. It thus has to be ascertained whether supporting the integration in its supranational or intergovernmental form can embody Eurosceptic stances to certain aspects of the European integration. Hence, the opponents of the very idea of European integration require shifting into a new basket, such as Euro-rejectionism. At this point, the Conservatives are facing a dilemma, for they have clearly committed for change in the EU. Unlike in the past, distancing if not marginalizing from the integration project, the current aim is to bind to the project as a means of gaining ability to influence it. Otherwise, why would the party publish a policy paper explaining the “10 ways the ECR group has made citizens’ lives better” (ECR, 2011a). It is evident that the ECR group aims to attach itself to the EU project in order to no longer be acknowledged as the ‘Euro-outsider’. In one of his speeches, the deputy chairman of the ECR group Timothy Kirkhope makes the party’s ambitions clear. He states, “we are the first realist ‘Euro-realist’ group in the EP neither blindly in favour of everything done by EU nor unthinkingly opposed, we are not against European cooperation” (Kirkhope, 2009).

It is clear that the ECR group seeks deliberation and communication between levels of national and supranational. The party differs greatly when new treaties come into debate. Every new treaty incorporates content from different policy areas, and it is likely to be criticized by some political parties. The Eurosceptic parties themselves assume critical roles in the EP, whereby they question every aspect of European integration, but on the other hand are ‘not unthinkingly opposed’. The ECR group acknowledges the EU level as a special option of the idea of societal problem solving. As Eriksen (2005, p. 17) argued, “it represents the institutionalization of communicative processes for the selection of problems and solutions for a community”. In that sense, deliberation should not be seen solely as an instrument for reaching better decisions, but also as a learning process, accomplished through argument testing. Eriksen (2005, p. 17) further argued, “parties can provide self-reflexive interpretations, as well as provide intelligible, inter-subjective reasons for their behaviour which is procedurally deep-rooted”. This emerging democratic understanding makes divergence of voices heard and allows them to be taken into consideration, which brings challenging arguments, and prompts actors to rationalize their claims by institutionalizing critical opposition and offering alternatives. It is important in the process of cooperation.

In this context, the value of cooperation lies in it being maintained in a democratic environment, through constantly evolving integration, and becoming wider with the expansions. In the Laeken Declaration of 2001, the EU laid down the need

of reforming the institutions in order to be more effective and accountable. According to the ECR group, the reforms are made in the name of fulfilling the necessities laid in the Laeken Declaration. For instance, as argued by Kirkhope in his 'Simplifying Treaty' pamphlet: "Laeken asked all the right questions but Europe's elite somehow managed to find all the wrong answers" (Kirkhope, 2007, p. 10). In a point of this view, the party is in defence of accountable institutions becoming closer to the citizens of Europe, which are directly affected by the decisions taken by them. The statement clearly refers to EU-level decision-making. As, within the premise of transnationalism, individuals from different cultural, religious, ethnic and national backgrounds should live in a peaceful environment under the political institutions, they see as legitimate. However, the issue of legitimacy is not perceived as providing the necessary democratic credentials, as argued by the ECR party. This brings the issue to the democratic deficit in the EU.

3.2 The arguments of the democratic deficit

Whether in support or against a federal Union, the ECR group cannot be located in an anti-European position. The issue is thus the presence of opposition and, as the Euro-party argues, "need of new intellectual thinking" (Eppink, 2009) in a democratic understanding. The part assumes its criticism as constructive, as put forth by MEP Daniel Hannan:

All organizations are better if they have an opposition; any organization that is immune to criticism will end up becoming flabby, corrupt and self-serving. So, even the most committed Euro-integrationist should welcome the existence of the ECR as healthy, critical opposition. (Hannan, 2009)

The MEPs from the ECR group, including Hannan, argue that "for 50 years this Parliament had nothing in the character of an official opposition, now closer European integration is no more inevitable, it is just one among the series of competing ideas" (Hannan, 2009). It is worth noting that the ideas of the group, in addition to blaming or criticizing the EU, are based on the group's aspirations linked to Europe. Following the argument of the ECR group, the European elites must acknowledge that Euroscepticism is fundamentally healthy, as it gives the chance for closer examination of the policies falling under the competence of the EU. It increases the involvement of the citizens in the EU's policy-making process, as the policies become more widely debated among the Euro-parties in a democratic environment. Also, it supports the very idea of "demanding democracy from below" (Porta *et al.*, 2006, p. 7). This involvement leads to a

better understanding of the policies at stake and the reasons behind adoption or rejection of various policies that challenge or even override the sovereign powers of individual nation states (Meritt, 2007, p. 2). Otherwise, if not debated or negotiated by all parties, this would cause a serious damage. ECR Chairman Martin Callanan argues that “European economic governance is becoming antonymous with democracy” in his statement:

[T]here is a grave antagonism emerging between greater EU economic control on one hand, and national democracy on the other. The further down this road we move, the further we take power away from the ballot box. If people feel incapable of influencing their economic destiny in elections, we are delivering a recipe for social unrest. (Callanan, 2012b)

This is why questioning of the EU is an important function within the EU’s political system, one that is “part of any political system which gives the ability to receive feedback and react to it” (Majone, 2009, p. xii). As argued in this article, this is important for strengthening and securing a transnational Europe. At this point, Bartolini (2006) shares the same opinions as, for him, there is firstly the need for removing the taboo against critical views on the depth or substance of the EU on constitutional aspects. Next, focus should be shifted to the contents of the policy areas that the Union has incorporated in its decision-making (Bartolini, 2006, pp. 32–33). The ECR group has made the same remarks in supporting this argument: for instance, MEP Kirkhope (2007, p. 8) argued, “there is certainly more agreement on, for example, the need to cut CO₂ emissions than there ever was the need for an EU Constitution”. This is why it is important to stress that the party finds transnational solutions valuable in cases where the demands of the national level become impossible to fulfil.

The group is supporting a shift of priorities in the name of integration, from institutional arrangements to more specific areas of urgent cooperation on which the group campaigns such as environmental protection, recognition of EU-wide volunteering, reducing the costs of the EP. If the deliberation of the European integration will continue to circle around the main themes of federal Europe, intergovernmental decision-making, and bureaucratization, the citizens would not be allowed to follow what common policies are specifically debated at the EU level. At this point, in his recent speech, Chairman of the ECR group Callanan stated the following:

the people do not trust the EU because the EU does not trust the people. Democracy is the principle of the rule of the people: that

the demo is able to determine the future of public policy. But the principle of ever-closer union and its spin-off tools such as the euro have pushed power upwards towards unelected commissioners, the troika, or have enshrined it in EU legislation. The people are not able to fully determine their own destiny. We cannot go on taking them for granted. They are already moving away to ugly extremes in their droves. (Callanan, 2012a)

Two MEPs from the Group, Konrad Szymanski and Charles Tannock, had made similar arguments in 2009, at the time when the Euro-party was recently established:

[W]e in the ECR are totally opposed to such a form of governance. It is not democratic for unelected and totally unaccountable judges to make the law, but this is far from the only problem the EU has with democracy. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that an elected political leader proposes a referendum in any of the EU's member countries. If the result turned out to be contrary to expectations, surely politicians would not dare say that the outcome is wrong just because it is politically unwelcome. (Szymanski & Tannock, 2009)

Under democratic values, the goal of these critics is not to terminate the entire EU project, but rather to continue in the direction in which—as recent approaches reflect—there is consent from the people of the EU. While the Member States do have different concerns in the name of Europe, their interests are developing common ground, in particular when it comes to criticizing the EU in a coherent way. In doing this, Eurosceptics politicize the treaty referendums, carried out in different Member States, to justify and legitimize their arguments in the name of European citizens. Moreover, they promise to defend the expectations of not only their own *demos*, but in a sense of a European *demoi*. For that reason, the Eurosceptic parties mostly make reference indirectly to a *demoi* above the nation, as the political developments, either in another Member State or at EU level, become ‘internal’ rather than named as ‘external’, giving them ability to mobilize the masses in using these resources. This evokes the debate on anti-immigration, questioning of who constitutes the nation alongside the European integration.

3.3 The arguments of anti-immigration

The issue of mass immigration into Europe, fuelled mostly by the radical right parties, is permanent among quite a few party agendas both at national and supranational levels. In contrast to the radical right-wing parties, the ECR group does not target a specific group of migrants as a threat to European culture, values or norms. The party handles the issue of immigration in terms of the labour market and unemployment. The party group does not oppose immigration in principle, but draws attention to the issues surrounding immigration such as high unemployment rates and its hazardous effects to social security. Immigration is prevalent in the ECR group, as stated in the official party document, the ECR group argues for an “effectively controlled immigration and an end to abuse of asylum procedures” (Prague Declaration, 2009). The party argues that demographic shifts and maintaining family values are just a few of the most important challenges facing the EU. Chairman Kamiński (2010) stated that the ECR Group supports “pro-family policies and immigration is not the right solution for demographic problems. We have to solve these problems internally, not externally”. The ECR group is not opposing immigration, unless it is under strict control. In addition to the official party programme, MEP Kirkhope, evaluates the Schengen area positively, stressing its importance to the European economy, but also criticizes, arguing that it requires an update for Europe to secure its borders from outside immigration. Kirkhope notes,

The Schengen agreement has created economic benefit for the EU, especially for those who have signed up to it. However, the picture in Europe 2011 is one of high unemployment, with a large number of EU migrants and an increasing threat from terrorism. It is fair to say that the current Schengen system has flaws and now leaves Europe very vulnerable... The EU needs to make the Schengen system a more modern tool which is representative of the security and domestic needs of member states. (Kirkhope, 2011a)

Although UK does not participate in the Schengen area, it is quite active in the party group, supporting certain measures (e.g., Smart Border Programme, Registered Traveller Programme) to tighten illegal migration for securing the EU borders. The ECR group is aware of the need to tackle immigration at supranational level. Their goal is to decelerate immigration according to the needs of the labour market in Europe. Although the party finds the open border of Europe beneficial for the Schengen states, it still doubts its future trajectory. The risks it associates with immigration include unemployment, terrorism and

cross-border crimes,⁴ which, the ECR group argues, have great potential for undermining liberal values. The party calls for the Member States “to agree for a concerted effort to efficiently guard and monitor the EU’s border” (Kirkhope, 2011a). The policy of the party correlates with the argument put forth by the European Commission stressing the need for a common, comprehensive immigration policy (European Commission, 2012).

The European Commission is also developing policy frameworks in order to address the problems of migration in Europe. The policy agendas of the European Commission and the ECR overlap, as the party also seeks the issue of immigration to be tackled in a European framework. However, an important reservation comes from one the MEPs of the ECR group, Konrad Szymanski, who argues in the debate of the Schengen Agreement:

I would like the changes to the Schengen Code not to be used as a pretext for limiting the freedom of movement of citizens of the European Union’s Member States. Such proposals have been made for many years in respect of the Polish-German border, to the disadvantage of Polish citizens. It will be easier to reach an agreement if we have a full guarantee that changes to the Schengen code will not affect the citizens of the Member States. (Szymanski, 2011)

As the speech indicates, the view is not of an internal, but rather an external boundary drawing. The citation given above indicates the need of securing the borders in making Europe a continent secure for its citizens. Under trade, migration, transport and similar policies, a transboundary dimension is challenging the traditional nation-state borders. The speech given by Konrad Szymanski addresses the need to deal with migration as “French, Italian and Maltese citizens are today faced with the highest bills on account of the fact that controls along the European Union’s external borders are simply not working” (Szymanski, 2011). Although the party has some reservations in the name of immigration, the ECR group supports an EU-wide migration policy, one running parallel with the enlargement policy of the EU.

⁴ “Especially in the last decade or so, anxieties about transnational criminal networks, drug trafficking, terrorism, and immigration have resulted in dramatic augmentations of shared and increasingly complex forms of policing and security policies operating ‘beyond the nation-state’ (e.g. the European search warrant), with one scholarly commentator describing the movement toward supranationalized policing in Europe as ‘one of the strongest expanding fields of activity’ within the EU.” Cited in Scheuerman, 2009, p. 49.

According to the strategy of the ECR group, upon evidence from the case study, it rejects certain aspects of the EU leading towards—as they argue—a ‘United States of Europe’, while generally accepting the idea of European cooperation, albeit not in the shape of the current EU. For that reason, rather than opposing, the group problematizes the issues arising from the integration, aiming to reform, if not improve. In the light of the argument put forth, Euroscepticism contains a positive point of view, despite its reservations—expressive, normative, and instrumental—on European evaluations.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this work was to evaluate Euroscepticism as an important part of the political contestation in Europe, rather than a marginal phenomenon opposing everything in the name of Europe. According to the findings presented here, the ECR group reveals that Euroscepticism is increasingly becoming an integral part of the dynamic European debate, simultaneously supporting and criticizing the EU. In the light of the arguments laid down in the study, Euroscepticism will be an important character of this political system. Since the beginning, marked by the post-Maastricht era, there is a general public dissatisfaction with the EU and an increasing party-based questioning of the way the integration is proceeding. Thus, the role of Euroscepticism is to prompt questioning and criticism, as it allows evaluating the EU alongside other competing ideas.

The work presented here evaluated the Eurosceptics as a challenge to the Euro-enthusiasts. As outlined in the paper, the main criticisms or questions of the ECR group are not towards blocking *development*, *reform* and *progress* of the European project. Rather, the current emerging and future vagueness of the integration forces the party group deeply question the substance of the developments that have taken place alongside the European integration. In the realm of immigration, the party stipulates tighter and stricter controls, in favour of an EU-level action for securing the European borders. However, the ECR group remains critical on the federalization of the EU, which positions its politics mainly around the issues of sovereignty and democracy. In that respect, the party questions how federalism would affect the sovereignty of the nation state. This problematizing is inevitably accompanied by criticizing democracy, since every move in the name of integration, as the party argues, is causing more undemocratic measures, as the latter is occurring as a result of the former. Moving towards more supranationalism, mostly embraced by the Euro-enthusiasts, forces the Eurosceptics to demonstrate

these movements as anti-democratic, as they perceive them as a threat to democracy at both national and supranational levels. Thus, while the party group is not against further integration per se, it stipulates that any move in that direction must meet the democratic criteria.

While the ECR group claims its support of the current European project, it is clearly criticizing both the failures of the regime the EU has so far established, and its future trajectory. The position of the party group under the motivations of sovereignty, democracy and immigration clearly indicates a vision for reforming the EU, rather than rejecting or dismissing all ideas related to it. The ECR group evaluates its very presence as constructive, hoping to contribute to the contestation at the EU level. Thus, if the EU is about to settle a polity in the future, which is clearly inevitable for further integration, the Eurosceptic parties will be increasingly important for this polity design.

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