

# How to debunk Euroscepticism?

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The Conservatives and Labour could have first claimed the term themselves after the UK joined the Common Market, turning Margaret Thatcher's 'speech of Bruges' into the founding moment of the opposition towards European integration. However one must say that if the word is relatively new, the attitudes implied are as old as the European project it-self. Over the years, Euroscepticism has taken on a wide range of meanings. European leaders may refer to Euroscepticism as a 'threat to Democracy' just as populism and extremism, which are often equated with it. Yet, the development of Euroscepticism has been one of the major elements of the integration process for over two decades. That's why I will first try to analyse the concept and give it a definition in order to get a better understanding of it and then we will try to seize its implication and the role<sup>1</sup> that such a movement can play in the future of the European Union.

## I) Euroscepticism, a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

The diversification of negative reactions towards European integration challenges the conceptualisation of this phenomenon. The term tends to be used as a generic notion involving a set of disparate oppositional attitudes, from doubts to reluctance. As noted by C. de Vries et E. Edwards *'This has led to a major conceptual ambiguity: sometimes used to describe all form of opposition or critics towards the process of integration, when for others it implies an ideological stance structuring attitudes towards many other political issues.'*

Euroscepticism would refer to the doubt and the distrust towards European integration or in a broader sense to the doubt of the current path chosen for the European Union, doubts on its advantages and the relevance of a further integration as well as an adamant opposition to the European project. A stricter definition would imply a mere opposition towards European membership. But all in all, as many other concepts from the political sciences, there is no commonly accepted definition but rather a set of interpretations.

However one common conception arises among the Eurosceptics as diverse as they can be according to their traditional national political culture, they reject without distinction the Communitarian Method as the leading principal of the European integration. If Eurosceptics also share a rhetoric stressing the lack of democracy, transparency and accountability of the European institutions, their stance can evolve depending on the national context. Flood and Usherwood propose a differentiation. This classification distinguishes six categories, of which the first three cannot be considered Eurosceptic:

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<sup>1</sup> Mostly based on the work of Nathalie Brack : *L'Euroscepticisme au sein du Parlement européen, stratégies d'une opposition anti-système au cœur des institutions, Promoculture larcier, Windhof, 2014*

- **Maximalists** are strongly in favour of European integration, both in general and for specific policies,
- **Reformists** combine a general acceptance of advancing integration with constructive criticism,
- **Gradualists** accept slow and piecemeal advances of integration.
- **Minimalists** accept the status quo while rejecting further advances in integration,
- **Revisionists** want to return to an earlier state of integration, e.g. before a treaty revision,
- **Rejectionists** outright refuse integration in general and oppose membership more specifically.

<i>Soft/Hard Euroscepticism (Taggart/Szczerbiak)</i>	<i>Classification according to Flood/Underwood</i>	<i>Eurosceptic Parties</i>
	Maximalist	
	Reformist	
	Gradualist	
Soft Euroscepticism	Minimalist	Ataka (Bulgaria) also: Conservatives (UK) Sweden Democrats
Hard Euroscepticism	Revisionist	Front National (France), True Finns, Danish People's Party The Freedom Party (Netherlands), Jobbik (Hungary)
	Rejectionist	UKIP (UK), also: FPÖ

Once we understand that Euroscepticism is a multifaceted phenomenon, we can think of Euroscepticism not as an attitude of doubt or reluctance, but rather as a form of political opposition aiming against the *status quo*, which means the current European project. However this opposition is not to be understood as a classic opposition but as a deviant form of political opposition, aimed against the system and the *Polity* to quote R. Dahl and O. Kircheimer. Euroscepticism must be understood as the opposition not against European politics but as a systemic opposition aiming the process of European integration and its political regime.

In brief, Euroscepticism refers to the attitudes of opposition towards the European regime, its institutions and its legitimacy. However, what is striking when

analysing Euroscepticism, is that the Eurosceptics celebrate their biggest success during European elections. They then have to act amid an institution and a system that they are denouncing. By analysing the role they may play at a supranational level, one could try to understand Euroscepticism either as a Trojan horse or as a key to the legitimacy crisis that the European Union is currently going through.

## **II) Euroscepticism at the European Parliament:**

One of R. Dahl's key steps on the road institutions have to take in order to become completely democratic is *the implementation of a right for one organised opposition amid the system to call for a vote against the government*. In that sense, one could argue that the European Parliament has missed a major step.

The focus has in fact been placed on efficiency at the expense of the symbolic representation function: the parliament cannot fulfil its role of conflict arena and of implementing the representation of dividing lines, which therefore remain inconspicuous for the citizens.

If we want to reflect on the way debates in the European Parliament are held we should take into account that strengthening the powers of the Parliament was inversely proportional to the interest that citizens take in it.

In this respect, the presence of Eurosceptics in the EP may be an asset and a guarantee of the democratic nature of the institution, as long as they get to be heard. The presence of anti-systemic opposition, including its most confrontational forms, can help to increase the representativeness of the EP and contribute to the reduction of electoral Euroscepticism. However, this presupposes that the opposition is not only represented and has a voice, but also that the debate is organised in a way with which citizens can identify themselves. For now the status of the opposition is yet to be found.

The presence of Eurosceptics in the EP could be a means to the legitimisation of the institution and the political regime of the European Union as a whole, which is, in fact, characterised by a consensus largely based on the logic of conflict avoidance. The European institutions value expertise and tend to place emphasis on a technical rather than a political register, promote the search for compromise and surpass both political and national divisions. This design certainly makes it easier to build alliances but contributes to the euphemism of the political dimension of issues and, in doing so, to the (apparent) depoliticisation of the debates.

This logic of conflict avoidance is partly responsible for the legitimacy deficit of the European Union as experienced by the citizens who perceive its institutions as distant, technocratic, cut off from their daily concerns. And it is mainly through this breach that Eurosceptics tend to infiltrate and communicate. Due to the current operating rules, the EP is not an appropriate arena for protest; Eurosceptic deputies are therefore forced to choose between participation or radical opposition, which is, in their view, both unsatisfactory. Unable to effectively express their discontent with the policies of the EU or punish its leaders, the opposition tends to turn into an opposition of principle directed against the political regime itself.

The democratic deficit, which the EU is suffering, is partly due to the tendency of its institutions to use that technical register and the lack of an institutional structure for the free expression of dissent. This induces a lack of visibility and legibility of the politics at European level. This form of sanitisation of democracy entails the indifference and

apathy of citizens. The presence of Eurosceptic MEPs is, from this point of view, likely to play a crucial legitimising role. Chosen in part because of a lack of conflict of the European political system, their presence in the EP can contribute to reducing the democratic deficit of the EU in two ways:

- These (Eurosceptic) players provide the opposition with a channel to express itself and to act as a mouthpiece for the recriminations of a segment of the population. Disagreeing with a European elite entirely devoted to the continuation of the integration process, their presence and their role contribute to increase the representativeness of Parliament as an open institution representing society in all its diversity
- Eurosceptics tend to contribute to the politicisation of the European Union, which remains a central element of a consolidated political system.

Eurosceptic MEPs contribute to integrating the system they criticise without being able to significantly influence EU decision-making on sensitive issues. They thus contribute crucially to the legitimisation of the political system.

Eurosceptic MPs contribute to this politicisation of the EU by animating the debate on European issues, including its constitutive dimension, both national and supranational level. While leaders and European institutions focus on the way of pragmatic problem solving and are currently seeking to avoid the politicisation of European issues, Eurosceptics have a virtual monopoly of 'clear speech' regarding readability and assessment issues. This resistance although emanating from peripheral European groups could make sense. Although these (Eurosceptic) actors are not yet able to fundamentally challenge the technocratic consensus and functioning of the European institutions, their integration in the system tends to contribute to greater visibility of European issues and to give the EU a more democratic character, which could ironically deprive them of their main arguments. They allow the emergence of a more political and 'confrontational' style in a consensual and technocratic regime. They could thus help to turn the EU from a negotiating democracy into a democracy of debate and to reduce the democratic deficit in the European system

All in all, I would venture to say that far from endangering the integration, the presence of Eurosceptics in the EP could be seen as a guarantee of a greater legitimacy for the European political system as long as their ideas are effectively countered and not muffled.