Eurosceptics – enemies or necessary part of European integration?

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Abstract: Can the activities of so-called Eurosceptic political parties and Eurosceptic politicians lead to the destruction of the European Union? The common answer is yes as Euroscepticism is perceived as a serious threat for the European Union. Yet an alternative point of view treating Euroscepticism as a vital and necessary part of the European Union’s political system is possible. In this understanding Euroscepticism is a part of the feedback loop in the European Union’s political system. This paper focuses on explaining the obvious paradox of Euroscepticism (or activities and approaches labelled as Eurosceptic): critique of European integration can lead to a stronger rather than weaker Union. Euroscepticism is analysed through the model of the political cycle, a concept normally used to analyse decision-making not only in the European Union but also in traditional national political systems. A key element of the political cycle is its evaluation phase, as evaluation necessarily contains a substantial degree of scepticism and doubt. The paper is organised as follows. First the terms “European” and “Eurosceptic” are defined. Without clearly identifying the pro-European stance, all efforts to characterise the opponents of the European Union are doomed. The prevailing conceptualization of Euroscepticism which splits this phenomenon into two parts (hard and soft version) is then replaced by one category. The last part of the paper discusses the pro-European and Eurosceptic stances in the context of the evaluation phase of the policy cycle model.

Key words: Soft & Hard Euroscepticism, Political cycle, System theory, Democracy, Pro-European, Evaluation
1. Introduction

In his oft-quoted study “Europe’s ‘Democratic Deficit’: The Question of Standards” the Italian political scientist Giandomenico Majone claims that evaluation of any product or institution is a matter of defining standards and their subsequent application. The European Union (EU), its institutions and the state of democracy within constitute no exception. The issue of setting standards which are then used for evaluation is substantially a matter of choice for the individual who establishes them (Majone 1998:5–6).

Although Majone’s study is related to the question of democratic deficit, it can be applied generally in evaluating the EU’s political system and its democracy. Establishing the standards of this institution’s democratic character or, on the contrary, pointing out its democratic deficit only makes sense if the target (EU’s nature and character) is precisely defined. That the discussion of democratic deficit developed in the mid-1990s and was contemporary with an equally stormy debate about Euroscepticism was probably not an accident. Although the term as such was only introduced into academic discourse at the end of the twentieth century (Taggart 1998), an enormous number of both empirical case studies and theoretical treatises appeared over approximately thirteen years, focusing mainly on Euroscepticism manifest in political party programmes. Simplifying matters somewhat, it can be said that this imposing body of research amounts to the academy’s attempt to reckon with tendencies which have appeared in the European integration process since the beginning of the 1990s: namely, the politicization of the integration process, the increasing involvement of the European public, and the gradual disintegration of the “tolerant consensus”¹ connected with the latter developments. Disapproval of the evolution of European integration, manifest, for instance, in the referenda on revisions of primary law or in the European Parliament (EP) elections, appeared as a new phenomenon in need of a comprehensive theoretical explanation.

This paper analyses the ways in which the EU and Euroscepticism are conceptualised and the relationship between these conceptualisations. It is based on certain normative premises necessary for conceptualising Euroscepticism:

a) an explicit definition of the EU’s character

b) an explicit theoretical definition of democracy in the EU

c) an explicit demarcation of a positive attitude towards European integration

The structure of the paper is as follows. The second section provides a brief summary of the debate on conceptualising Euroscepticism, stressing its presence in party political programmes. Clearly this is the area where the theory of Euroscepticism is the most developed and most influential. Four critical arguments applicable to the prevailing understanding of Euroscepticism are then presented and analysed in detail. Specifically, they concern the perception of the EU, the lack of a positive stance in the conceptualisation of Euroscepticism, the perception of democracy in the EU, and the normative issues of Euroscepticism. The next section applies these arguments to existing understandings of

¹ This term denotes the public’s implicit support for European integration (Norris 1997).
Euroscepticism. The fifth section summarises the findings and proposes directions for future research. The paper presumes the importance of standards, as stated in the introduction. Without a normative definition of the EU that takes into account the finality of European integration and its structure, attempts at conceptualising the criticisms of European integration and the opposition to it are pointless.

2. Euroscepticism: The creeping enemy

As indicated above, discussion of Euroscepticism began both in the EU itself and in the political science in the mid 1990s, approximately concurrently. Before the creation of the EU, European integration was an elites-driven project that did not impinge, directly or indirectly, on the life of the common electorate. The EU constitution, which includes concepts such as European citizenship but which also strengthened the powers of the directly-elected EP, has brought European integration substantially closer to the public and to everyday politics.

The phenomenon of Euroscepticism is vague and its definitions wide. A number of approaches have focused mainly on party-based Euroscepticism (e.g. Taggart 1998, Kopecký, Mudde 2002, Conti 2003, Taggart, Szcerbiak 2003, Flood, Usherwood 2005). Studies of Euroscepticism among the general public are also available (Sørensen 2008, Vallaste 2009), however it remains true that almost all studies not dealing with party-based Euroscepticism,\(^2\) employ definitions deriving from research of party-based Euroscepticism.\(^3\)

Paul Taggart (1998) was the first to attempt a conceptualisation of party-based Euroscepticism. According to Taggart, Euroscepticism is expressed by the political parties in various forms and is also employed in various ways. He distinguishes four types of Euroscepticism (Taggart 1998: 368-369).

Taggart’s first type is represented by single-issue Eurosceptic parties for whom opposition to the EU is their raison d’être. They only exist to mobilise the electorate on the issue of European integration and are therefore often coalitions created ad hoc. The second type proposed by Taggart comprises protest parties which express their opposition to the EU as part of their general opposition against the political system as such. The third type encompasses established parties which assume a Eurosceptic attitude. In Taggart’s definition they are either in government or at least close to entering government. Taggart’s last type contains Eurosceptic factions in parties which themselves support European integration; Taggart admits that these last Eurosceptics are difficult to identify and to study systematically (Taggart 1998: 369).

In 2002 Taggart’s original typology was followed up with a division of Euroscepticism into soft and hard variants, made by Taggart together with Aleks Szcerbiak. In their definition, “Hard Euroscepticism is where there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from

\(^2\) Christopher J. Williams’s study (2011) analysing the connection between Euroscepticism in EU member states and the rate at which they adopt EU secondary legislation can serve as an example.

\(^3\) Amandine Crespy and Nicolas Verschueren (2009: 381) also point out the preponderance of party-based research and believe it to be the reason why Euroscepticism is vaguely and insufficiently defined. They equally point out other issues with the concept, viz. the historical determinants of the origins of the term and the negative connotations which inject excessive normativity into research.
membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived.” (Taggart, Szczerbiak 2003: 6). Soft Euroscepticism, on the contrary, was defined as follows: “where there is NOT a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas leads to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that ‘national interest’ is currently at odds with the EU trajectory.” (Taggart, Szczerbiak 2003: 6).

Peter Kopecký and Cas Mudde’s typology was a reaction to Taggart and Szczerbiak’s division of Euroscepticism into soft and hard variants and criticised soft Euroscepticism as being too inclusive. According to Kopecký and Mude, soft Euroscepticism thus defined encompasses any disagreement with the EU and its policies whatsoever. It is therefore an exceedingly widely defined category which loses its validity (Kopecký, Mudde 2002).

Kopecký and Mudde’s second objection concerned the issue of EU membership. In their view this is not the crucial point dividing hard and soft Eurosceptics. Instead of emphasising the support for EU membership of the given country (or lack thereof), they suggested taking two other factors into consideration: (1) the principle of ceding sovereignty of the nation state towards the supranational structures and (2) support for/opposition against further enlargement of EU sovereignty (as a contemporary trajectory of European integration).

Kopecký and Mudde proposed their own schema based on attitudes towards these two issues. The schema is based in a two-dimensional model of relationship with the EU in which they identify two levels of attitudes towards integration, namely diffuse and specific support for European integration. The former is a general support for European integration, whereas the latter is support for the EU (Kopecký, Mudde 2002: 300-304).

Europhiles are distinguished from Europhobes at the level of support for the idea of European integration. Europhiles are convinced that the basic ideas of European integration are institutionalised co-operation on the basis of shared sovereignty (this being its political element) and integrated liberal market economy as the economic element of this co-operation. Europhiles can thus be advocates of supranationality or of free trade only. Europhobes, on the contrary, do not support the general idea of European integration on which the EU is based, nor do they explicitly oppose these ideas, whether for political or economic reasons.

The second dimension of Kopecký and Mudde’s typology differentiates EU-optimists from EU-pessimists. EU-optimists back the present state of the EU and are convinced that it is going the right way. A critical attitude towards some European policies does not exclude a party from this category, as long as the party generally accepts the present state of the Union. EU-pessimists, on the contrary, do not support the EU in its present state or are pessimistic about its future development.

Taggart and Szczerbiak reacted to these new typologies by redefining their concept of soft and hard Euroscepticism. In this they acknowledged the point made by Kopecký and Mude concerning the support for the given country’s membership in the EU and replaced this criterion by another which looks into support for (or opposition to) the transfer of political power from the states to the supranational centre, the EU. In their revised conception, hard Euroscepticism is “principled opposition to the project of European integration as embodied in the EU, in other words, based on the ceding or transfer of powers to [a] supranational
institution such as the EU.” (Szczerbiak, Taggart 2003: 12) Soft Euroscepticism is then an attitude where “there is not a principled objection to the European integration project of transferring powers to a supranational body such as the EU, but there is opposition to the EU’s current or future planned trajectory based on the further extension of competencies that the EU is planning to make.” (Szczerbiak, Taggart 2003: 12)

With Taggart and Szczerbiak’s refinement, developments in the conceptualisation of Euroscepticism were essentially complete and their revised typology is now the one most often used, notwithstanding the fact that the political science has attempted to articulate other, more or less sophisticated typologies (e.g. Riishoj 2004, Rovny 2004). This conclusion of Euroscepticism’s theoretical development has several important consequences for the present paper.

3. What is the EU?

As defined by Taggart and Szczerbiak, our knowledge of Euroscepticism has been left with four unsolved issues. The first consist in the implicit definition of the EU as a static actor which has already reached its finality. The second is a corollary of the first – how exactly is this final and firmly standing EU defined? In the definition of Euroscepticism – which can be described as canonic due to the number of texts that adopt it (from the most recent literature, see for example Leconte 2009: 8) – the opposite of Euroscepticism, i.e. the pro-European stance or position, is not explicitly present. The third issue is connected with the normativity implicit in the term Euroscepticism. The fourth and final major objection concerns the initial understanding of democracy in the EU.

Researching criticisms of European integration makes sense if the actor is convincingly defined and characterised. The analysis must therefore begin by answering the question: What form of political arrangement does the EU have and what exactly it is that the possible critique of the EU delimits against? Posed in a suggestive fashion, the question could run as follows: Is the EU a state? A union of states? A federation? A confederation? A political system, or something else?

Attempts to define the EU in terms of statehood are controversial and divide the scholarly community in several more or less irreconcilable camps. There is only an elementary consensus in that the EU is an unprecedented entity sui generis for which a suitable comparison can be found neither in the past, nor in the present. But attempts to fill the term sui generis with concrete content are not very successful, even though the political science has expended a remarkable effort and showed appreciable creativity in this regard. Examples include classification of the EU as a regulatory state (Majone 1998), a certain form of union of states (Dehousse 2003: 137), a form of post-national governance (Reschová 2003: 48), etc. There is a much larger consensus, however, that the EU involves multi-level interactions encompassing supranational, national, regional and possibly local levels (Pitrová 2009: 110), and on what the EU is not – a Westphalian state, or a union of Westphalian states in a federation or confederation (Eriksen 2004: 5).

The implicit consequence of the discussion outlined above is the constant dynamics of European integration. However simplified the comparison between the EU polity and a nation state polity is, since the adoption of the Treaty on European Union, the Union’s political system has experienced a radical and ground-breaking transformation which the
political systems of nation states take hundreds of years to achieve. In terms of institutions, development of the co-decision procedure can serve as an example. This tool, which involves in equal measure the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union in the adoption of legislation, was created by the adoption of the Treaty on European Union. Already in 1996 the Amsterdam Treaty simplified the co-decision procedure by reducing the number of readings. The Treaty of Nice (1999) de facto replaced the co-operation procedure with the co-decision procedure, and the Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, which was later incorporated into the Treaty of Lisbon, made co-decision a standard legislative procedure in the EU. The presidencies of the Council of the EU and the European Council have undergone fundamental reforms since the adoption of the Treaty on EU. Other institutions were also reformed. Qualitatively, the EU’s political system was substantially affected by the massive enlargement of the Union, with the number of member states more than doubling since the adoption of the Treaty on EU. This fundamentally transformed the relationships both within the EU’s various institutions and between these institutions. The EU therefore cannot be analysed as a static entity, and neither it is possible to delineate oneself against it as if it were one. After all, the current primary law postulates continuing amendments to the EU’s decision mechanism and more countries are expected to accede.

In addition to the EU’s dynamics, the second important trait of its structure is the lack of finality of both the integration process and the EU’s constitutional setting. Although finality is not a unambiguous and single-level term, it is connected with the EU’s dynamics. Neil Walker (2002) has distinguished six definitions of the concept of finality of European integration. In addition to the clear concepts of territorial finality (defining the EU’s boundaries), legal finality (the form of EU’s legal framework) and institutional finality (the ultimate character of the EU’s institutional framework), Walker also deals with three finalities which have a fundamentally political and therefore controversial dimension. The first, political finality, is understood by Walker as the issue of finding the limits of political integration within the EU. The definition of Europe in a social and political sense, i.e. finding a common standard for all of the Union’s member countries, is closely related to political finality. Issues connected with the intent of integration, i.e. the goal of European integration, represent the most comprehensive concept of finality for Walker (Walker 2002). Symptomatically, and with the exception of territorial finality each of the finalities mentioned above remains to be defined in a satisfying manner – let alone codified.

What are the consequences of the present state of the EU described above for an analysis of the general attitudes towards European integration? First, the unwieldy nature of the EU and the fact that it is not firmly anchored explains why specific theories of European integration (Rosamond 2000, Kratochvíl 2008, Wierner, Dietz 2009) are unable satisfyingly and comprehensively to explain, let alone predict, the development of integration (Fiala 2009). Second, the entanglement of various approaches and trends in European integration which are most manifest in the constant conflict between supranational and intergovernmental

4 I mean the amendment of qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Council of the EU, where the Lisbon Treaty envisages gradual replacement of the current system by a new mechanism from November 2014.

5 Territorial finality is defined in the Lisbon Treaty, specifically in the article XY of the Treaty on EU which stipulates as a condition for accession of a new country that the country’s territory must form part of the European continent.
models of integration suggests that the supranational model of integration which dominated in the 1980s and the 1990s is not the only one, and that the intergovernmental model of integration has equal place and importance in EU’s dynamics.

Third, the implicit understanding of the EU as a final and static entity entails another hidden assumption which ought to be subject to discussion and interrogation. It concerns the perception of democracy within the EU. Theoretically, a range of views can be applied to democracy in the EU, alongside their respective standards of evaluation. The oldest and most widespread approach is the concept of classic liberal democracy, which expects that the citizen will be protected from the caprices of state power. The essence of democracy then consists in creating mechanisms which guarantee governance that promotes the power of the majority without tyrannising the minority and with sufficient checks on political power (Held 1996: 88). Berthold Rittberger describes an alternative position which is based on the communitarian and republican tradition (Rittberger 2010: 138–142). According to the communitarians, legitimacy of political power is derived from the common good or a shared way of life. The political consequence of this approach is the premise that only a community based on a shared language and values can produce a political discussion which articulates the wishes and will of the citizens (Bell 1993). The republican point of departure, which is close to communitarianism emphasises, the role of political discussion and the development of common values. In the context of European integration the task is the creation of the EU as a community which will share values such as moral culture and ethical standards (Etzioni, 2007).

The conglomerate of concepts usually referred to as deliberative democracy sets itself against both the liberal-democratic and the communitarian-republican conceptions. To a significant degree, however, it is an eclectic construction based upon them: it borrows the emphasis on clear rules from the former and the stress on discussion as the tool for establishing political will from the latter (Habermas 1996: 7–8). For deliberative democracy, political discussion is uppermost; it is not limited to formal and power structures, but is also able to engage the public sphere, and precedes political decisions (Rittberger 2010: 143).

Fourth, from the outset the term Euroscepticism clearly had negative connotations which made it a strongly normative concept (Crespy, Verschueren 2009: 383). Its applicability for empirical research is therefore fairly problematic, especially if the normativity is not stated explicitly.

4. **Applying the arguments to the theory Euroscepticism**

What do the abstract objections listed above mean when applied to the prevailing conceptualisation of Euroscepticism? First, and this is not limited to Taggart and Szczerbiak’s typology, the theory of Euroscepticism does not allow for the dynamics of the integration process and its lack of finality. Taggart and Szczerbiak, but Kopecký and Mudde as well, define Euroscepticism as a stance towards European integration in which the latter is a permanent and unchangeable entity which has reached a finality. Symptomatically, this finality is present in the conceptualisation of Euroscepticism only implicitly, never explicitly. As outlined above, to define the finality of European integration explicitly is a very difficult endeavour and it is even more problematic to claim that this finality has already been achieved or that it must be achieved. In other words, the finality of European integration
might be postulated implicitly and explicitly in political speeches, but it is hardly possible to do so in academic discourse. If an author decides to do so, s/he should do so explicitly. In conceptualising Euroscepticism, a scholar should clearly outline the positive form of European integration in relation to which the definition or typology is constructed.

Second, the conceptualisation of Euroscepticism hitherto equates support for integration with support for one specific form of European integration: the one that dominated the EU throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Although one can accept that the postulate of “ever closer Union” was already present as the goal of European integration in the first documents of the primary law in the 1950s, both the institutional design and the political development of European integration do not suggest that the one and only way to this Union leads through the swift transfer of powers from the nation states to the supranational centre. Given the inherent presence of important intergovernmental institutions such as the Council of the EU and the European council in the EU’s institutional structure, the terms “supranational” and “European” can hardly be used interchangeably. In other words, the EU’s finality as a federation is not the only possible outcome of the EU’s development – and it is not even a realistic one (Majone 2009: 219–221). A mischievous comment suggests itself in connection with the “ever closer Union”: there is probably nothing that would contradict the finality of European integration more than this concept, which characterises above all a process, a development.

It remains true, however, that although the categories of soft and hard Euroscepticism imply one specific form of European integration, Taggart and Szczerbiak’s typology does not employ an explicit, positive definition of it. Obviously, one might object that the research aim of both authors was to define Euroscepticism, but the lack of a positive definition precludes the possibility of comparing, for instance, soft Eurosceptics with pro-European parties.7

A third premise implicit in the definitions of Euroscepticism favours the liberal concept of democracy over alternative views. To a significant degree, such choice is the logical corollary of the previous two: if the EU is understood as a static actor which has reached its finality, a study of the attitudes of actors towards the entity such conceived will not be ontologically grounded in a preference of premises that emphasise discussion and debate as a fundamental value.

The application of the last objection is self-evident. From the outset, the term Euroscepticism had clear negative connotations, making it a strongly normative concept (Crespy, Verschueren 2009: 383) which can be fairly easily misused in political struggles. As G. Majone says (Majone, 2009, p. xii), “words do matter.” If any questioning of one form of European integration (which is then identified with European integration as a whole) is considered an expression of Euroscepticism, an important function is removed from the EU’s political system. This function, which ought to be part of any political system, is the ability to receive feedback and react to it. To call any critique of the speed and depth of European integration as it unfolded in the 1990s Euroscepticism is in practice to remove feedback from relevant

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6 The speech of the German foreign minister Joschka Fischer at Humboldt University in 2000 is a typical example: Fischer called for the creation of a European federation (Fischer 2000).

7 As Taggart and Szczerbiak pointed out, however, that wider contextualisation of soft and hard Euroscepticism should be the subject of further research (Taggart, Szczerbiak 2008: 259).
political discourse about European integration. Instead of dealing with the arguments of so-called soft Eurosceptics, the EU pushes them outside the boundaries of legitimate discussion. The term Euroscepticism is then misused for political struggle (Neumayer 2007); the distinction between soft and hard Euroscepticism has fundamental social and political consequences. First, soft is, in the logic of language, the preliminary stage of hard, from which follows their affinity. In other words, support for a slower tempo of European integration and emphasis on the importance of its intergovernmental character thus becomes associated with a principled refusal of European integration as such. A constituent part of European integration – intergovernmental cooperation – is thus seen as a first step towards a principled refusal of integration. Second, the hard Euroscptic parties are (with a few exceptions) mostly considered extremist, whether of the Right or the Left (De Vries – Edwards 2009, Crum 2007). In political reality, the ranking of soft and hard Eurosceptics alongside one another renders problematic the position of the former, who are typologically (and in social discourse also rhetorically, given that mass media, commentators and analysts do not distinguish between soft and hard Eurosceptics) put into one imaginary camp with the latter (Katz 2008: 155). The consequences of this association include a reduction in political discussion and a refusal of soft Eurosceptic arguments as non-democratic, due to their association with hard Eurosceptics.

In the study of Euroscepticism only the category of hard Euroscepticism is free of major issues, representing a coherent and stable analytical tool: its criterion is the fundamental opposition to (or refusal of) European integration as such. The so-called soft Euroscepticism is problematic, however, as it is an amorphous and moving target. If a politician or a party supports the idea of European integration in principle, but objects to its tempo or to a deepening of integration in certain specific areas of politics, it is hardly possible to call this criticism soft Euroscepticism, and by extension, in general discourse, a mild variation of hard Euroscepticism. If an analytical category is conceived in this manner, according to Taggart and Szczersiak’s definition of soft Euroscepticism it is very difficult to determine which policies and which forms of critique represent sufficient reason for ranking a politician or a party among the Eurosceptics. A possible corollary is that Euroscepticism is reduced to a simple disagreement between the preferences of the actors in question and the outputs of EU policies, the latter, moreover, being subject to a temporal transformation (Hix 2007: 133–140).

5. EU as a political system

How might one deal with the objections voiced above, and how might one tackle the concept of soft Euroscepticism?

A solution that suggests itself is to conceptualise Euroscepticism on explicitly stated premises which would be articulated in view of the objections stated above concerning the EU’s character, finality of the European integration and democracy within the Union. Here we are faced with two fundamental options: either to view the EU as a static object (a view that is substantially political), or to respect the EU’s character and choose a suitable analytical tool for describing and explaining the processes unfolding within the EU. That the prevailing conceptualisation of Euroscepticism is grounded in the first option is a fact. The EU is viewed as a compact and static project which inexorably marches towards a European federation which is, incorrectly and misleadingly, branded a “superstate.” If this conception is to be the norm, then both soft and hard Eurosceptics are the true opponents of the unifying Europe.
The EU, however, never got as far as the phase of “the closest Union.” There is no European people (as a *demos*), no European interests, no all-European groups that would mediate, aggregate and articulate in the political process the interests of such a people, and obviously there is no European identity either. In contemporary Europe, it is not even possible to identify processes that would lead to the creation of the above. One might therefore ask how fruitful it is for the analysis to create typologies and categories which are defined in opposition to something that does not exist in reality and which therefore is not supported by a sustainable argument.

The paragraphs that follow seek to offer an alternative conception. In keeping with the critique presented first in abstract and then concretely in sections three and four, from the perspective of deliberative democracy the EU is understood as a dynamic political system. The dynamics of the EU’s institutional development, the absence of an European *demos* and lack of public space, testify to the fact that the EU is a polity-in-progress. The deliberative approach emphasising communication and interaction can be used to conceptualise and explain this development analytically. Bearing in mind the importance of the European public sphere and the issues pertaining to the finality of European integration and to Europe’s structure, space for public discourse about European integration seems a necessary component of the emerging Europe. In other words, viewed through the prism of deliberative democracy, soft Euroscepticism cannot be branded Euroscepticism at all, as thanks to its critical and alternative position it represents an indispensable part of the dialogue within the EU.

In terms of classifying the EU’s character, it must be considered a distinct political system and as such analysable by system theory. Simon Hix designates the EU a democratic political system and proves this by applying four elementary criteria which are grounded in the classic conception of system theory (Easton 1957).

*Political System Model*

Source: Easton, 1957.
The EU features both a stable and clearly defined set of institutions for collective decision-making and rules which govern the relationships both within and without these institutions. It is also true that citizens and social groups endeavour to have their political desires fulfilled within the EU. The decisions made in the political system have important consequences for the distribution of economic resources and allocation of social and political values within the system. Finally, “there exists continuous interaction between these political outputs and new demands” (Hix 2005: 2).

But Hix’s characteristics are not entirely without issues. One might object to the notion that the EU’s institutions are stable, given that since the 1990s constant shifts in EU membership and frequent revisions of the primary law which accompanied European integration have influenced the EU’s decision-making mechanism many times and often profoundly. On the other hand, the qualitative dimension of these institutions has transformed only very slowly and hesitantly, as has been apparent from the unsuccessful attempts at substantial reform for which some EC/EU representatives have been pushing since the first enlargement in 1973.

The second criterion of a system is not entirely fulfilled by the EU either. True, some citizens and social groups endeavour to have their needs satisfied on the European level, but does the overwhelming majority of citizens? In other words, is it possible to identify a majority social group of European citizens (i.e. those who truly identify themselves with this concept) which strives to have its interests met at the European level? Empirical facts indicate to the contrary. And if Hix argues that the number of groups which become involved in the system is on the constant increase, it is somewhat doubtful whether this unequal representation of particular interests (most often the loudest and the best networked) can be considered to sufficiently fulfil the second criterion in the definition of a democratic political system. In other words, the structures mediating and articulating society’s demands which would at the same time create a trans-national discourse on certain topics at certain times (Eriksen 2004: 26) are not fully developed in the EU. The EU does not have a unified European public sphere; European political parties and the electorate do not have a direct influence over the institutions of representation. On the contrary: the EU features only partial and isolated public spheres which constitute themselves around specific political networks and are linked to specific policies (Eriksen 2005).

The third condition that the EU must fulfil in order to be considered a system seems the least problematic, as the volume of EU legislation that directly or indirectly impinges on the behaviour of actors within the EU is enormous. A clear feedback loop in the system is only guaranteed on the level of national governments and on the level of EU institutions, however. Feedback from the general public has been emerging in the last decade, but as yet is mostly limited to protest voting.

Despite all of the objections voiced above, the conceptualisation of the EU as a political system has fewer issues than other conceptualisations, as it heeds the dynamics of the system and avoids the problematic issue of European integration’s finality. In addition, system theory offers useful analytical frames which allow us to describe and explain political processes within the EU. The political cycle model which understands politics as a dynamic and interactive system can serve as an example here (Fiala, Schubert 2000: 75).
The political cycle model is based on Easton and Almond’s conception of politics as system which converts the inputs into outputs and features a feedback loop. In the words of Petr Fiala and Klaus Schubert, this model de facto represents a cyclic or a spiral process whose usual phases are the initiation, implementation, evaluation and termination/reformulation of a policy (Fiala, Schubert 2000: 76 – 85).

If in the discussion of Euroscepticism we were to consider the EU as a dynamic actor, the so-called soft Eurosceptics would represent a natural component of the political system, fulfilling the functions of evaluation or reformulation. At the same time, an unnatural enemy would be removed from political discussion, one which is presently analysed in the political science through a political prism. Removing the taboo against critical views on the present tempo and depth of European integration would likewise improve general political discussion within the EU, shifting the attention of actors away from the overemphasised constitutional aspects of the integration process and focusing this attention on the contents of common policies. This would minimise the concerns voiced in relation to the politicization of the EU by Stefano Bartolini (Bartolini 2006), Cees van der Eijk and Mark N. Franklin (Van der Eijk - Franklin 2004). Van der Eijk and Franklin see in the politicization of the EU the risk of awakening a “sleeping giant” by which they mean a certain line of conflict which has not been very important in Europe thus far. According to van der Eijk and Franklin, the awakening of this fault-line could destroy the existing incentives for party mobilization in most of the national party systems of the member countries and inhibit the formation of an Europe-wide party system, for instance (van der Eijk - Franklin 2004: 32-47). As for Bartolini, he is worried that politicization of the EU could mean that the baby would be thrown out with the bath water, as it might lead not to the politicization of the common policies (in the sense of an enlarged offer of alternative concepts being available), but to the politicization of the basic elements of the EU, such as membership of the individual countries or the EU’s institutional setting (Bartolini 2006: 35). In other words, if soft Euroscepticism were no longer a taboo, it would become “part of the game.”

If we bring together the conceptualisation of the EU as a political system with the conceptualisation of Euroscepticism, we will be in a better position to understand several phenomena which have been appearing both in the EU as a whole and in member states since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Repeated manifestations of disapproval of the deepening of European integration (for instance, the rejection of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe in France and Netherlands by referenda, or the increased popularity of so-called Eurosceptic parties in parliamentary elections) do not necessarily mean the electorate’s increased disapproval by of European integration as such, but rather its disapproval of the fact that the political system’s evaluation function is not working. Evaluating steps taken and potentially terminating or reformulating a policy are as legitimate a part of the political system as are the initial phases of articulating a policy, choosing a solution and applying it. In the EU, however, the critical elements of the political process which provide the system with feedback are chronically neglected or undervalued by the political elites; this is particularly true of the most conspicuous aspects of the integration process. Petr Fiala (Fiala 2010: 145–146) illustrates this fact by pointing to the speed with which the primary law of the EU was revised at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Whereas seven years passed between the approval of the Single European Act and the adoption of the Treaty on the EU, the revisions that followed, viz. the Amsterdam Treaty, Nice Treaty and the Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe,
were proposed at ever-shortening intervals, precluding the possibility of documents currently in force being evaluated and conclusions drawn. Over the last few years, the possibility of any reformulation or termination of a policy has been unacceptable to the EU’s political elite, as is apparent from both the repeated referenda on Nice and Lisbon Treaties and the attempts to exclude the referenda altogether from the process in which future developments of the EU are decided. The EU political elite’s inability to accept a “no,” and the fact that its way of dealing with disapproval consists in attempts to find a “yes” hidden inside, decrease the general confidence in the political system as such and lead to the mutual alienation of the public and the elites. Clearly, if evaluation is pushed out of the mechanisms used in the EU to formulate and constitute the primary law – the constitutional framework of European integration – such patterns of behaviour are transferred to everyday politics. A hypothesis that might seem daring can be proposed here: it is precisely because negative or critical feedback is underrated by the elites and pushed out of the EU’s political mainstream that the so-called Eurosceptic parties, especially the “soft” ones, have been successful recently and are gaining strength in both national and European politics. They aggregate discontent which – if constantly ignored – could gradually develop into a wholesale refusal of the EU’s political system as such. The universal success of soft Euroscepticism, which has always been present in the rhetoric of the political mainstream, can be explained by pointing out that it is in fact a manifestation of a natural part of the EU’s political cycle, however refused and suppressed it has been.

6. Conclusion

This paper has provided a normative analysis of Euroscepticism as it is currently understood. This phenomenon is most precisely defined in the context of its party-based manifestations, and it was in this area that the hitherto dominant division of Euroscepticism into soft and hard variants, made by Szczerbiak and Taggart, has arisen. The critical analysis of Euroscepticism which forms the core of the paper has uncovered four major issues concerning the EU’s character, determination of its finality, the political normativity of Euroscepticism and the theoretical perception of democracy in the EU. The prevailing conceptualisation of Euroscepticism is based on an implicit understanding of the EU as a static entity which is reaching certain finality; it is viewed through the prism of liberal-democratic theory. The pro-European stance apparently lacking in both soft and hard Euroscepticism is an equally implicit agreement with the tempo and character of European integration as it unfolded at the end of the 1990s.

But the choice made in this conceptualisation of Euroscepticism is not the only one possible. The EU can also be viewed differently, by using alternative premises, especially in terms of its character and the presence/lack of its finality. The argument that the EU can be defined as a dynamic political system which has not yet reached its finality is compelling. Its advantage is that it heeds the whole development of European integration whilst avoiding reducing support for the EU to support for its rapid federalisation. Grafting system theory onto the concept of Euroscepticism allows us to explain the success and substantial popularity of the so-called soft Eurosceptics, who are then not viewed as enemies of European integration but as its natural component, fulfilling the evaluation function of the political system. The disadvantage of such an alternative conception of Euroscepticism is, put briefly, a certain loosening of the category “pro-European.” European integration has never been,
metaphorically speaking, solely the story of the European Commission or the European Parliament.

I am in agreement with Szérbia and Taggart's claim that the study of Euroscepticism does not make sense unless the phenomenon is put in a positive context, which is made part of a typology containing and describing both positive and negative attitudes towards European integration. Given the arguments employed and developed in this paper one can surmise that no typology stands a chance of being generally accepted unless it respects the nature and reality of the EU. It must be grounded in explicitly articulated premises concerning the EU’s character, its finality and democratic procedures. Research into Euroscepticism should therefore first and foremost take a normative turn, as without clear definitions and conceptualisations supported by strong arguments, empirical studies are nothing but intellectual exercises.
Works cited

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