

ADVOCATES OR CHALLENGERS OF EUROPEANIZATION? AN INQUI- RY INTO THE DISCOURSE OF THE ROMANIAN ELITES ON THE EURO- PEAN UNION IN THE CONTEXT OF EU ELECTIONS 2014*

Loredana RADU

Alina BÂRGĂOANU

Loredana RADU

Associate Professor, Ph.D, Faculty of Communication and
Public Relations, National University of Political Science and
Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania
E-mail: loredana.radu@comunicare.ro

Alina BÂRGĂOANU

Professor, Ph.D, Faculty of Communication and Public
Relations, National University of Political Science and Public
Administration, Bucharest, Romania
E-mail: alina.bargaoanu@comunicare.ro

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on the role of elites in the Europeanization of the national public sphere. 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of political, administrative, and media elites in Romania were carried out between March 23 and April 24, 2014, which was on the eve of the 2014 European Elections campaign. Our research shows that, in general, the Romanian elites – be them political, administrative, or media-related – declare themselves as euro-enthusiasts or euro-realists; at the same time, through a diversity of blame-avoiding games, they use the EU as a means of diffusing (national) responsibility for crisis-related hot topics, such as the implementation of austerity measures. By identifying the key narratives of Europeanization in elites' discourse on the 2014 European Elections, this paper indicates that we witness a paradoxical trend, in which elites are rather challengers than advocates of Europeanization.

Keywords: Europeanization, public sphere, elites, Euroscepticism, European Elections 2014.

1. Introduction

The multi-layered crisis still confronting the EU has generated multiple changes in the Europeans' mindset. According to the most recent Eurobarometer (Standard EB no. 81), EU citizens continue to experience a low level of trust in the European Union; at the same time, they have grown more confident in their national parliaments and governments. Currently, the gap between citizens' trust in the EU, on the one hand, and citizens' trust in their national parliaments, on the other hand, has been lowering down to only 3% (31% vs. 28%), as compared to the pre-crisis situation, when it was around 15%. Plain statistics reveal that the public is willing to resurrect its trust in national institutions, but it is not willing to do the same as regards the EU. This is consistent with Sarah Hobolt and James Tilley's findings that 'when things go badly, and citizens hold the EU responsible, then people's trust in the EU institutions will decline' (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014, p. 9). We assume that this is one of the symptoms of re-nationalization of the national public spheres. Other recent symptoms include the low turnout and the ascent of anti-establishment and eurosceptic parties in the last elections for the European Parliament.

This paper argues that national elites partly orchestrate this retreat into the national public spheres. As far as Romania is concerned, the national elites play a key role in this phenomenon by engaging in a blame-avoidance game, by tacitly agreeing not to bring Europe forward on the public agenda, and by refusing to 'raise the heat on an issue that threatens to divide their party' (Hooghe and Marks, 2008, p. 19) – as the EU issue is. In order to test these assumptions, we carried out a series of 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of political, administrative, and media elites in Romania. Interviews were carried out between March 23 and April 24, 2014, right before the start of the campaign for European elections. Our research shows that, in general, the Romanian elites – be them political, administrative, or media-related – declare themselves as euro-enthusiasts or euro-realists; at the same time, through a diversity of blame-avoiding games (see Weaver, 1986; Hood, 2011; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014), they use the EU as a means of diffusing (national) responsibility for crisis-related hot topics, such as the implementation of austerity measures. Are these blame-avoidance games played at the expense of Europeanization? Building on Trenz's recent paper on the narrative construction of European society, our research also reveals that the Romanian elites contribute to the so-called 'banalization' (Trenz, 2014) of the discourse on Europe. By doing this, they paint the image of a 'post-heroic Europe' (Trenz, 2014), which is neither an object of triumph (i.e. inspiring euro-enthusiasm) nor an expression of a trauma (i.e. euroscepticism). Rather, it is a mild taken-for-granted reality, which does not have the capacity to lift up the spirits or to mobilize (pro-EU) energies – either of leaders and elites or of citizens.

2. Europeanization – the corollary of European integration

For decades now, in seeking to address EU democratic deficit, communication scholars and political scientists have focused on two interrelated processes: Europe-

anization and the emergence of the European public sphere. If one could summarize the academic debate in one single phrase, the best choice would be that 'Europeanization literature meets the public sphere debate' (Meyer, 2005).

Europeanization of the national public spheres is often regarded as a corollary of European integration and as a means of providing for its sustainability (Koopmans and Pfetsch, 2003; Koopmans and Erbe, 2004; Brüggemann *et al.*, 2006; Machill, Beiler and Fischer, 2006; de Vreese *et al.*, 2006; Kitus, 2008). Europeanization is a form of transnationalization, and some use the two terms interchangeably in order to name the process of creating a common European discourse (Brüggemann *et al.*, 2006, p. 1) on topics of common concern and relevance. Europeanization can be 'approached as a set of puzzles' (Radaelli, 2004, p. 2), and assembling the pieces of this puzzle has proved to be challenging for both researchers and decision-makers. Inquiring into the complex mechanisms of Europeanization has gradually transformed the public debate into a scientific quest for the meaning of Europe.

One very useful differentiation is that between 'downloading' and 'uploading' Europeanization processes. This has been translated into the well-known typology – vertical and horizontal Europeanization (Börzel and Risse, 2000; Koopmans and Erbe, 2004; Meyer, 2005; Liebert, 2007; Brüggemann and Kleinen von Königsłow, 2007). Vertical Europeanization consists of communicative linkages between the national and the European level, be they bottom-up or top-down, whereas horizontal Europeanization consists of communicative linkages between different member states. Over time, scholars have come up with several variations on this typology, speaking, for example, about comprehensive Europeanization (high levels of vertical and horizontal Europeanization), segmented Europeanization (vertical, but no horizontal Europeanization), Europeanization aloof from the EU (horizontal without vertical Europeanization), and parochial public sphere (neither vertical, nor horizontal Europeanization) (Brüggemann and Kleinen von Königsłow, 2007).

Researching Europeanization has been – to a large extent – focused on downloading processes. A suggestive theorization belongs to Radaelli (2000) who identified four ways in which member states respond to EU-driven changes. First, he considered 'accommodation', in which downloading is compatible with domestic structures, policies, discourses and identities; second, he spoke about 'transformation', where downloading poses a challenge to these areas; third, 'inertia', which happens when a political will to bring about change does not exist; last, 'retrenchment', which is when a downloaded policy area stimulates opposition to the EU and gives birth to anti-European interests. Following this top-down logic, Radaelli formulated the following definition: 'Europeanization consists of processes of a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies' (Radaelli, 2004, p. 4).

Top-down approaches 'have been increasingly criticized for their rather narrow top-down perspective which conceptualizes the process largely as a one-way street and treats target countries as passive recipients of EU demands for change' (Borzel and Pamuk, 2011, p. 6). Our paper is premised on what it is often referred to as a 'domestic turn' in Europeanization studies (Moller Sousa, 2006; McCauley, 2011). Departing from this domestic turn, we explore the role of elites in linking the top-down with the bottom-up Europeanization processes of the national public sphere. We premise our approach on Tanja Börzel's statement that 'member states are not merely the passive takers of European demands for domestic change. They may act proactively to shape European policies, institutions and processes to which they have to adapt later' (Börzel, 2003, p. 3). Noteworthy, 'Member State governments may be the most important shapers of EU decisions. Yet, domestic actors are their main takers' (Börzel, 2003, p. 4). Thus, investigating the role played by domestic actors in the Europeanization of the public spheres or in their (re)nationalization becomes particularly relevant.

3. Europeanization of the national public spheres: the role of elites

There is a strong tendency in the literature to explain the lack of cohesion and solidarity in crisis-stricken EU by entering the rather complex field of EU communication studies, while tackling sensitive subjects, such as the Europeanization of national politics and policies or the creation of an EU public sphere. EU communication scholars argue that the lack of solidarity in Europe or the lack of a collective identity are connected to the European 'public sphere deficit' (Ward, 2004). As any theoretical field, EU communication is subject to many controversies and opposing perspectives. Some believe that we cannot speak of an EU public sphere in a meaningful way (Baisnée, 2007), while others argue that public spheres 'are social constructions in the true sense of the word' (Risse, 2003, p. 5). Nowadays, scholars no longer search for an EU public sphere outside of or separated from national public spheres. Rather, the emphasis is on the degree to which the national public spheres are gradually Europeanized and European issues are regularly dealt with in the various national media (as underlined by van de Steeg and Risse, 2010). In this context, the concept of Europeanization mediates the debate about the emergence of the EU public sphere.

This paper treats elites – be those political, economic, administrative or media-related – as domestic actors and agents of Europeanization, who steer the contemporary process of European unification (Best, Lengyel and Verzichelli, 2012, p. 1). Noteworthy, 'the key role in the interchange between actors and institutions belongs to elites in that they are the dominant actors' (Best, Lengyel and Verzichelli, 2012, p. 1). It is true that, in the context of the crisis, the EU has gone through the transition from the 'permissive consensus' to 'constraining dissensus', meaning that 'elites ... must look over their shoulders when negotiating European issues' (Hooghe and Marks, 2008, p. 5) and enjoy a lesser role in 'spreading' the EU message. Still, elites are among the most prominent actors in the social and political dynamics of Euro-

peanization, but can act as either advocates or challengers of Europeanization. They are under a two-fold pressure. First, they are pressured by citizens who, in their own turn, are pressured by economic and financial difficulties. Second, they are pressured by the need to develop a feeling of belonging to 'Europe', the need to believe in a common European future and to act on this belief. In this dialectic, advocating for the EU could prove to be a losing card, given the citizens' discontent with the EU (both with its current form and its future model); at the same time, challenging the EU and its possible future is almost unconceivable both in intellectual and in practical terms (the old argument that the EU will lose its global weight and relevance if it does not stick together).

We argue that, under the pressure of the constraining dissensus, the Romanian elites have to compromise between the national electoral logic and the European electoral logic, respectively. In the national logic, EU is an abstract and far-distant concept, which induces the average citizen mixed feelings, if not plain indifference. In the European logic, EU stands for community, solidarity and a shared future. Elites adjust their discourse on the EU in a way that would allow them to meet the expectations of their national public, who tends to be more and more eurosceptic or euro-indifferent. It is our assumption that the Romanian elites compromise between these two types of logic through blame-avoidance strategies and banalization of the discourse on the EU. By banalization of the public discourse on the EU, we mean 'securing consent to the continued functioning of the EU system even in the absence of support for European integration' (Cram, 2010, p. 9).

As we have underlined, elites play a major role in the Europeanization of the national public sphere. They are inevitably wired to the public opinion in their countries and they will most probably be concurrent with the prevailing feelings about the EU. Consequently, elites' discourse will most probably incorporate or respond to these prevailing feelings. Elites discourse about Europe echoes citizens' opinions about Europe. Simultaneously, as elites are agents of Europeanization, citizens' opinions about Europe are shaped by the way in which these elites approach the question of EU and its future.

4. Research objectives and methodology

Our research has three interconnected objectives: to determine whether the Romanian political, administrative and media elites play a blame-avoiding game relatively to EU; to identify the narratives of Europeanization that are used by the Romanian elites in their discourse on Europe; and to analyze whether the Romanian elites are advocates or challengers of Europeanization. Departing from these research objectives, we have derived four research questions:

1. Do the Romanian elites use blame-avoiding or credit-claiming strategies in their discourse on EU?
2. If yes, which are the most frequently used strategies in this respect?

3. What are the key narratives of Europeanization that the Romanian elites use in their discourse?
4. Are political, administrative and media elites advocates or challengers of the Europeanization processes?

In order to provide empirically relevant answers to these questions, we have carried out 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of Romanian elites (i.e. former and current members of the European Parliament, leaders in central or local administration, influential academics and political analysts), out of which eight are active at the national or the European level, and seven at the regional or local level. In order to effectively manage the interviews, we used an interview guide consisting of 10 open questions, out of which three focused on the EU crisis, three on (then) coming European elections, one on the future of the EU, and the last three on Romania's economic and political situation. Given the semi-structured type of the interview, we allowed the interviewees to allocate unequal amounts of time and attention to our questions. With one exception, all interviews were complete, which means that we were able to ask and to receive answers to all the 10 questions. The interviews were carried out between March 23 and April 24, 2014, right before the start of the campaign for the European elections. The average duration of interviews was of 70 minutes; they were recorded and transcribed, while leaving the identity of interviewees confidential.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. *EU in the elites' discourse: blame avoidance and dilution of responsibility*

Public opinion is not formed in a vacuum. Apart from the contextual factors – the crisis of the European Union, the prevailing eurosceptic attitudes, and the second-order character of the EU elections, citizens' perceptions of the European Parliament and EU institutions are filtered through the national political discourse (Peter and De Vreese, 2004). Without ignoring the role of media, this paper focuses on elites and their role in Europeanization processes. As we have already underlined, our premise is that the cross-pressure to which elites are subjected today has created fractions and contradictions in the very structure and content of their discourse on Europe. As the Romanian elites strive to accommodate citizens' growing discontent with the EU, on the one hand, and the (traditional) rhetoric of a bright and peaceful European future, on the other hand, we expect a growing propensity for blame avoidance strategies in elites' discourse on the EU.

In carrying out our analysis, we build on Hobolt and Tilley research, who – by investigating 211 statements done by Angela Merkel, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Brian Cowen and Enda Kenny between 2008 and 2012 – found that 'dilution of responsibility is a favored strategy by those politicians who <<were on watch>> when the economic crisis hit' (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014, p. 101) and that EU 'allows politicians to muddy the waters by sharing responsibility across national govern-

ments and EU institutions’ (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014, p. 101). We instrument the key blame-avoiding and credit-claiming strategies as categorized by Hobolt and Tilley (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Blame-avoiding and credit-claiming strategies of national government in the EU

	Strategy	Approach	EU example
Blame-avoiding	Find a scapegoat	Deflect blame by blaming the others	Blame EU institutions or other member state governments
	Redefine the issue	Distance oneself from the problem	Present the issue as an EU problem rather than a domestic issue
	Circle the wagons	Diffuse blame by spreading it among as many policy makers	Spread the responsibility among EU nations and institutions
Credit-claiming	I did it my way.	Take sole credit for positive outcomes	Take credit for positive EU-level decisions or outcomes
	We made it happen	Claim association with positive outcomes of collective responsibility	Highlight association with positive EU-level decisions or outcomes

Source: Hobolt and Tilley (2014, p. 103)

This section helps us to formulate answers to the first two research questions as previously defined:

1. Do the Romanian elites use blame-avoiding or credit-claiming strategies in their discourse on EU?
2. If yes, which are the most frequently used such strategies?

As expected, the answer to the first research question is affirmative, which is consistent with the widely acknowledged fact that ‘individuals assign responsibility instinctively, and the responsibility represents a powerful psychological cue’ (Iyengar, 1989, p. 880). Claiming credit or avoiding blame came as natural strategies in the discourse of our interviewees.

As regards the second research question, our analysis of the 15 interviews shows the ‘redefine the issue’ and ‘circle the wagons’ strategies as the preferred ones among Romanian elites. ‘Finding the scapegoat’ is present, too, but not as heavily employed as the first two. We could also notice an important discrepancy between the answers formulated by the political leaders, on the one hand, and those given by the media elites or political analysts, on the other. Political leaders tend to play blame-avoidance games, whereas political and media analysts are able to make more balanced assertions about the EU.

When asked about the design of their electoral message, European Parliament (EP) candidates answered that this will definitely touch upon national problems, for these are the only ones relevant for the voters.

‘In our party the message will be national. Some will try, some will try ... it is very clear that those that are currently EP members will try to bring the discussion close to the European Parliament, an European discourse. They will try for sure. *But it is not about what they wish, or about what the party imposes on them, or about what the media wants, or the public opinion, because if you go in the campaign and you speak about European themes, at the countryside you will speak for yourself – the same will happen in the big cities*’ (emphasis added) (EP candidate).

This interviewee uses the 'circle the wagons' strategy to diffuse blame for a non-European discourse on the average Romanian citizens, who, arguably, are not able to understand the 'EU topics' or do not care about them:

'I do not expect to see a debate on European themes in Romania unless, as I said, it serves the promotion of some politicians' ideas. If one would try (to promote a European message), I think they would go for the idea – we do not speak about European subjects that are far too abstract and too far from people, our public is not interested in such debates, let's speak about more specific things' (emphasis added) (Political analyst).

The alleged EU-unaware citizens are the main reason for which EP candidates will not touch upon European issues in their electoral discourse. Thus, citizens' will actually absolves candidates of the guilt of not bringing EU up in their political discourse about the European Elections. One EP candidate reveals that her/his party has actually decided to go for a local-national discourse because there is no credit they could claim as associated with EU membership:

'The incapacity to attract European funds is now turning against us and we cannot use anymore the topic of European funds. I mean we used it last time and we said that this is what Europe is about, European funds, benefits, projects, development, and infrastructure. Anything you could say about the impact of the European funds. Now it is very difficult to say this' (emphasis added) (EP candidate).

One public administration leader circles the wagons when analyzing how Romania was affected by the crisis; the responsibility for Romania's deficit is diffused – as it is not clear who should have re-funded this deficit or who, more specifically, has disappointed the Romanians:

'Romanians have been disappointed based on their expectations about the EU. We refer to money, free movement, labor, and, why not, to the influence exerted by Romanian politicians in Brussels. Austerity and the exaggerations over the over-indebtedness were no good. In order to be able to economically develop and to improve the living standards, it ought that this debt that we have as a country to have been re-funded, so that we would be able to pay them in a shorter period of time' (emphasis added) (Representative of administrative elite).

Another interviewee scapegoats the EU when discussing about the austerity measures:

'(...)we could go for a negative message regarding the austerity measures that the EU has taken because they have affected us. We did not take (austerity measures), to the extent we implemented the austerity measures imposed by the EU; it was very bad for the people. The perception. That many jobs have been lost, that the salaries and the pensions went down, that the small and medium enterprises went bankrupt and so on' (emphasis added) (EP candidate).

According to this statement, EU is (solely) responsible for the belt-tightening measures implemented in Romania. The Romanian government was somehow ‘obliged’ to implement these measures, which negatively impacted upon people who lost jobs and whose life standards eroded.

The same ‘scapegoating’ tactics are visible in the words of this representative of the administrative elite:

‘We have to admit, as I personally admit, that very often when I was discussing with the representatives of the business environment about the causes that generate this economic crisis, our thoughts used to led us towards this area, towards the *European Union* – *we approached it not necessarily as generating the economic crisis, but rather as a big contributor to letting this crisis to fully unfold*’ (emphasis added) (Representative of the administrative elite).

Noteworthy, the interviewee does not refer to a certain European institution or to a specific political leader, but to the EU as an entity. This confirms our assumption that blame-avoidance is present and is done at the expense of the EU as a concept. Even though we found that scapegoating is rarely used as a blame-avoiding strategy, and elites employ more subtle mechanisms for diffusing responsibility, it is somehow instructive to see that this kind of statements could potentially transform elites’ soft euroscepticism, as a way of contesting EU policies and decisions, into popular hard euroscepticism, understood as anti-EU feelings. The mechanism lying behind this transformation is rather clear: if EU (and not specific institutions or political leaders) is responsible for uninspired political and economic decisions, then EU is to be blamed for the crisis; if EU is to be blamed for the crisis, then EU is to be blamed for the consequences of the crisis, which – for the ordinary citizen – are mainly reflected into economic strain and financial austerity. Arguably, elites do not explicitly intend to scapegoat the EU; however, their narration about the EU instills a certain feeling of blame, which is definitely attributed to the EU as a whole.

As already mentioned, we found a discrepancy between the discourse of the political and administrative elites, on the one hand, and the discourse of the media elites (i.e. political analysts), on the other hand. The most striking difference resides in the fact that political analysts tend to stand for more balanced opinions regarding the role played by the EU in the crisis. For instance, one former political leader and current analyst reveals the mechanism that lies behind the blame-avoiding and credit-claiming strategies promoted by political leaders:

‘*EU is not guilty for everything that goes wrong; I would say that it is the other way around; when we refer to the mistakes done by the political class, we could mention the creation of <Brussels> as an amorphous entity, which is very easy to scapegoat after the European Councils: some leaders, in case of victory, came home claiming this success for themselves, whereas in case of defeat, they said that the Brussels had won*’(emphasis added) (Representative of media elite).

Trying to answer who is to blame for the crisis, one political analyst stated that blame-avoidance is a strategy that is somehow embedded into the human nature and into the way humans tackle crises in general. Thus, blame-avoiding is a natural process, which intensifies during critical moments:

'It is clear that when you are passing through a period of economic turmoil, which implicitly gives birth to social problems, the tendency will be to close down within, this meaning that there is this tendency to assign blame on external factors, in the first place. It is a human instinct, no matter whether we speak about the political class in general, about the governing party or about a coalition of parties' (emphasis added) (Political analyst).

As regards the Romanians and their traditional and taken for granted euro-optimism, this interviewee analyses its roots in a very expressive manner:

'So, Romanians are different as compared to other categories, as they are among those who still believe in a European vision, but Romanians also believe in Santa Clause, they believe in many things, so I do not know whether this could necessarily be an indicator (of euro-optimism). The EU should deliver more than prosperity and peace, this meaning a coherent vision' (emphasis added) (Political analyst and journalist on EU affairs).

We can still find blame-avoiding patterns in this statement, as the responsibility for the 'coherent European vision' is transferred entirely to the European Union, with no focus on the role and responsibility of the Member States, who should equally contribute to the creation of this vision. When discussing Romania's standing in the EU, one could notice a complex of inferiority, which is also a means of avoiding blame and diffusing responsibility. For instance, one EP candidate stated that:

'This is where the rivalry intervened and it became evident who leads the Union, and what means the EU for those that are leading it. In fact, it is not a union; it is a kind of more or less fortunate leadership' (emphasis added) (EP Candidate).

The same clue of a complex of inferiority is to be found in the following statement, made by a representative of the administrative elite:

'The crisis has weakened citizens' trust in the EU, they feel far away from the institutions. The more powerful countries take decisions in the name of the EU. The decision-making process does not reflect local and regional interests' (emphasis added) (Representative of the administrative elite).

Speaking about Romania's relationship with the EU during the crisis, there is a myth of unmet expectations, which is also a manifestation of blame-avoiding through redefining the issue. For instance, one administrative leader stated:

'In presenting Romania's ascension to the EU or the pre-ascension period, most politicians and economists focused only on the strengths, on the benefits of

membership [...] But, after a while, *we realized on our own that life's not really pink* (emphasis added) (Administrative leader).

The analysis of the 15 interviews shows that blame-avoidance is used at the expense of the EU as an entity. When asked about EU, the crisis and the coming elections, Romanian leaders would most probably redefine the issues and circle the wagons, whereas they would be rather reluctant in directly scapegoating the EU. Technically, their discourse is somehow stuck between Romanians' great expectations about the EU and the popular disillusion with the benefits of membership. We consider the following statement made by one of the media elites as encapsulating Romanians' philosophy about the European Union:

'We like the European Union because it looks good; it is good for us to be seen in the company of European leaders. Brussels has a positive, harmonious connotation in the ears of the Romanians, but too few of the decision-makers [...] really strive to understand how EU policies work and, more importantly, what these policies mean to Romania and how they could influence them' (emphasis added) (Political analyst).

As already mentioned, the difference between the discourse of media elites and the discourse of political and administrative elites is emblematic for our study. If media elites are able to make powerful and balanced judgments about the EU, political and administrative leaders avoid blame by employing two preferred strategies – redefine the issue and circle the wagons. The object of these strategies is the EU as an entity overall. Rarely do politicians or administrators refer to specific institutions of decision-makers when attributing responsibility for the current economic and political situation in the EU or in Romania. In other terms, they use the EU as an umbrella for blame, which makes them challengers, rather than advocates of Europeanization.

5.2. *Narratives of Europeanization in the discourse of the Romanian elites*

We are also interested in identifying the narratives by which Romanian elites become challengers of Europeanization, and, thus, to answer the third research question: What are the key narratives of Europeanization that the Romanian elites use in their discourse?

In order to answer this, our research has built on Hans-JorgTrenz's recent work on the narrative construction of European society (2014). In Trenz's view, 'Europeanization relates to stories or narratives through which we can describe the contours of European societies in the plural and European society in the singular' (Trenz, 2014, p. 5). Trenz examines four inter-related processes in the discursive construction of Europe (see Table 2, below).

Table 2: Narratives of Europeanization

<i>Europeanization</i>	<i>Affirmation</i>	<i>Disruption</i>
The extraordinary (heroic)	1) Triumph	3) Trauma
The ordinary (banal)	2) Routine	4) Crisis

Source: Trenz (2014, p. 7)

First, 'triumphant Europeanism' is a means of consecrating the EU as affirmation of the extraordinary (Trenz, 2014, p. 1). The 'sacred European Union' stands for shared future, solidarity and humanistic values. Second, banal Europeanism is the affirmation of everyday life. The 'banal European Union' is about pragmatic benefits of European integration, projects, infrastructure, and development. Banal Europeanism means that 'there is little effort to narrate the story of Europeanization, to make Europe salient, or to reflect on its merits. Europeanization rather operates as a mechanism at the subconscious level' (Trenz, 2014, p. 2). Third, trauma is a means of demystifying the EU. Trauma unfolds primarily through euroscepticism, understood as opposition to European integration. Fourth, political crisis is understood as disruption of everyday life. This is when the discourse about EU focuses on domestic or European political confrontations; it is not Europe that matters, but, rather, the political dispute.

Based on the analysis of the 15 interviews, we find it relevant to insist upon the concept of 'banal Europeanization', as it helps us to build our case on how Romanian elites tend to change from advocates into challengers of Europeanization. We found this trend towards 'banalization' of Europe in the statements of all our interviewees. We identified a strong correlation between banal Europeanism and the utilitarian identification with the European Union. Whenever interviewees discussed the causes of euroscepticism, they focused on the pragmatic benefits of European integration, maintaining that if Europe cannot deliver anymore, then citizens' eroding trust into the EU is legitimate and easy to understand. Below we note only a few examples of this stance:

'The source of euroscepticism could be the *bad management of expectations*. You see, in our case, in Romania, we hoped a lot and we had far greater expectations in 2007 as compared to what we have been offered now, in 2014' (emphasis added) (Representative of the administrative elite).

'EU citizens have grown eurosceptic because of *low employment, high prices, high corruption, the gap between countries in terms of standard of living*' (emphasis added) (Representative of the administrative elite).

'(...)it all starts from our *expectations related to the EU: money, free movement of money and of labor, capacity to influence the Brussels*. Since we have been disappointed by all these aspects, it is normal that the enthusiasm will decrease' (emphasis added) (Media elite).

'*It is a competition*. Let's not forget that this Union started from an economic union, from a competition among economies. They do not want us to develop, to grow. We have a huge potential. Huge!' (emphasis added) (Political elite).

Few interviewees tried to reinvigorate the 'heroic Europe', the Europe of strong values and principled actions. For instance, one manager in the Romanian public administration concluded by wondering whether the future would imply more Europe or less Europe:

'I would say (in the future) we should have more Europe. More Europe means having the ability to *go beyond the individual good or the regional good in order to see the common good*' (emphasis added) (Representative of the administrative elite).

Banal Europeanism takes Europe for granted and transforms it into a sum of tangible benefits, such as individual economic wellbeing. While acknowledging 'Europeanization as normalization' and the merits of this utilitarian approach, Trenz highlights two subsequent dangers (2014, p. 10). First, banal Europeanism does not have the mobilizing force of some of its 'institutional stalemates', such as nationalism, populism, socialism, or any other political force that lit peoples' spirits in the past. 'Such a post-heroic account of contemporary European history might result in some weak form of collective alignment' (Trenz, 2014, p. 10). In the long run, this kind of normalization of European integration could simply result into citizens' disengagement with underlying European values, such as solidarity. Second, by normalizing Europe, the EU remains a fragile construction. If EU is good only when it generates a nice return, then citizens' attachment to the EU is conditioned on EU's economic performance. In this context, the idea of creating a sort of 'European patriotism' is simply non-sense. How could one create emulation around an idea whose validity is conditioned on how much it can deliver? It is not elites' euroscepticism that challenges Europe, but their indulgence in this logic that de-mystifies Europe and reduces it to a sum of benefits. By normalizing Europe, by reducing it to a return-on-investment ratio, it comes natural for citizens to punish it when this return does not meet their expectations or the capital of trust that they invested.

6. Conclusions. Challenging EU in the national public spheres

Are political, administrative and media elites advocates or challengers of the Europeanization processes? Our research reveals that, in the context of EU elections, Romanian elites chose to normalize Europe and to narrate EU in a banal way. Previous research on elites' role in the Europeanization of the Romanian public sphere is rather scarce. Two relevant studies found that EU used to be narrated as an engine of peace and solidarity during the pre-accession period (Seagle, 2014), whereas in the post-accession period it was mainly framed either as a 'savior' or as 'arbitrator' (Bângăoanu, Dobrescu and Marincea, 2010). Thus, according to these findings, the prevailing narration was either triumphant or traumatic, to employ Trenz's typology.

Our research sheds light on two new (related) phenomena. The first is blame-avoidance through two privileged strategies: redefine the issue and circle the wagons. Romanian elites symbolically punish the EU for the crisis, for the EU elections' envisaged outcome, and for the harsh economic situation. Whether they do it consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, intentionally or non-intentionally are relevant questions, yet out of the scope of this paper. What our research indicates is the fact that elites attribute responsibility to the EU as a diffuse, stand-alone concept. They do not attribute responsibility to a specific European institution, to a well-identified European policy or leader. As Sara Hobolt and James Tilley noticed, this phenomenon has long term effects: 'When people hold the EU responsible for poor performance, but cannot hold it accountable for that performance, they become less trusting of its institutions as a whole' (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014, p. 147). The EU has become a sym-

bolical scapegoat, which coagulates the blame-avoiding energies of political and administrative leaders.

The second phenomenon is the emergence of banal Europeanism in the discourse of Romanian elites. Europe is no longer narrated as a triumph (i.e. 'the Messianic Europe'), not even as a trauma (i.e. arbitrating/penalizing instance). It is narrated as an every-day reality. This is definitely a sign of the normalization of the public discourse on Europe, a more 'sober' one. It is also a manifestation of the well-documented 'post-accession syndrome', signaling that EU has surpassed its triumphant stage and is now approached as yet another construction, an ordinary political project. Why would anyone be motivated to stand for an ordinary project? Why should we defend it?

These two combined phenomena have several long-term implications, many of which remain to be further analyzed. However, one important long-term consequence is that EU is on the edge of losing its symbolical appeal. The magnitude of such a phenomenon is arguably higher in those member states that enjoyed periods of euro-enthusiasm (triumphant Europeanism) right before the crisis. In the case of these countries, the way in which elites narrate about Europe might induce the ordinary citizen the idea of a 'paradise lost', of a 'lost promise'. This could also be the case of Romania, which, in spite of some apparent EU trends, can still be characterized as a euro-enthusiast member state. With the major change that this kind of euro-enthusiasm is different, less than exuberant and more of the 'banal' type. In other terms, the Romanians – elites and ordinary citizens alike – appear to vacillate between mild euro-enthusiasm and downright euro-apathy.

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