EUROPEAN NARRATIVES AND EUROSCEPTICISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE EU

Manuela Caiani, Benedetta Carlotti, Marko Lovec, Faris Kočan, Maria Wincławska and Adam Balcer

"Manuela Caiani and her colleagues systematically explore Euroscepticism comparatively across the Right/Left political spectrum in five countries. Drawing on the framing perspective, among other social movement concepts, their analysis identifies a number of different contextually based Eurosceptic narratives, showing that Euroscepticism is more variegated and nuanced than often portrayed. For scholars interested in current Eurosceptic trajectories and their prospects, this is a timely and instructive contribution meriting a close reading."

—**David A. Snow,** *Distinguished Professor Emeritus, University of California, Irvine*, USA

"Attitudes to European integration largely depend on how it is framed in different national and subnational public spheres. To uncover them demands meticulous, systematic qualitative work and expert triangulation based on different sources. Caiani et al.'s work makes a valuable contribution to mapping the diversity of frames across Europe by focusing on a neglected geopolitical area: Eastern Europe and the Balkan region. In so doing, it improves our understanding of the Eurosceptic undercurrents, which, while in the minority, challenge the European project."

—**Juan Diez Medrano,** *Universidad Carlos III Madrid, Spain*

European Narratives and Euroscepticism in the Western Balkans and the EU

Moving from a social movement perspective, this timely volume examines narratives on Euroscepticism and frames on Europe from below, at the party and social movement levels. Revealing perspectives from both the Right and the Left, it unpacks the emergence, re-emergence and increase in critical 'voices' and opposition towards Europe.

Based on extensive fieldwork in two candidate countries for accession to the EU and three member states, it offers insight from analysis of focus groups, interviews with Eurosceptic and pro-European political actors and ordinary citizens, together with frame analysis and scrutiny of archival material, electoral manifestoes and organisational documents. Revealing the development of Eurocritical frames, it demonstrates the differences and similarities in narratives used to address Europe and the conceptualisation of Euroscepticism. Key cases examined include the rise of illiberalism in post-transition Slovenia; complex Euroscepticism in Poland; the path from strong support to harsh opposition in Italy; indecision over membership in North Macedonia; anticipating the future while revisiting the past in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Offering guidelines for the direction of future research and policy, *European Narratives and Euroscepticism in the Western Balkans and the EU* is essential reading for scholars and students of political sociology, political science, European studies and international relations, as well as policy makers concerned with trajectories pro and against Europe and the European integration process.

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Contents

Figures

Tables

Abbreviations

AfD	Alternative for Germany
BiH	Bosnia and Hercegovina
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CERV	Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme
COS	Cultural opportunity structures
DC	Christian Democratic Party
DPA	Dayton Peace Agreement
DPMNE	Demokratska partita za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo
ECB	European Central Bank
ECI	European Citizens' Initiative
EEC	European Economic Community
EP	European Parliament
ERM	Exchange rate mechanism
EU	European Union
EUFOR	European Union Force in BiH
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FdI	Brothers of Italy
FG	Focus Group
FI	France Unbowed
FN	Forza Nuova
FPÖ	Austrian Freedom Party
GAL	Green-alternative-libertarian
GDP (PPP)	Gross Domestic Product per Capita based on Puchase Power Parity
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bi- and Trans-sexual, Queer
LMŠ	Marjan Šarec's List
M5S	Five Star Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPF	Narrative Policy Framework
OHR	Office of the High Representative
PiS	Law and Justice Party
PO	Civic Platform
POS	Political Opportunity Structure

PTB	Workers' Party of Belgium
PVV	Partij voor de Vreijheid
RN	National Rally
RS	Republika Srpska
SAA	Stabilization and Association Agreement
SAP	Stabilization and Association Process
SDS	Slovenian Democratic Party
SNS	Slovenian National Party
SPS	Socialist Party of Slovenia
TAN	Traditional-authoritarian-conservative
TEU	Trattato sull'Unione europea
USA	United States of America
VMRO	Vnatrešna makedonska revolucionexna organizacija
VOX	Vox
WBc	Western Balkan country

1 European narratives and Euroscepticism

An introduction

The best way to fully stabilize the Balkans is to permanently anchor the region to the European family.

(*Giorgia Meloni, FdI ministerial meeting on the Western Balkans, April 3, 2023*)[1]

1.1 Introduction

As the quotation at the beginning of the chapter shows, the entry of the Western Balkans into the European Union (EU) "family" has become an important issue for old member states, particularly in light of the current Russo-Ukrainian crisis. The accession of Western Balkans was described as a priority for the EU by the Italian foreign minister and vice-president of the Italian Council of Ministers, Antonio Tajani.

However, Europe and the European integration are contested concepts, whose meanings are different for different actors, as well as are testified by the massive pro-EU protest in Moldova, which brought tens of thousands of citizens to streets in May 2023.[2] They change in time and become a terrain of struggle and contestation within and across countries, justifying the (pro/contra) positions towards the European integration process itself, giving birth to different collective identities and political action(s).

This book investigates European narratives (and Euroscepticism) from below, from the Right and the Left, in five countries in Europe: two candidate countries for accession to the EU—North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter BiH)—and three member states (one founding member and two that joined the EU in the twenty-first century): Italy, Poland and Slovenia.[3]

This comparative analysis is particularly valuable since it portrays similarities and differences among Eastern/Central/Southeastern and Western Europe, as well as member and non-member states (or quasi-member states)—filing an empirical gap on this respect—as well as similarities and differences across various collective actors (political parties and social movements), something also rarely compared.

In spite of the visible differences among these countries, they have, in fact, something in common: the presence (emergence or re-emergence) and increase in

the recent past of critical "voices" towards Europe, which not necessarily entails Euroscepticism (or a rejection of Europe) tout court.

While the wave of anti-austerity protests in the early 2010s re-emphasized that the time of "permissive consensus" concerning European integration is over (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), they were also marked by the "low visibility" (Flesher Fominaya, 2017, p. 1) or even "invisibility" (Kaldor & Selchow, 2013, p. 79) of Europe. More recently, however, organizations (both political parties and movements, on the Right and the Left) from across the political spectrum are increasingly advancing their own "visions of Europe" based on strong European identities (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2022). In the second half of the 2010s, mobilization in favour of "Europe" and against "nationalism" became a crucial element for many left-wing and liberal activists, especially in the face of significant increase in the electoral strength of far-right parties. Simultaneously, far-right groups organized protests in response to the intensifying "refugee crisis" (Caiani & Císař, 2019; Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019). Moreover, Euroscepticism seems to have become a trans-national issue.

While support for joining the EU was traditionally high in North Macedonia (around 70%), the last years have seen an increase in right-wing nationalist outbursts, including a violent attack on the Macedonian parliament in April 2017. The adoption of the French proposal to remove the veto in June 2022 caused violent outbursts in North Macedonia and further strengthened Eurosceptic narratives in that country. This is even more complex in the case of BiH, where on paper 77.4% of people support EU membership, but in Republika Srpska (RS), only 54.4% of people support EU membership, whereas in the Federation of BiH that figure is 90.1% (Klix, 2022). In parallel, the other three countries included in the study (Poland, Slovenia and Italy) have significant anti-EU sentiment coming from both the Right and the Left, and this must be comprehensively analysed in a manner that moves beyond the simple framework of "Euroscepticism" (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009).

Moreover, in these five countries, Eurosceptic and nationalist political forces and political parties in recent years have become not only stronger in terms of social penetration but also part of governing coalitions or governments' leaders— such as Gruevski, leader of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization— Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity in North Macedonia; Salvini of the Lega party in Italy; Morawiecki of the Law and Justice, PiS, party in Poland; and Janša, from the Slovenian Democratic Party, SDS, in Slovenia. Also in BiH, these trajectories can be traced in the ruling ethno-nationalist party led by Dodik, who also serves as a member of the tripartite presidency on the state level (Kočan, 2022).

This book aims at going beyond Euroscepticism, analysing and "unpacking" a variety of narratives on Europe from below, at the level of parties and social movements. While Euroscepticism is almost a long-term political phenomenon that developed hand in hand with the development of the European integration project, the most recent critical events (such as the pandemic crisis and the recent Russo-Ukrainian conflict) coupled with the potential enlargement to the Balkans

have renewed the attention on it. Euroscepticism nowadays is a diffused phenomenon that involves left- and right-wing parties and grassroots movements and is diffused among the public at large. As an example, it is enough to mention the anti-austerity protest back in the 2010s that showed how the permissive consensus has transformed itself in a "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe & Marks, 2007). Decisions taken at the European level are indeed not anymore the results of closed negotiations among the European elite but are rather subject to the people's scrutiny and criticism. As a matter of fact, references to the European dimension of policy-making have become a regular feature of the protest arena (in struggles on labour, women, environment, territorial independentism, etc.; Della Porta, 2020b). This is true even if the main issue at stake is not simply the European integration process (on environmental issues, see Caiani & Lubarda, 2023).

Such protests and criticisms come from both the Left and the Right of the ideological spectrum, while for left-wing players, Europe has become a "strange beast" (Caiani and Weisskircher, 2021) even if they have strengthened their feelings as European, right-wing players exalt the nationalist turn besides recognizing the importance of working and trading together among member states. This is to say that there is a dominant tendency towards the European identity even if the EU is strongly criticized from several perspectives.

All in all, what are the core dimensions of criticism towards the EU? Which narratives develop from below? How many different notions of Europe are criticized or envisaged by various types of political collective actors (from political parties and social movements, from the Left and the Right)?

Replying to these questions is the central objective of this book that draws on a combination of desk research and fieldwork that aims at mapping the key hotspot of Eurosceptic narratives in the countries mentioned earlier. In this book Europe is conceived as an imagined community (Anderson, 2020), and the criticism (or favour) towards Europe/the European integration is seen as a multidimensional concept (which not necessarily entails rejectionism) (see Table 1.1) and which can imply different visions of Europe (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2022) from political, economic, cultural and historical angles. It can be a disobedient Euroscepticism, understood as a "fourth way" of Euroscepticism.

The focus is on the *frames* and framing on Europe(s) and the integration (or envisaged disintegration) process, namely on the symbolic construction of the

Table 1.1 The complexity of Euroscepticism conceptual alternatives in the literature

"Critical Europeanism" (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009)
Cultural, legitimacy, socioeconomic and sovereignty frames (Pirro & van Kessel, 2018)
"Euroalternativism" (Della Porta & Caiani, 2007a, FitzGibbon, 2013)
"Euro-disenchantment" (Zamponi, 2020)
Europe as an "ideological resource" (Lorimer, 2020)
Europe as tactical resource (Pytlas, 2020)
Radical Eurocriticism (Milan, 2020)
Visions of Europe (Caiani & Weisskircher, 2021)

Source: Caiani & Weisskircher, 2021

social and political reality from below, from left-wing and right-wing social move-ments and political parties. Theoretically, the book bridges insights coming from European studies, social movement studies, international relations and party poli-tics. While the rise of sovereignty has much to do with the crises of the liberal international order, popular contestation of liberal internationalism has not yet get much traction in the international relations, which tends to see states as "black boxes". In similar terms, comparative politics has yet to address how changes of the international environment play out in national debates in different countries.

In particular, an analysis of public discourses allows us to address soft pres-sures on European integration, expressed through the varying beliefs and expec-tations of national actors (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009). If traditional theories of European integration see it as driven by national (mainly economic) interests, a framing approach (also in international relations) emphasizes instead the role of national debates on European issues. In this sense, Europeanization may proceed through the work of norm entrepreneurs who adopt and adapt European frames (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009). In order to account for these phenomena, we will analyse how Europe is framed from below, in the public discourses.

As for the *case selection*, our countries have been chosen since they provide us with sufficient variation on dimensions that we consider relevant to explain Euro-scepticism from below. Indeed, beyond having different organizational milieus of Eurosceptic political parties and movements on the Right and the Left, they also offer different *political opportunity structures*[4] for Eurocritical forces to locate and justify their opposition (or favour) to Europe (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009). Namely, the set of opportunities and constraints of the institutional structure and political culture of the political systems in which these groups operate (e.g., Tar-row, 1994; Koopmans, 2005).

In other words, *our research design includes two comparative dimensions*: cross-national and cross-organizational types. Cross-nationally, the design includes five national case studies of Italy, Slovenia, Macedonia, Poland and BiH. The first choice was to compare countries where our main object of research is present: namely, the European integration as a salient (or increasingly salient) topic and "voices" from below on that.[5] Second, this set of countries offers different politi-cal and discursive opportunities for Euroscepticism to be raised and mobilized ("older" member versus "newer" or "not yet" ones; countries with a resurgence of nationalist actors and right-wing actors in power; geographical West/East/Balkans variation; different (consensual versus conflictual) elites' political discourse vis-à-vis the European integration; historically determined traditions and legacy towards the European integration process and Europe, etc.; see chapter 2 for details), which can determine a more open or closed context for degrees of Euroscepticism and its varieties (see also Della Porta & Caiani, 2009). For instance, in Italy, Poland and Slovenia—unlike in Hungary—Eurosceptic parties have not yet consolidated authoritarian types of governance. Similarly, in North Macedonia, in contrast to several other candidate countries, important elite and public forces are determined to complete the accession process once it is approved by the EU. Moreover, con-trary to North Macedonia, BiH serves as a litmus test for EU accession processes,

as the country has been in a deadlock vis-à-vis EU membership since 2019 (Isti-nomjer, 2022). Third, this research project focuses on both political parties and non-party organizations, including radical groups (see chapter 2), from both the Right and the Left of the political spectrum. These countries have been chosen as they present various civil society organizational milieus (in terms of presence of Left/Right actors; parties versus movements; institutionalized versus more infor-mal groups mobilizing on the EU, etc.), within which various frames on Europe and forms (more focused on a political, cultural and/or economic dimension) can emerge (Caiani, 2019). While for some organizations Europe may imply a more positive balance of opportunities (e.g., adding new channels to the traditional tools of politics), other groups in the same country may stand to lose influence.[6]

Using a combination of desk and field research, this book maps the key hotspots of Eurosceptic narratives in the aforementioned countries.

Methodologically, the book adopts a mixed methods approach, combining qual-itative and quantitative-formalized data; content analysis of electoral manifestoes and leader speeches; in-depth interviews with members of Eurosceptic and pro-European political parties, associations and social movements; focus groups (FGs) with activists, party members, sympathizers and ordinary citizens; comparative historical analysis; and secondary analysis of country datasets and documents on Euroscepticism. It is to be noted that the FGs saw the presence of what the book addresses as "ordinary citizens" whose participation provides a deeper understand-ing of the perception of the EU from below.

Relying on the analysis of frames and narratives concerning Europe from below constructed by political actors, parties, movements from both the Left and the Right of the political spectrum and ordinary citizens, this book points out five main paths and trajectories of opposition towards Europe, exemplified by our cases, that can interact with and enrich the classical categories for interpreting Euroscepti-cism. They are *i*. poor integration and the rise of illiberalism-Euroscepticism in the context of EU crises (Slovenia); *ii*. Euroscepticism beneath the surface (Poland); *iii*. strong support coupled with firm opposition to the EU (Italy); *iv*. moderate Europhilia and strong doubts about accession (North Macedonia); and *v*. between strong Europhilia (Federation of BiH) and moderate to hard Euroscepticism (BiH). The varieties of Euroscepticism found between movements and parties in old and non-member states from Western and Eastern Europe and Balkans confirm that positions towards the EU (and therefore Euroscepticism) are a polyform concept (Della Porta & Caiani, 2011) and that Europe has different meanings depending on the actor who "construct" it.

Beyond the added value of the comparative analysis across several analytical dimensions, highlighting the varieties of Euroscepticism, this volume has also the merit to formulate some guidelines for promising future research on the topic (also methodological, with the support for qualitative methods in studying Euroscep-ticism), which attempts to bridge literature branches that scarcely communicate among one another: social movement studies and international relations, party pol-itics and European politics. Finally, it formulates some policy recommendations that complement its theoretical contribution.

1.2 Euroscepticism: an old concept with new emerging features

Euroscepticism is a media-driven concept that emerged in the 1980s in the British context, at a time when the British Conservatives, following a functionalist approach, were harshly opposed to the construction of the supranational market (Harmsen & Spiering, 2004). The now-famous Margaret Thatcher Bruges Speech contributed to moving opposition towards the process of European integration from "side-show to center stage" (Holmes, 2016, p. 1). Margaret Thatcher was indeed the booster for the development of Euroscepticism within the British party system and among the society at large, enabling the sentiment to spillover from the political sphere to academia and the media. While Euroscepticism was initially conceived as a marginal phenomenon that was not of significant interest to the scientific community, the progress of the integration process brought increased attention and resulted in struggles for its conceptualization, use and normative characteristics (Flood, 2002; Carlotti, 2021). Many scholarly works recognize the Maastricht Treaty as a turning point for Euroscepticism's evolution (Ray, 1999; Taggart, 2006; Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2013; Usherwood & Startin, 2013; Brack & Startin, 2015; Sørensen, 2004), a treaty that transformed the Community of Member States into a Union of States with "shared objective and values" (Article 1 of the Trattato sull'Unione europea). Alongside formal changes in the supranational structure of European extravagant institutional arrangements, the EU's increased competencies in the domains of social, economic, legal, environmental and foreign affairs blurred the distinction between national and supranational power relationships. After Maastricht, the EU integration project increased in salience among the public at large and was easily capitalized on by parties opposing it (de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Vasilopoulou, 2017). From Maastricht onwards, the literature begins to refer to the EU democratic deficit, citing the passage from "permissive consensus" to "constrained dissensus" as its major cause. In other words, if the integration project was initially the result of coordination and agreement between the elite, coupled with a substantial consensus and even lack of awareness from the public at large, none of this remains the case after the Maastricht period. Political dissensus spread, public conflict and awareness awakened, and "the elite became vulnerable. And, as they became vulnerable, so too did their projects, and that for Europe" (Mair, 2013, p. 114).

   If Euroscepticism was initially a residual phenomenon expressed by scattered and residual Eurosceptic formations, a sort of "grit in the system that occurs when political systems are built and develop" (Usherwood & Startin, 2013), the era of "constrained dissensus" coupled with the EU evolution phases (e.g., the monetary union, enlargement to the East or negotiation for the Constitutional Treaty) resulted in an increased number of Eurosceptic voices and the widespread diffusion of Euroscepticism among citizens. Recent years have seen an increase in this trend, resulting from factors such as the Eurozone crisis, the EU's inability to handle the immigration crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war, which exposed the EU's inability to take a strong and solid position. Indeed, nowadays scholars no longer conceive of Euroscepticism as a passing phenomenon but as

something that is here to stay and that "moved from the realm of political phenomenon to constituent element of the European political sphere" (FitzGibbon et al., 2017, p. 3).

Euroscepticism was in its origin studied through the lenses of single-case studies that used a national perspective to investigate Euroscepticism in specific countries (Ward, 1996; Benoit, 1998; Evans, 1998; Aspinwall, 2000; Sitter, 2001). Nowadays, studies on Euroscepticism follow a broad comparative approach and have become a full-fledged body of literature (Flood, 2009; Mudde, 2012; Brack & Startin, 2015). This body of literature can be easily split into two parts: firstly, the one that deals with the conceptualization of Euroscepticism, what it means, which dimensions it touches and how it is to be characterized; secondly, the one that aims at understanding its causes.

1.2.1 *Euroscepticism between social movements and political parties: towards a unified approach?*

With the increasing politicization of European integration in the 1990s, political scientists began to study how the process was framed by its opponents and by political parties, in particular. This subfield came to be defined by the concept of "Euroscepticism" or "contingent or qualified opposition as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration" (Taggart, 1998, p. 366). Further distinctions have been proposed, such as the classical one that divides Euroscepticism into soft (contingent or qualified opposition to European integration) and hard (outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration). Later, Kopecký and Mudde (2002) distinguished more precisely between a general approval of the idea of European integration and specific support for the EU in its current form. For them, "Euroenthusiasts" support European integration both in theory and in practice, while "Eurorejects" disapprove of both the European idea and its reality. In this paradigm, "Eurosceptics" exist between these two poles and favour the idea of European integration but reject its current form. Recently, other scholars have analysed various elements of Euroscepticism, disentangling cultural, legitimacy, socioeconomic and sovereignty frames (Pirro & van Kessel, 2018).

Many other classificatory schemes have been put forward, such that it might become rather difficult to grasp differences and similarities among critical actors pushing some scholars to identify Euroscepticism as, for example, a "Cinderella concept" (Caruso, 2016); to reject it in favour of more traditional concepts of "political opposition" (Carlotti, 2021); or to identify the phenomenon of the "mainstreaming of Euroscepticism" to rationalize critical stances expressed by mainstream parties traditionally conceived of as supporters of the EU (Vasilopoulou, 2013).

When moving from the definition and conceptualization of Euroscepticism to research on its explanations, the literature evolves hand in hand with the development of the EU itself. Key findings to explain the presence of Euroscepticism might be found in the distinction between the Sussex and North Carolina Schools