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Specific regional features of modern euroscepticism: A comparative analysis

Abstract. This study investigated the topical issue of regional variation of Euroscepticism in the modern EU. The growing opposition to European integration in different parts of the continent threatens the unity and legitimacy of the European project, which necessitates a thorough study of the specifics of this phenomenon in a comparative perspective. The purpose of this study was to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the specific regional features of modern Euroscepticism based on theoretical understanding and empirical verification of its determinants and manifestations in different contexts. The study employed methods of comparison, structural, and functional analysis, cluster analysis, discourse analysis, and case studies to identify common patterns and differences in the nature and dynamics of Euroscepticism in different countries and regions. The findings of the study suggest that Euroscepticism is a multidimensional and context-specific phenomenon, the intensity and nature of which is determined by a complex of historical, socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. The comparative analysis has found three main regional models of Euroscepticism – Central European, Southern European, and Northwestern – each with a distinctive profile and determinants. Despite the differences, a common pattern is the link between the dynamics of Euroscepticism and the asymmetric effects of integration at the local level – the growth of Euroscepticism is most pronounced in peripheral regions and communities that have been marginalised by economic development and feel threatened by their own identity. At the same time, the penetration of moderate Euroscepticism into the political mainstream poses risks of normalising populist criticism of the EU

Keywords: geography of discontent; local specificity; historical heritage; socio-economic determinants; political culture

Introduction

Euroscepticism as a socio-political phenomenon is becoming increasingly widespread in the European Union. Criticism of European integration processes and EU policies manifests itself in different forms and with varying intensity in individual European regions. The study of specific regional features of modern Euroscepticism is an important task of political science, as it offers a better insight into the causes, manifestations, and consequences of this phenomenon for the future of the European project. The problematic of the study lies in the lack of a comprehensive comparative analysis of the regional dimensions of contemporary Euroscepticism. There are still uncertainties regarding the existence of substantial differences in the levels, forms, and causes of Euroscepticism between different European regions, their determination, and the influence of the regional context on the manifestations of critical attitudes towards the EU.

The specific regional features of contemporary Euroscepticism are an important aspect of its study, as they reflect the variability of manifestations, causes, and consequences

of this phenomenon in different parts of Europe. A comparative analysis of Euroscepticism at the regional level reveals common patterns and differences in attitudes towards European integration, which are determined by historical experience, political culture, socio-economic conditions, and other contextual factors. The essence of the comparative study of specific regional features lies in a systematic comparison of the characteristics of Euroscepticism in such parts of Europe as Western, Northern, Southern, Central, and Eastern.

The problem of regional variation in Euroscepticism has attracted the attention of many researchers, such as K.V. Karaman (2023), P. Rowinski (2021), but there is still a lack of a comprehensive comparative analysis. These and other researchers, including B. Pisciotto (2020) and K.A. Tryma *et al.* (2023), have investigated certain aspects of this problem, focusing on the regional specificity of Euroscepticism in party discourse, media, historical memory, and public opinion. Their study demonstrates the substantial differences in the manifestations and causes of

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Euroscepticism between different parts of Europe, due to historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. However, these studies are often limited to certain regions, countries, or dimensions of Euroscepticism and do not provide a coherent comparative picture. In this context, K.A. Tryma *et al.* (2023) note that comparative regional analysis is not only theoretically but also practically important. Understanding the specifics of Euroscepticism in each part of Europe, as B. Öman (2020) points out, allows for the development of more targeted and effective EU communication and policy strategies aimed at strengthening its legitimacy and overcoming social divisions. This is especially significant in the context of numerous crises that are testing the strength of the European project. Thus, the comparative aspect of the specific regional features of contemporary Euroscepticism requires a systematic investigation considering its theoretical and practical significance.

D. Pasquinucci (2022), A. Filip (2021), N. Styczyńska & J. Meijer (2023a) contributed to the conceptualisation of populist and party Euroscepticism by proposing a theoretical framework for analysing these phenomena. At the same time, from a comparative regional perspective, the empirical application of these approaches stays limited. S. Baute (2023) and A. K. Reinl & D. Braun (2023) focused on the social foundations of Euroscepticism, such as perceptions of injustice and unity, but did not fully reveal the regional variation of these factors.

In summary, recent studies have substantially expanded knowledge about the phenomenon of Euroscepticism, its forms of manifestation, factors, and consequences. Therewith, a range of issues still require more in-depth investigation, including a comparative regional analysis of the specific features of Euroscepticism, considering different contexts; the dynamics of Euroscepticism over time, especially under the influence of crises; a conceptual framework that would link the different dimensions of the phenomenon; the legitimacy of European integration in the eyes of citizens; and ways to overcome the divisions over the future of the EU.

The purpose of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis of the specific regional features of contemporary Euroscepticism in the EU countries. To fulfil this purpose, the following tasks were planned: to analyse theoretical approaches to the study of Euroscepticism and its regional dimensions, to investigate the levels and forms of Euroscepticism in different EU regions based on empirical data, to identify the principal factors that determine regional differences in attitudes towards European integration.

The hypothesis of the study is that the regional context (historical, cultural, socio-economic) substantially affects the specific features of Euroscepticism in different parts of Europe. The comparative analysis is expected to identify clusters of regions with comparable characteristics of Euroscepticism and explain the reasons for these similarities and differences.

Materials and methods

The comparative method was used as the basis for the investigation of specific regional features of Euroscepticism. It was used to compare the levels, forms of manifestation, and determinants of scepticism towards the EU in different parts of Europe – both between individual countries and

between macro-regions (Central and Eastern, Southern, North-Western Europe). This helped to identify common patterns and differences in the nature of Euroscepticism depending on historical, socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts. Specifically, the study involved a comparative analysis of the specifics of opposition to the EU in post-communist states, Southern European countries affected by the debt crisis, and developed democracies of Northwest Europe.

The structural-functional analysis was employed to investigate Euroscepticism as a complex multilevel phenomenon. Using this method, the study identified the key dimensions and forms of manifestation of scepticism towards integration (affective, behavioural, cognitive), analysed their functions and interrelationships. Attention was paid to both the mass orientations of citizens and the positioning of political parties and elites in relation to the European project. The structural approach helped to reveal the organisational features of anti-European movements, ways of their mobilisation and communication with voters. The method of cluster analysis was used to identify and compare typical patterns of Euroscepticism characteristic of certain groups of countries with comparable parameters. The study identified three main regional syndromes of Euroscepticism: Central European, Southern European, and Northwestern. For each of these clusters, a specific combination of cultural, identity, and socio-economic factors of opposition to the EU was identified. The use of these approaches and methods was based on a systematic review of the extensive literature on the topic, as the phenomenon of Euroscepticism as of 2024 has attracted the attention of dozens of researchers in Europe and around the world. Thus, the present study systematised these scientific developments.

Discourse analysis has become a valuable tool for investigating political rhetoric and framing of European issues by parties, media, and social movements. It was used to study the manifestos and programme documents and public statements of the main Eurosceptic forces: The updated manifesto of the Party of the European Left for the 2024 European Parliamentary elections (Principles and proposals..., 2024), the 2014 manifesto of the Spanish Podemos party (Podemos Manifesto, 2014), and the speech of the leader of the Greek party SYRIZA, Alexis Tsipras, in the European Parliament in 2018 (Alexis Tsipras at the..., 2018). Particular attention was paid to populist narratives that exploit the opposition between “ordinary people” and “corrupt elites”, appealing to threats to the sovereignty, identity, and well-being of citizens from the “Brussels bureaucracy”. The discursive approach helped to cover the symbolic dimensions of Euroscepticism and its resonance with various ideological trends (nationalism, conservatism, anti-globalisation, etc.).

The method of studying individual cases (case studies) was used for an in-depth analysis of the specifics of Euroscepticism in certain countries and regions that are of particular interest due to the expressiveness or originality of the phenomenon under study. Specifically, the study considered the cases of Greece (the impact of the debt crisis), Hungary (authoritarian populism), Italy (motley anti-systemic coalition), France (identity splits), the UK (Brexit), etc.

Results

Theoretical approaches to the study of Euroscepticism and its regional dimensions. The phenomenon of Euroscepticism, which has become particularly intense in the context of the spread of populist movements and parties, is attracting increasing attention from researchers in the fields of political science, sociology, and European studies. The scientific literature has developed a range of theoretical approaches to conceptualising and explaining this phenomenon, which emphasise different aspects of the attitudes of citizens and political actors towards European integration. At the same time, along with general trends, empirical research reveals substantial variability in the manifestations of Euroscepticism at the regional and local levels, which requires considering the specifics of the socio-economic, political, and cultural context of individual territories.

Traditionally, studies of Euroscepticism have distinguished two main areas: utilitarian and identity-based. The utilitarian approach looks at attitudes towards the EU through the lens of citizens' rational assessment of the benefits and costs of their countries' membership. According to this logic, Euroscepticism is the result of dissatisfaction with the uneven distribution of integration benefits between countries and social groups, as well as the perception of EU policies as contrary to national interests (Call & Jolly, 2020). A striking example of the actualisation of utilitarian Euroscepticism was the eurozone debt crisis, during which the harsh anti-crisis measures imposed by Brussels on peripheral countries caused a wave of discontent and disillusionment with European integration (Bijsmans, 2021).

The identity-based approach, on the other hand, explains Euroscepticism through the lens of perceiving integration as a threat to national identity, sovereignty, and cultural identity. According to this concept, opposition to the EU is based primarily on values and emotional attachment to the national community, with economic considerations playing a secondary role (Call & Jolly, 2020). Such sentiments are particularly characteristic of right-wing populist parties, which exploit citizens' fears of immigration, Islamisation, the erosion of traditional values, and the loss of control over political processes as a result of the transfer of power to the supranational level.

However, the opposition between utilitarian and identity motives of Euroscepticism does not always correspond to empirical realities. A. Bíró-Nagy & Á. J. Szászi (2024) show that these two dimensions are closely intertwined and mutually reinforce each other. Dissatisfaction with the uneven economic effects of integration is often combined with a sense of cultural marginalisation and loss of control over one's own destiny, especially among residents of depressed regions. Conversely, abstract fears about the erosion of national identity can resonate with the very concrete experience of a deteriorating socio-economic situation. To overcome the limitations of the dichotomy of "utilitarian versus identity", the researchers propose to consider Euroscepticism as a multidimensional phenomenon with affective, behavioural, and cognitive components. The affective dimension includes emotional attitudes towards the EU – feelings of attachment or alienation, pride or shame for being a member. The behavioural dimension is manifested in electoral support for Eurosceptic parties

and participation in anti-European movements and campaigns. Finally, the cognitive dimension covers citizens' knowledge and perceptions of the EU, as well as their assessment of its effectiveness and democracy.

A comprehensive approach allows for a better understanding of the differences in the nature and intensity of Euroscepticism between EU countries and regions. M. Kaeding *et al.* (2020) find substantial variation in the configuration of the affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions of integration scepticism. For instance, in the UK, a combination of negative emotions towards the EU with a prominent level of electoral mobilisation of Eurosceptics and critical media coverage prevails, while in Germany, the cognitive and behavioural components of scepticism are much weaker.

To explain these differences, M. Kaeding *et al.* (2020) address the specifics of the historical experience, political culture, and socio-economic structure of individual countries and regions. Specifically, in the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, distrust of the EU is fuelled by the contradictory legacy of accelerated market and democratic transition, fears of losing recently gained sovereignty, and disappointment with the results of integration. In contrast, in Southern Europe, Euroscepticism was driven by negative assessments of externally imposed austerity measures and a sense of restrictions on democracy.

Alongside differences at the country level, M. Kaeding *et al.* (2020) document internal regional and local splits in attitudes towards the EU. They were especially evident during the Brexit campaign in the UK, where supporters and opponents of the exit were concentrated in different parts of the country. Euroscepticism was closely correlated with the socio-economic decline of depressed regions and industrial cities, while globalised megacities demonstrated distinctly pro-European sentiments. Comparable trends can be observed in other countries where integration into the common market had asymmetric territorial effects.

To conceptualise these processes, A. Rodríguez-Pose (2018) uses the term "places that do not matter" – peripheral regions and cities that have fallen on the margins of economic development and lost conventional sources of well-being and identity. Structural transformations associated with deindustrialisation, rising inequality, and demographic shifts are creating a sense of nostalgia for the lost past, distrust of central and supranational authorities, and a tendency to support populist parties that exploit these sentiments.

To explain the geographical patterns of Euroscepticism, L. Dijkstra *et al.* (2020) propose using multilevel models that combine the analysis of individual characteristics of citizens with contextual factors at the local and regional levels. This approach helps to identify the influence of the socio-economic structure, political culture, and other specific features of the territories on the political orientations of their residents, as well as to trace the interaction of individual and contextual variables. At the same time, new methodological approaches, such as discourse analysis and anthropological studies, allow delving into the cultural specifics of individual locations, understanding how their historical memory, symbolic landscape, and everyday experience resonate with populist Eurosceptic narratives (Table 1).

Table 1. The principal theoretical approaches to explaining Euroscepticism

Approach	Key thesis	Focus of the analysis	Examples of research
Utilitarian	Euroscepticism as a result of dissatisfaction with the uneven distribution of benefits and costs of integration.	Citizens' perceptions of the economic impact of EU membership on their countries and social groups.	The Eurozone debt crisis (Bijsmans, 2021). The impact of EU cohesion funds on public opinion (Dijkstra <i>et al.</i> , 2020).
Identity-based	Euroscepticism as a reaction to the threat of integration to national identity, sovereignty, and culture.	Value orientations and emotional attachment to the national community; fear of immigration and Islamisation.	The rise of right-wing populist parties (Kaeding <i>et al.</i> , 2020). Cultural factors of Brexit (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021).
Multidimensional	Euroscepticism as a complex phenomenon with affective, behavioural, and cognitive manifestations.	Interaction of emotions, electoral behaviour, and rational assessments of the integration project.	Comparative analysis of the configuration of Euroscepticism dimensions in different countries (Bíró-Nagy & Szászi, 2024).
Contextual	Euroscepticism as a territorially rooted phenomenon that reflects local specifics of development.	The influence of the historical trajectory, socio-economic structure, and political culture of individual regions and communities.	The controversial legacy of post-communism in Central and Eastern Europe (Kaeding <i>et al.</i> , 2020). The decline of "places that do not matter" (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Source: systematised by the author of this study.

The plurality of theoretical approaches to the study of Euroscepticism opens new avenues for analysing this complex phenomenon. Moving away from simplistic dichotomies such as "utilitarian versus identity-based" or "elites versus people" helps to observe the multidimensionality of motives and manifestations of scepticism about integration, and their roots in specific territorial contexts. Multilevel models and qualitative methods shed light on the mechanisms of interaction between structural and agentic factors in the (re)production of Eurosceptic sentiments and electoral mobilisation around these issues.

The political dimension of Euroscepticism: the role of parties and movements. Euroscepticism as a socio-political phenomenon is expressed not only at the level of mass sentiment and orientations of citizens, but also in the activities of organised political actors – parties, movements, and public associations. It is these collective actors who play a key role in articulating and mobilising anti-European sentiment, turning latent discontent into overt electoral support and political pressure on national governments and EU institutions.

Several approaches to the conceptualisation and typology of Eurosceptic parties and movements have emerged in the academic literature. A. Szczerbiak & P. Taggart (2024) point to the dichotomy of "hard" and "soft" Euroscepticism. According to it, "soft" Eurosceptics do not deny the idea of European integration as such but criticise certain EU policies or areas of its development, while "hard" Eurosceptics oppose their countries' membership in the EU and call for withdrawal from it.

Examples of the former are moderate conservative and left-wing parties such as the British Tories or the French Socialists, while the latter are radical right-wing and left-wing political forces such as the National Front in France, Alternative for Germany, Podemos in Spain, or the Left Bloc in Portugal (Topaloff, 2017). Despite its convenience, this dichotomy is not always able to consider the nuances of the positions of individual parties, which may combine elements of soft and hard Euroscepticism or change their views over time.

Another approach to the typology of Eurosceptic parties is based on their positioning in the system of ideological

coordinates "left-right" and "YES/NO to European integration". According to D. McDonnell & A. Werner (2019) and S. Wagner (2022), different segments of the party-political spectrum combine Euroscepticism with their programme attitudes in different ways. For radical right-wing parties, opposition to the EU is a continuation of nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric, defence of traditional values and sovereignty against the "Brussels bureaucracy". Left-wing and left-populist parties criticise the neoliberal nature of European integration, the impact of austerity policies on the welfare of citizens, the democratic deficit, and the excessive influence of corporations on EU decision-making (Carrieri & Vittori, 2021).

It would be appropriate to quote the updated manifesto of the European Left Party for the 2024 European Parliamentary elections, which outlines the current position of this political force. Specifically, the document states: "We call on all democratic citizens of Europe, who constitute the social majority, to participate and vote in the European elections for a democratic, peaceful, social, and environmentally friendly Europe". And further: "We stand for a fundamental reformatting of the EU on an egalitarian and democratic basis" (Principles and proposals..., 2024). A quote from the 2014 manifesto of the Spanish Podemos party is more appropriate to illustrate the left-wing populist critique of the current model of European integration: "The European Parliament elections will take place at a time of deep crisis of the legitimacy of the European Union... We are facing a financial coup against the peoples of the southern Eurozone". At the same time, the document emphasises: "We want a different Europe, a just Europe of rights and democracy, not of plunder and disregard for peoples" (Podemos Manifesto, 2014). In his 2018 speech, Alexis Tsipras said: "The European Union must change direction and we must be bold" (Alexis Tsipras at the European Parliament, 2018). This statement clearly reflects the position of the Greek left-wing populists, who call for in-depth reform of the EU in a progressive way, rather than withdrawal from it. According to Alexis Tsipras, the Union must take a decisive turn towards greater social justice, democratisation, and solidarity. Only such bold steps will help overcome the deep crisis of public confidence in

the European integration project. However, not all leftists share Eurosceptic views, and there are supporters of an alternative, social dimension of integration. Finally, Eurosceptic slogans are also sometimes found among centrist parties, but they are mostly situational and opportunistic.

Empirical studies of party Euroscepticism show that its electoral appeal varies substantially between countries and over time. In some cases, Eurosceptic parties stay marginal players on the periphery of the political process, while in others they become influential opposition forces or even win government positions. Thus, in Italy and Greece, populist parties of the left and right gained considerable representation in parliament and took part in the formation of coalition governments on the back of dissatisfaction with austerity policies during the debt crisis (Franzosi *et al.*, 2015). In contrast, in Germany and Spain, anti-EU parties stayed relatively weak, despite some electoral successes.

In explaining these differences, researchers draw attention to the specific features of political culture, party systems, and electoral rules in each country. Specifically, the level of trust in national political institutions, the presence of strong ethno-regional and populist parties, as well as electoral barriers and the formula for distributing mandates can either contribute to or hinder the electoral success of Eurosceptics (Kneuer, 2019). At the same time, the internal characteristics of the parties themselves – the charisma of their leaders, cohesion, resource base, etc. – play a major role in their ability to mobilise supporters.

However, the party-political dimension of Euroscepticism is not limited to electoral competition and representative authorities. It is also manifested in various extra-parliamentary forms of political participation – movements, initiatives, public campaigns, etc. It is in these formats of grassroots mobilisation that the most radical anti-European slogans and practices often crystallise, and new organisational models and technologies of communication with citizens are tested. A classic example is the British “Vote Leave” campaign, which played a decisive role in the victory of Brexit supporters in the 2016 referendum (Usherwood, 2018). Although most of the campaigners belonged to the camp of “hard” Eurosceptics, they managed to mobilise a broader population through successful communication strategies and synergies with the systemic pro-EU parties.

The specific feature of the party and political landscape of Euroscepticism in each country reflects the specifics of social divisions and conflicts, historical memory, and political culture. Thus, in France and the Netherlands, right-wing radical parties, which are the main carriers of anti-European slogans, exploit the theme of immigration and Islamisation, appealing to citizens’ fear of the erosion of national identity (Vieten & Poynting, 2022). In Greece and Spain, on the other hand, Euroscepticism has long been driven by left-wing populist parties that emerged in the wake of protests against the social consequences of austerity policies (Stavarakakis *et al.*, 2018). The post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe show a varied picture, ranging from the moderate Euroscepticism of left and right-wing national conservatives to the out-right anti-EU rhetoric of radical populist forces (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002).

Despite the distinct national specificity, there are several common features of the organisational design and political strategies of Eurosceptic parties in different countries. Firstly, most of them tend to use a populist style of politics, opposing the will of the people to elites and experts, appealing to simple solutions to complex problems. Secondly, many of them rely on charismatic leaders whose personal appeal and communication skills compensate for the lack of an extensive organisational structure and routine party work. Thirdly, there is a typical reliance on new media and social networks, which allow direct communication with voters, bypassing conventional media. Finally, in the context of the crisis of mainstream parties, Eurosceptics often resort to the strategy of “protest voting”, intercepting the electorate of the dissatisfied and disillusioned.

However, it would be an exaggeration to claim that Eurosceptic parties and movements completely determine the dynamics of the integration discourse. After all, the systemic parties, which mostly adhere to the pro-European consensus, are also forced to respond to the spread of “anti-EU sentiment”, partly adopting certain slogans and proposals of their opponents (Meijers & Williams, 2020). Thus, there is a gradual “normalisation” of moderate Euroscepticism and its penetration into the mainstream. However, this strategy is dangerous, as it legitimises populist criticism of the EU and blurs the boundaries of what is acceptable in political discourse.

The study of the party-political dimension of Euroscepticism shows its diversity, dynamism, and rootedness in national contexts. The typology of Eurosceptic parties and movements is based on both ideological (right-left) and functional (hard-right-moderate) criteria. Despite the differences, the common features of organisational design and electoral strategies of Eurosceptics are populism, personalisation, reliance on new media, and protest voting. At the same time, systemic pro-European parties, responding to the Eurosceptic challenge, risk normalising it and legitimising it in the eyes of voters. Therefore, the prospects for the integration project will largely depend on the ability of political elites to find convincing answers to citizens’ demands and concerns about the content and vector of the EU’s development.

Regional clusters of Euroscepticism: a comparative analysis of determinants and manifestations. Deeper European integration and the EU’s eastward enlargement have been accompanied by a rise in Euroscepticism in various parts of the continent. However, the intensity, nature, and drivers of these sentiments vary considerably across countries and regions, reflecting the diversity of local contexts and historical trajectories. Using the method of cluster analysis, researchers have identified several typical models or “syndromes” of Euroscepticism, each with a specific profile and determinants (Verney, 2015; Szewczyk, 2021).

The most pronounced type of Euroscepticism is inherent in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, specifically the Visegrad Four (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia). Despite the generally pro-European public sentiment and positive experience of integration, populist and anti-liberal trends have considerably increased in the region over the past decade, with parties such as Hungary’s Fidesz, Poland’s Law and Justice,

or the Czech ANO (Szewczyk, 2021). While these political forces do not question their countries' membership in the EU, they harshly criticise certain aspects of its functioning from nationalist and sovereigntist standpoints.

Central European Euroscepticism is based on a complex of historical, ideological, and socio-economic factors. The traumatic experience of the communist past and the accelerated market reforms of the 1990s has created a distrust of supranational institutions and a fear of losing their newly acquired sovereignty among many citizens. More than four decades of living behind the Iron Curtain have fuelled resentment and feelings of inferiority towards the West, which are now being projected onto the EU. European integration has also failed to meet the high expectations of many citizens for a rapid improvement in living standards, and social unrest has melted into a nativist reaction to immigration and culturalism (Kaeding *et al.*, 2020). Finally, the successes of modernisation in the capitals and metropolises have exacerbated the gap with the peripheral regions, which have become a source of anti-European resentment.

In contrast to Central and Eastern Europe, Southern European countries that suffered from the debt crisis of the 2010s show a different pattern of Euroscepticism. Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Italy have a long history of EU integration and deeply rooted pro-European orientations of their elites and citizens. However, the economic turmoil, the sharp rise in unemployment, and the painful effects of austerity policies during the eurozone crisis have shaken southern Europeans' trust in Brussels (Verney, 2015). Against the backdrop of public dissatisfaction with the consequences of integration, populist parties of the left and right have rapidly grown in strength, making criticism of the EU a cornerstone of their programmes.

In Greece, which suffered the most from the debt crisis and was effectively placed under the external control of "the three creditors", the left-wing populist party SYRIZA became the leader of Euroscepticism. After coming to power in 2015, it initially openly clashed with Brussels, but was later forced to make concessions and continue its fiscal consolidation policy (Kaeding *et al.*, 2020). In Spain, anti-Yesi slogans are being voiced by both the left-wing Podemos party, which appeals to working-class discontent with austerity, and the far-right VOICE, which exploits issues of immigration and separatism. In Italy, the source of Euroscepticism is populist parties of various persuasions, such as the Five Star Movement and the Lega, which are ready to push different narratives of discontent depending on the current situation (Mete, 2022).

Portugal stands out among its southern European neighbours as having relatively weaker Euroscepticism, due to its faster economic recovery after the crisis and the more effective actions of the left-wing democratic government (Fernandes & Carvalhais, 2016). Thus, the Southern European model of Euroscepticism is based primarily on socio-economic dissatisfaction with the fruits of integration and the severe restrictions it imposes on fiscal sovereignty. Therewith, EU membership itself is not generally questioned, as southern Europeans are well aware of its benefits.

Finally, the third model of Euroscepticism is demonstrated by the most developed countries of Northwest Europe, such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and

the Scandinavian states. Despite their strong democratic traditions and generally high quality of governance, they have also faced the rise of populist and anti-European parties over the past decade. However, unlike in Central and Eastern Europe and Southern Europe, their Euroscepticism is not so much economic as cultural and identity-based (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). The challenges to multiculturalism posed by the influx of migrants and refugees, the rise of Islam, and the erosion of traditional values have become a breeding ground for right-wing populist parties such as the French National Rally, the German Alternative for Germany, or the Dutch Freedom Party.

These parties advocate immigration restrictions, stricter integration policies, and the return of powers to national governments in the areas of internal security, social policy, and market regulation. However, unlike their Central and Eastern European counterparts, they are not prone to outright nativism and authoritarianism, but rather exploit voters' fears within the framework of established democratic rules of the game. Although anti-European parties have had some electoral successes (e.g., in France, the Netherlands, Austria, and Finland), they have mostly failed to enter government coalitions because of the "sanitary cordon" imposed by mainstream forces. At the same time, the latter have partially adopted some of the ideas and slogans of Eurosceptics, particularly in migration and security policy.

Alongside differences between countries, there are distinct internal splits in attitudes towards the EU, linked to the development trajectories of individual regions and communities. The key dividing line is between metropolises integrated into global flows and networks and small towns and rural areas that have been left on the margins of post-industrial transformation (De Dominicis *et al.*, 2020). While the former demonstrate a clear pro-European orientation, backed by high quality of life and cosmopolitan culture, the latter have become a reservoir of anti-European resentment caused by socio-economic decline and identity erosion. Examples include the gap between London and the depressed industrial regions of Northern England, Paris and the French "periphery", and East and West Germany.

Explaining these differences, M. Bayerlein and M. Diermeier (2022) show that the effect of EU cohesion funds in overcoming Euroscepticism has a distinct regional dimension. The recipient regions of these funds show a substantially lower level of Euroscepticism compared to those that have little use for structural assistance. At the same time, cohesion grants have a much stronger impact in less developed regions of Southern Europe than in wealthier regions of Northwest Europe. Thus, Euroscepticism is closely linked to the real results of integration on the ground, the material and symbolic benefits it brings to local communities. Importantly, these results are mediated by people's subjective assessments, fuelled by the local discursive context and political culture.

To summarise, the regional clusters (Table 2) of Euroscepticism demonstrate the diversity of motivations, intensity, and forms of expression of opposition to the EU in different parts of the continent. Whereas in Central and Eastern Europe, scepticism about integration is largely a reaction to the traumas of post-communist transformation and the pressure of supranational norms on national sovereignty, in Southern Europe it has a distinct

socio-economic basis, tied to the effects of the debt crisis. In contrast, in the developed countries of Northwest Europe, Euroscepticism resonates primarily with the anxieties of post-migration society and the erosion of traditional identities. These “ideal types” are not mutually

exclusive – each cluster has a distinctive mix of cultural and socio-economic motives. At the same time, at the intrastate level, there is a clear link between the intensity of Euroscepticism and uneven trajectories of local development in the context of globalisation.

Table 2. Comparative characteristics of regional models of Euroscepticism in the EU

Region	Countries	Key factors of Euroscepticism	Main carriers of Euroscepticism	Features of internal splits
Central and Eastern Europe.	Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia.	◆ Traumas of post-communism and accelerated reforms; ◆ Fear of losing sovereignty; ◆ Disappointment with the results of integration; ◆ Nativist reaction to immigration.	Populist right-wing parties (Fidesz, PIS, ANO).	The gap between pro-European capitals and the Eurosceptic periphery.
Southern Europe.	Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal.	◆ Economic consequences of the Eurozone crisis; ◆ Dissatisfaction with the austerity policy; ◆ Restrictions on fiscal sovereignty.	Populist parties of the left (Syriza, Podemos) and right (League).	Less pronounced compared to other clusters.
Northwest Europe.	France, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, and the Scandinavian countries.	◆ Anxieties of post-migration society; ◆ Blurring of traditional identities; ◆ Dissatisfaction with the loss of control over migration and internal security.	Right-wing populist parties (National Union, Alternative for Germany, Freedom Party)	The gap between cosmopolitan metropolises and depressed old industrial regions.

Source: created by the author of this study

Therefore, the interpretation of Euroscepticism should accommodate the complex interaction of structural and discursive factors in concrete territorial contexts. Neither the reduction of this phenomenon to a reaction to economic problems, nor its interpretation in purely idealistic categories of “populist uprising” can capture the full depth of the processes taking place. Instead, an optic that combines the analysis of objective indicators of quality of life and evolution of identities with the study of how they are refracted through the lens of local discourses and narrative frames produced by political actors appears to be fruitful. It is this approach that will help to deconstruct the regional mosaic of attitudes towards European integration and offer effective recipes for overcoming the many faces of Euroscepticism.

Discussion

The findings of this study allow drawing several significant conclusions about the nature and dynamics of Euroscepticism in modern Europe. The use of a regional approach and comparative methodology reveals the diversity of forms and ambiguity of the determinants of opposition to the EU in different parts of the continent. Depending on the historical trajectory, socio-economic structure, and political culture, negative attitudes towards integration can be driven by different ideological motivations, rely on different social bases and take on different party and electoral manifestations.

The study shows that domestic divisions towards the EU are growing due to asymmetric effects of integration. This finding resonates with the results of a longitudinal analysis by Q. Mayne & A. Katsanidou (2023), who traced the evolution of public opinion from the fading of the “permissive consensus” to the crystallisation of a new geography of Euroscepticism after the Great Recession. However, the timeframe of their study is somewhat different from that used in the present study.

The results of the study suggest that although crisis phenomena objectively increase critical attitudes towards the EU, their real impact is mediated by political and discursive

processes and regional specifics. This finding is in line with the thesis of E. Teperoglou & A.M. Belchior (2020) about the different nature of critical attitudes towards integration in different Southern European countries – more structural in Greece and Italy and more situational in Spain and Portugal. At the same time, the cited study offers a broader comparative perspective and looks at other regions as well.

The study covered substantial differences between mass orientations, party positioning, and elite positions on the EU in many European countries. Comparable results regarding the specifics of the Italian case were obtained by N. Conti *et al.* (2020), who found ambivalence in public criticism of the EU against the backdrop of stronger support for integration from the establishment. However, since N. Conti *et al.* focus on a single country, the possibilities for broad generalisations are somewhat limited compared to the present study.

A regional perspective is also inherent in the chapter by L. Vogel (2021) on Euroscepticism in Central and Eastern Europe. The undoubted advantage of this study is the comparative analysis of the trajectories of opposition to the EU in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Both studies show marked differences in the intensity and colour of opposition to the EU among the states of the region, despite the common post-communist experience. At the same time, the cited study suggests additional criteria for typology – structural and discursive – as well as a wider geographical coverage.

The study shows that various forms of Euroscepticism are rooted in the specific historical experience and political culture of individual societies. This conclusion is in line with the findings of an in-depth case study by Y. Haydanka (2020) on the origins of the diverse range of Eurosceptic positions in the Czech Republic, from communist to right-wing populist. Therewith, the relatively narrow time and geographical scope of the study makes it difficult to assess the external validity of the findings.

The findings confirm the heuristic value of a multilevel analysis that integrates the study of mass sentiment, party

competition, and MPs' positions. This approach extends the conventional research focuses that have been concentrated on certain dimensions of opposition to the EU. Specifically, it allows for a fuller disclosure of the complexity of the phenomenon of Euroscepticism compared to general typologies, such as the classification of rejecting, conditional, and concrete types proposed by S. Guerra (2020). At the same time, the theoretical generalisations of S. Guerra can be usefully applied to systematise empirical observations.

The typology of regional models of Euroscepticism developed in this study differs from studies that focus on individual ideological niches or countries. For instance, S. Mardal (2020) focuses on comparing only two far-right parties – UKIP in the UK and Vox in Spain. Although the researcher applies the promising design of “the most dissimilar systems” and the multidimensional operationalisation of party positions, the limitation of the sample to one party family narrows the possibilities of generalising the results. Instead, this study proposes a taxonomy that covers different ideological spectrums and national contexts, explaining the variation in Euroscepticism by a combination of structural, discursive, and motivational factors.

M. Cilento & N. Conti (2021) analyse the attitudes of parliamentary elites towards the EU in 12 countries of Western and Central and Eastern Europe. Using the data from the surveys of MPs, the researchers seek to verify the thesis of divergence of integration orientations between the “old” and “new” members of the Union. Their findings show marked differences in the levels of affective commitment and assessments of the functioning of the EU between the two groups of countries. These conclusions are consistent with the observations of the present study regarding the heterogeneity of the positions of national elites. At the same time, the multi-level design proposed here, which integrates mass orientations, party positions, and views of MPs, helps to more fully reveal the complexity of the phenomenon of Euroscepticism.

N. Styczyńska & J.D. Meijer (2023b) investigate the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism on the example of the Law and Justice party in Poland. Using qualitative content analysis, the researchers show how the populist dichotomy of “people-elites” serves as a frame for delegitimising the EU and substantiating sovereignty claims against Brussels. Undoubtedly, this study offers valuable insights into the discursive arsenal of Polish populists that may be relevant to other contexts. However, its conceptual framework and empirical focus differ from the present study, which considers the symbolic construction of Euroscepticism as only one aspect of a broader comparative picture.

A valuable addition to the comparative study of Euroscepticism is the collective monograph by M. Caiani *et al.* (2024). This study stands out from the rest because it applies a social movement lens to the analysis of anti-European narratives and frames at the grassroots level, within parties and civil society. Such a focus helps to capture the shades of ideological colouring and social basis of Eurocritical discourses, which are often overlooked by studies focused on aggregated poll data or the positions of mainstream parties.

The findings of M. Caiani *et al.* (2024) are in line with the results of the present study regarding the diversity of political and discursive representation of Euroscepticism in different countries. The inclusion of a wide range of cases – from post-transformation Slovenia to the Balkan candidate

countries – demonstrates the rootedness of ambivalent or oppositional narratives towards the EU not only in the South and East of Europe, but also in states that do not formally belong to these regional clusters. The similarities in Eurocritical frames on both sides of the EU border undermine the established division of the continent into “core” and “periphery”, at least in the symbolic dimension.

Comparison of the findings of this study with the work of other researchers allows formulating important generalisations about the nature and evolution of Euroscepticism in modern Europe. First of all, most of the studies reviewed confirm the diversity of forms and ambiguity of the factors of opposition to the EU in different parts of the continent. The historical path, socio-economic structure, and political culture create specific contexts in which negative attitudes towards integration are fed by different ideological motivations, are based on different social strata and are embodied in different party and electoral configurations. The use of regional optics in the study of Euroscepticism helps to highlight this diversity and at the same time identify common patterns.

A substantial number of studies emphasise the crucial role of crisis phenomena and their discursive representation in intensifying critical attitudes towards the EU. The Eurozone debt crisis, the acute migration situation, and other challenges are objectively increasing dissatisfaction with the integration course, especially on the part of social groups that feel marginalised. Therewith, the real effect of these phenomena is mediated by political processes – the efforts of parties and movements that mobilise citizens under anti-European slogans.

The comparative analysis highlights the natural discrepancies between aggregated mass orientations, ideologically coloured party discourse, and pragmatic positions of national elites towards the EU. Citizens' attitudes are shaped by socio-economic conditions, value preferences, and situational assessments of current policies. Parties tend to articulate controversial positions according to their programme niche and electoral calculations. Instead, representatives of the establishment are guided by pragmatic motives and institutional constraints, which narrows the room for manoeuvre in European politics. Thus, the findings of the proposed study are not only consistent with the findings of other researchers, but also offer new generalisations about the nature of Euroscepticism. The use of multilevel design and extended geographical optics helps to more fully cover the complexity of determination, the multivariance of manifestations, and the specifics of the representation of this phenomenon in the public sphere.

Conclusions

As a result of the study, a comprehensive analysis of the specific regional features of modern Euroscepticism in a comparative perspective was carried out. Based on a review of theoretical approaches and empirical data, the study identified the key determinants, manifestations, and consequences of the variation in attitudes towards European integration in different parts of the EU. The analysis of theoretical approaches has shown a shift away from simplistic dichotomies in explaining Euroscepticism, such as “utilitarian versus identity” or “elites versus people”. Multidimensional models that consider this phenomenon as a complex of affective, behavioural, and cognitive elements

rooted in specific territorial contexts are promising. It is these contexts that form various regional “syndromes” of Euroscepticism with specific profiles and intensity.

The study of the empirical manifestations of Euroscepticism has revealed substantial differences between EU regions. In Central and Eastern Europe, opposition to integration is fuelled by the contradictory legacy of post-communism, fear of loss of sovereignty, and nativist reactions to migration challenges. Southern European Euroscepticism is rooted primarily in dissatisfaction with the economic consequences of the debt crisis and the restrictions on fiscal sovereignty. In contrast, in the developed countries of Northwest Europe, anti-European sentiments resonate with the anxieties of post-migration societies and the erosion of traditional identities. Despite the distinct regional specificity, the common thread is the link between Euroscepticism and uneven trajectories of local development in the context of globalisation and economic integration. Regional variation in Euroscepticism is conditioned by a complex of structural and discursive factors. On the one hand, the intensity of Euroscepticism is closely correlated with objective indicators of the quality of life and the effectiveness of local institutions. On the

other hand, these indicators are mediated by subjective assessments and narrative frames specific to local political cultures and discourses. Therefore, explaining the phenomenon of Euroscepticism requires an analysis of how structural challenges are refracted through the lens of specific identities and ways of understanding reality.

This study has certain limitations that need to be considered upon interpreting the findings and identifying areas for further research. One such limitation is the lack of attention to countries that do not fit into the standard regional clusters used in the analysis. Specifically, this study did not consider the specifics of such countries as Ireland, Cyprus, or the Baltic states, where Eurosceptic sentiment may have a different nature and dynamics compared to other EU members. Incorporating these cases into future research could enrich and diversify theoretical models of Euroscepticism studies.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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