

Decisions about the Future of the European Union: an Approach from a Romanian Perspective

Ramona Dumitriu
Răzvan Ștefănescu

The European Union reached a turning point when it has not only to fructify the opportunities of the new market opened by globalization, but also to face significant threats such as the ageing population, the competition from the Asian producers and the dependence on the energetic resources placed in politically unstable regions. This situation implies decisions about the reforms of the political institutions, the future enlargements and the elaboration of a common external policy. The experience from the past proved that, in making such decisions, it has to be taken into consideration the public opinion, which sometimes is not favorable to the radical changes. The position of Romania, with its representation in the European institutions, will certainly influence the strategic decisions regarding the future of the E.U. In this paper we will analyze this position, using both information from the Government strategies and the results of our investigations regarding the way some aspects of the integration are perceived.

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1. Introduction

The evolutions from the last years made the present circumstances of the European Union (E.U.) development very different in comparison with the ones from the creation moment. After the recent enlargements the E.U. became to have 27 members, overstretching considerably its absorption capacity and creating some coordination difficulties. There are some significant threats that have to be faced. The ageing population and the high unemployment endanger the state social insurance system from some countries. The significant competition from the Asian producers threatens the European companies. Moreover, the dependence on the energetic resources from the politically unstable regions makes the European economies vulnerable against the evolutions from these areas. Besides these threats it is also present the opportunity of entering on new markets open in the last years in the context of globalization. As a consequence, the policies and institutions adjustment to the new conditions became necessary. Such an attempt is quite complex because of the clashes of opinions between the members of the E.U. regarding the changes that must be accomplished in certain fields, such as:

- the European institutions reform;
- the E.U. enlargement;
- the foreign policy.

The role that Romania will have in adopting solutions for these problems is quite difficult to anticipate. On one side, the adhesion of Romania is quite recent and it was accompanied by some safeguard clauses. On the other side, its population of 22, 3 millions (4, 51 % from the E.U. population) gives the right to a significant representation in the E.U. institutions. In order to anticipate the position of Romania in the decisions concerning the future of the E.U., the present authorities attitudes (resulted from the official documents) over the discussed problems could be taken into consideration. The public

opinion perceptions regarding the decisions over the E.U. future that should be adopted are also important (Cojanu, Birsan, Muresan and Aristide, 2006, pages 7 – 10). These perceptions will be evaluated in this article on the base of an own investigation that was realized in the period March – May 2007, with the participation of 160 students from the “Dunarea de Jos” University – Galati. We considered the students being parts of a well educated and informed category that could offer signs about the Romania population attitudes. As methods of investigation we used the classical questionnaires and the focus group technique. Although the results of our investigation can not be generalized for the whole community of students from Romania, these could be useful in order to understand some public opinion perceptions.

2. The position of Romania in the decisions making about the future of Europe

Decisions regarding the E.U. are settled by certain treaties. The European Council, that puts together the state or Government leaders of the E.U. members, establishes the general social, economic and political views. The legislative initiatives come mainly from the European Commission grouping, for now, commissioners from all the member states. Theoretically, a commissioner must do his duty independently, without receiving instructions from his government. Presently, the Council of the European Union is the main legislative institution, that includes representatives (ministries or state secretaries) designed by the member states. According to the adopted European Treaties, the decisions must be approved by the Council of the European Union with simple qualified majority (each country having a number of votes correlated with its size) or with unanimity of votes. The European Parliament has also an important role in decision – making from E.U. as the control function of the European Commission. Each country from the E.U. has a number of places in the European Parliament correlated with its size.

Now, it must be obtained the unanimity of the Member States for the decisions with a significant impact on the future of E.U., being a very complex approach. In the situation of big clashes of opinions it may come to long negotiations, such it happened in the case of the Reform Treaty. This experience showed that opposition of one country could block for long time the decisions adoption, although the big contributors at the E.U. budget have a dominant position in the negotiation process in the end. For the moment, it is considered that Germany and France, countries with significant contributions to the E.U. budget and with a massive representation in the European decisional institutions, have an alliance that succeeds, generally, to impose its points of view.

A proposition concerning the future Reform Treaty stipulated that the basic decisions to be approved with qualified majority instead of unanimity. It is expected that such an evolution to strengthen the position of the present alliance between France and Germany.

The considerable population of Romania gives an important representation in the decisional institutions of E.U. that should be taken into account in the European construction. However, at least for the moment, it can not play a big role in this process. Romania adhered to the European Union only at 1st of January 2007 and it is yet conditioned by certain safeguard clauses. Moreover, its contribution to the E.U. budget is not significant.

An important aspect of adopting the strategic decisions for the E.U. consists in the degree a government must take into consideration the public opinion from its country. The mandate in the Council of the European Union for the vote regarding important decisions may be gained by a resolution of the Parliament or by referendum. On one side, it is easier to obtain a resolution of the Parliament but it may induce to the citizens the perceptions their opinions are ignored, amplifying the Euroscepticism. On the other side, the approval by a refer-

endum is not sure for a government, this being proved by the failures of a Constitution for the E.U approval from France and Holland. In the situation of Romania, the public opinion has, in general, a favorable attitude regarding the belonging to the E.U. This fact was confirmed by our investigation on 160 students who considered, in unanimity, that positive effects of the Romania adhesion to the E.U. exceed the negative ones. In order to evaluate the students' perceptions concerning the impact of the adhesion, they were asked to mention their first thought about the E.U. It resulted the greatest part perceive the E.U. with positive effects, such as the free mobility of the European citizens, the living standard increase or the access to the European funds (see table 1).

Table 1 - Students answers regarding their first thought about the E.U.

Opinions	Number of answers	Weight
Free mobility of the European citizens	74	46,3 %
The national identity lost	2	1,2 %
The living standard increase	59	36,9 %
Access to the European funds	20	12,5 %
No answer	5	3,1 %
Total	160	100 %

From the group interviews it came out a position of inferiority students allots to Romania in comparison with the other countries from the E.U. The explanation consists in the behind situation regarding some important aspects such as: justice, living standard, civilization degree or fight against corruption. When they were asked to mention the number of years Romania needed to reach, for these aspects, the

level from the Western Europe, the answers of the students offered a quite pessimistic image. The majority evaluated at over twenty years the gap between Romania and the Western Europe (see table 2).

Table 2 – Students opinions regarding the number of years Romania needs to reach the level of the Western Europe for some social – political aspects

Aspect	Number of answers		
	Under 10 years	Between 10 and 20 years	Over 20 years
Justice	32	55	73
Living standard	16	48	96
Civilization degree	22	47	91
Fight against corruption	17	43	100

This perception of inferiority makes the students consider that, at least for now, it would not be desirable that Romania adopt a very strong position in the decisions over the future of the E.U., even if there could be harmed some of its interests. In any case, in their opinion, Romania should not threaten to block the institutional reform (the way Poland did) or the future enlargements.

3. Decisions regarding the institutional reform

All the countries from the E.U. accepted the necessity of adapting the European institutions to the present stage of integration. However, there are some clashes of opinions over the ways these institutions efficacy could be increased. A disputed matter is represented by responsibilities distribution between the national authorities and the E.U. in-

stitutions. A concentration of the responsibilities at the level of the European institutions could lead to the economic policies efficacy increase, but this could be perceived by the public opinion as a national sovereignty decrease. In the conditions of the Euroscepticism increase from some countries this problem must be approached with a lot of cautiousness. Generally, the public opinion is more sensitive at the changes forms than at the changes fund. From this reason, it is recommended that institutional reform proposals to be formulated in a manner that spares the susceptibilities.

Another important aspect of the institutional reform is the change of the unanimity condition into the qualified majority in order to adopt the major decisions for the future of the E.U. It is obvious that unanimity of the member states could make very difficult the E.U. management. However, for the small countries there is a fear that unanimity replacement with the qualified majority could signify their voices would not be heard in the European Union Council. In this context, the approval in the Parliaments from these states of giving up to the unanimity condition could be quite difficult.

In Romania the authorities support, at least by their declarations, the French – German alliance position towards the institutional reform. This may be considered as a pre-cautious policy, adequate to the sort of vulnerable position Romania has in the present in the E.U. As it concerns the public opinion it must be considered the fact that a big part of it is quite little accustomed to the E.U. institutions role. In order to evaluate the opinions of some better informed categories, the 160 students were asked about the attributions transfer from the Romanian authorities to the European ones. It resulted the preferences are quite balanced distributed between the alternative of a significant transfer of decision power towards the European authorities and the one of maintaining the attributions at the national level (see table 3).

Table 3 – Opinions of students regarding the attributions transfer from the Romanian authorities to the European ones

Opinions	Number of answers	Weight
Favorable to the Romanian authorities attributions transfer	80	50 %
Unfavorable to the attributions transfer	77	48,1 %
No answer	3	1,9 %
Total	160	100 %

During the group interviews the students favorable to a significant transfer of the attributions to the European authorities justified their option by the lack of competence and the corruption of the Romanian authorities. The students who prefer the attribution maintenance at the national level explained they were afraid the European authorities could not understand the problems of Romania. Still, they mentioned they considered not indicated, in the present circumstances, the representatives of Romania to oppose frankly to the attributions transfer. As a conclusion, the results of our investigation seem to indicate the fact the institutional reform of the E.U. will not come up against a major opposition from the public opinion from Romania.

4. Decisions regarding the enlargement

A big number of countries (some of them from outside Europe) expressed their desire to become members of E.U. There are countries that could represent important markets for the E.U. producers. Moreover, many countries have a population with an age average quite reduced, that could counteract the population aging effects from the Western Europe. Nor there must not be neglected the geo-strategic positions of some potential candidates (Busek and Mikulitsch, 2005,

pages 161 – 166). However, the decision regarding the future enlargements is under some significant constraints.

The massive adhesions from the last years overstretched the E.U. absorption capacity and they contributed to the Euroscepticism increase. Many new members were countries with a low living standard in comparison with the average level of the E.U. and they needed consistent financing. Moreover, the flows of immigrants that followed the adhesion aroused partially the hostility of the public opinion from the Western European countries. The citizens from these countries are also sensitive to the cultural differences that separate them from the population of the potential candidates. Most of the E.U. old members are countries with a solid democratic tradition and they belong to the Western civilization with Catholic and Protestant majority (Huntington, 1998, pages 23 – 42). On the other hand, most of the countries that want to adhere have a quite recent democratic experience and they have an Orthodox or Muslim majority population. Especially the adhesion of a Muslim country, in the context of Islam terrorism worsening, could arouse the worry of the E.U. public opinion.

The potential candidates for the enlargement belong to three important geographic areas: the Balkans, the Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. In the Balkans the countries expressing their wish to adhere are: Albania, Bosnia – Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. For Albania, Bosnia – Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia the democratization and the economic reform processes did not reach stages for taking into account the adhesion in the near future. Croatia, Macedonia and Turkey gained the status of candidate for the adhesion to the E.U. In the case of Croatia, a small country with a Catholic majority population and with a living standard that exceeds the one of some E.U. members, it would not be overstretched the capacity of absorption and it would not be amplified the Euroscepticism. The admission of Macedonia, a country where the Orthodox and Muslim religions prevail and the living standard is inferior to those from the E.U. members, could amplify the Euroscepticism.

Moreover, there are some suspicions regarding the lack of control from the democratic institutions over the Army and its big population would qualify it for a massive representation in the European institutions.

From Eastern Europe, Moldova and Ukraine want to adhere to the E.U. Yet, their political and economical situation does not justify their hope to a fast adhesion. Besides that, the two countries have Orthodox majority population, so their accession could be regarded with hostility by some citizens from the Western Europe.

In the Caucasus area Armenia and Georgia expressed, for now, their intention to adhere. Both have Orthodox majority population, a low living standard, so their accession could favor the Euroscepticism. Anyway, their position next to rich in oil areas makes them attractive targets for the enlargements.

In the present circumstances, it is expected that the potential candidates not be admitted too soon in the E.U, with the exception of Croatia. However, the E.U. authorities must consider the fact a frank rejection or a too long delay could arouse the population hostility in these countries. From this reason it would be desirable as a remedy the intensification of the E.U. economic and political support for these states.

For the future enlargements there are also aimed countries that did not yet express clearly their intention of adhesion to E.U. The accession of some countries with a high living standard and that belong to the Western civilization (Norway, Island, Liechtenstein, Switzerland a.s.o.) would increase the economic and political force of the E.U. without escalating the Euroscepticism or without overstretching the absorption capacity. Besides these countries, the admission of Kazakhstan or Azerbaijan could be a guarantee against some future energetic crises. For these countries some promotional policies could be elaborated in order to convince the population about the adhesion benefits.

In the case of Romania, the government joined the majority from E.U., considering welcome the graduate enlargements. For the public opinion from the country a sensitive matter is the situation of Moldova Republic. This could create in the future a certain pressure for the Romanian authorities to a massive support of this country accession in the European Union.

During our investigation the 160 students were asked if, in their opinion, the new members' accession in the E.U. would be favorable for Romania. More than half of them answered new enlargements would be good for Romania and 40 percent of them answered there would not be favorable (see table 4).

Table 4 – Opinions of the students regarding the effects of new enlargements for Romania

Opinions	Number of answers	Weight
New enlargements would be favorable for Romania	83	52 %
New enlargements would not be favorable for Romania	64	40 %
No answer	13	8 %
Total	160	100 %

The students who consider the new enlargements would be favorable for Romania explained their opinions by the advantages of new markets. They think it would be desirable in the near future countries from the West Balkans to adhere, this making easier the communications of Romania with the South and South – West of Europe. However, they do not think the Romanian government should act in order to rush any enlargement. All the students showed hostility towards the accession of Turkey in E.U., motivating this country is too far from the European culture. Most of the students consider that for the mo-

ment Moldova Republic is not ready to become a member of the E.U. The students considering that new enlargements would not be favorable for Romania declared the new members of E.U. would become some serious competitors for the foreign direct investments and for the European financing. However, the students consider it would not be well that Romania opposes frankly to the new accessions, because this position would damage the international relations of our country.

5. Decisions regarding the foreign affairs

The transition to unitary foreign affairs policy of the E.U. members is a disputed matter. The requirements for a substantial clear policy of the members concerning the international problems came both from inside and from outside E.U. In order to reach this purpose, in the rejected European Constitution it was proposed the creation of the post called "Union Minister for Foreign Affairs". Anyhow, it became obvious such a measure is unpopular in some countries, being perceived as harming the national sovereignty. From this reason, in the Reform Treaty it is used the name "High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy". The person established for this post could represent E.U. only in problems where there is an agreed policy between all member-states. This could mean that in the future it will be quite difficult for E.U. to elaborate a coherent foreign affairs policy. Now, the E.U. Member States have to face three important problems of foreign affairs policy: the relations with the U.S.A., the relations with Russia and the situation from the Middle East.

During the Cold War, the threat represented by Soviet Union forced the countries from the Western Europe to have a foreign affairs policy similar to the one of U.S.A. Most of these were members of NATO, where the first position of U.S.A. was undisputed. However, beginning with the '60s the relations from the East and the West defrost decreased continuously the Soviet threat, stimulating the differentia-

tion of some Western countries (especially France) foreign affairs policies in relation with the U.S.A.

The fall of the Communist regimes from the Eastern Europe imposed a new approach of the relations with this area. It was rethought the role of NATO taking into consideration the new threats it had to face. Generally, the present members of E.U. supported U.S.A. in the conflicts from the Gulf, in the conflicts with Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. The latest war from Iraq led to major clashes of opinions in E.U. regarding the intervention of U.S.A. On one side the biggest part of the E.U. members supported U.S.A. politically and military, on the other hand the president Jacques Chirac and the chancellor Gerhard Schroeder disapproved the U.S.A. intervention. Their attitude, approved by the public opinion with increasing anti – American feelings, provoked a strong reaction from the U.S.A. officials. However, in the last years the elections from France and Germany brought the power to Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel. The two leaders seemed to be closer by the president Bush than their predecessors so that it is expected to be improved the relations of France and Germany with U.S.A.

Romania is considered by U.S.A. an allied in the conflict from Iraq and the declarations of the Romanian authorities indicate the interest for the privileged relations maintenance. From this reason, it is expected that Romania supports the cooperation between E.U. and U.S.A in the foreign affairs policy. However, from the group interviews with the students it resulted they were not too favorable to this attitude. Many of them are not pleased with what they perceive to be an American hegemony in the Euro-Atlantic affairs. Some of them explained that U.S.A. and E.U. (competitors from the economic point of view) will become, inherently, rivals in the foreign affairs policy. Quite a lot of students expressed their anti – American feelings that seem to be stimulated by the war from Yugoslavia and by the intervention in Iraq.

After the adhesion of Poland and of the Baltic States E.U. has now a common border with Russia. The relations with this country are dominated by the deliveries of oil and gases and by the attempts of Russia to maintain its spheres of influence. The Russian gas and the oil are sold in attractive conditions although some deliveries interruptions from the past aroused worry among the E.U. countries. There are fears regarding the Russia using the oil and gases deliveries as a mean of pressure on E.U. The attempts of Russia to maintain its spheres of influence are in contradiction with the intentions of some countries from these areas of adhesion to E.U. (Ciascai, 2006, pages 27 – 34). In the past the development of relations between Russia and E.U. was undermined by the situation of the Russian minority from the Baltic countries and by the Russian - Polish commercial dispute.

In the present, Romania imports big quantities of oil and gases from Russia. During our investigation most of the students mentioned the main obstacle for the Russian – Romanian relations development is represented by the situation from Moldova Republic, where Russia wants to maintain its influence. This is also the main reason for the students not being very favorable to the political cooperation between E.U. and Russia.

The situation from the Middle East is a preoccupation for E.U., in the context of the implications it could have on the oil price and on the Islam terrorism. Until now E.U. participated, together with U.S.A. and Russia, to attempts of solving the crises from this region.

The United States of America are allied with Israel but Russia supports some radical Muslim states. The privileged relations the present leaders of France and Germany have with the president Bush could indicate the E.U. policy regarding the Middle East would be similar to the American one. Anyway, the big weight the Muslims have in the electorate of some Western European could lead to a more moderate position.

Romania was the only member of the Pact from Warsaw that, after the Six Days War from 1967, did not interrupt the diplomatic relations with Israel. In the same time it succeeded to maintain good relations with many Arab countries. The contacts it had with both parts made Romania contribute significantly to the preparation of Agreements from Camp Davis. This experience could be used in the negotiation of new agreements for Middle East.

During our investigation the 160 students were asked about their opinion regarding the E.U. policy to Middle East. It resulted they support a moderate policy, rejecting the idea of E.U. participation to a new military intervention in the area.

6. Conclusions

This article had as subject the approach from a Romanian perspective of the decisions regarding the future of Europe. In the context of the Euroscepticism intensity from the last years, in these decisions – making the public opinion must be seriously taken into consideration. In our article, in order to understand the Romanian public opinion perceptions regarding the European problems we used the results of an investigation of 160 students.

In the present, the important decisions for the future of E.U. must be adopted in unanimity by the member states representatives. This situation makes that theoretically the small and the big countries to be equal as it concerns the strategic decisions making. Anyhow, the experience proved that practically the countries with big population and that are big contributors to the E.U. budget succeed to impose their points of view. The transition to the strategic decisions making by qualified majority could amplify the role of these countries. The considerable population of Romania offers a significant representation in the European institutions. However, being just a small contributor to the E.U. budget and the safeguard clauses that threat its quality of E.U. member does not allow it to play a big role in conceiving the fu-

ture of Europe, at least for the moment. From our investigation among students we conclude they perceive a certain inferiority of Romania in comparison with other members and they consider it would not be desirable our country to adopt a strong position in the strategic decision about E.U.

About the institutional reform of E.U. it must decide upon the attributions distribution between the national authorities and the European ones. The Romanian government does not oppose, at least by declaration, to give up a significant part from its attributions in the favor of the European institutions. Our investigation among students revealed half of them are favorable to an important transfer of attributions from the Romanian authorities to the European ones. Even those who are not favorable to this transfer do not consider that Romania should oppose frankly.

Concerning the decisions upon the future enlargements, it is expected that, excepting maybe Croatia, the new adhesions will not happen too soon. The Romanian government is favorable to some graduate enlargements. More than half of the students consider the new enlargements would be favorable to Romania but none of them thinks the government should act to urge them. After the European Constitution rejection it is obvious it will be difficult to get a unitary foreign affairs policy for E.U. Anyway, it is desirable the member states have similar positions in the important international problems. From our investigation among students it resulted they were favorable to some moderate positions and they did not agree the participation of E.U. to military interventions.

For now, it is not expected in the decisions regarding the future of Europe the Romanian authorities to have radical positions, as it was the case of Poland with the occasion of Reform Treaty debate. Such an attitude is caused both by the reduced economic force and by the safeguard clauses still available and by the quite favorable perceptions of the public opinion about the integration.

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Ramona DUMITRIU, Faculty of Economic Sciences, University "Dunărea de Jos" Galați, Romania.

Răzvan ȘTEFĂNESCU, Faculty of Economic Sciences, University "Dunărea de Jos" Galați, Romania.

