

The Undemocratic Nature of the EU — Myth or Reality?

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Abstract: *The main goal of this paper is to grasp the unique nature of elite-mass relations on the issue of European integration. The general question the paper aims to answer is whether the attitudes of the elites correspond to those of public on the issue of the European integration. Due to the limitations of the current research, three groups of attitudes on a scale from Eurosceptic through neutral to pro-integrational are singled out. The combination of the three types of attitudes on both the elite and mass level generates a typology of nine theoretically possible types the relationship of the elites and the masses in terms of their attitudes to the European integration. We also tried to identify the most important factors affecting the elite and the mass views of the European integration. The results are based on the statistical data analysis.*

Keywords: *European integration, elite-mass relations, attitudes, democratic deficit.*

The nature of the relationship between the public and the political elite is crucial to the understanding of any political system. If this relationship is positive, we usually label such systems as democratic. However, if the elites do not represent the public, or behave in a non-accountable way, we call such systems undemocratic, authoritarian or totalitarian. The terms elites and masses are used in the sense of the modern elitist theory and thus possess no normative meanings. These concepts simply represent two groups in the society that have very different structure and characteristics, so they have to be analyzed separately. In the present paper this relationship will be observed in the context of the European integration.

The fundamental question of this paper is whether the elites represent the public on the European integration. This issue is currently highly topical due to the repeated attempts of the European leaders to reform the whole system of the European Union (EU), and also because of the rising dissatisfaction of the public with the European policies and the intricate system of decision-making in the EU. The indicators of the dissatisfaction of the EU citizens since the early 90s are above all the unsuccessful referenda on the European issues, the falling turnouts in the elections to the European Parliament (EP) and the rise of radical populist right wing parties in Western Europe which are campaigning against the European integration. The past twenty years of integration are characterized by huge shifts in this relationship; it is most commonly, referred to in the literature as a shift from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus (Hooghe and Marks 2007; Schmitter 2007). What are the reasons of this shift? It is argued that the most important factors here are the changes in the nature of integration (from an economic community to a deeply integrated political one). The issue of this paper has been heavily attracting the attention of researchers since early 1990s, when the first unsuccessful referenda about the EU treaties took place. (Rohschreider 2002; Norris 1997; Schmitt 2005; Schmitter 2001, etc.) The main goal of this paper is to grasp the unique nature of elite-mass relations on the issue of the European integration.

In this paper we intend to answer a series of questions concerning this issue. The most general question is whether the elites represent the public on the issue of European integration. A clear-cut answer to this question may contribute to the understanding of the nature of democracy in the European Union. The second fundamental research question is: which factors and how are influencing the attitudes of masses and elites?

In order to answer these questions we have to deal with all the attitudes of the elite and the public separately. Due to the limited character of this research design three groups of attitudes on a scale from Eurosceptic through neutral to pro-integrational were defined. The elite and mass attitudes in every EU member-state will be separately put in one of these groups. Thanks to these clusters 9 theoretic types of member states will originate (based on two variables, each having 3 variations).

Table 1: Theoretic typology of member states

Mass attitudes	Euroskeptical (E)	Neutral (N)	Pro-integrational (P)
<i>Elite attitudes</i>			
<i>Euroskeptical (E)</i>	E\E	N\E	P\E
<i>Neutral (N)</i>	E\N	N\N	P\N
<i>Pro-integrational (P)</i>	E\P	N\P	P\P

Thanks to this typology a plain identification of the trends in the attitudes and the relationship between the elites and the masses will be possible. After this we will try to find the factors affecting the attitudes of the elite and the public based on certain factors that

are commonly mentioned in the literature (Hooghe and Marks 2004; Tucker, Pacek and Berinsky 2002).

The first part of the paper is given to methodology, introducing a set of to-be-tested variables. In this part we will also shortly introduce the research data. The next part of the paper is devoted to the results of the statistical tests and other findings that resulted from the statistical procession of the data. In the last part of the paper we will summarize the main results and findings and draw certain generalizations or further research questions from these results.

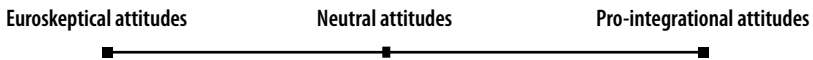
Research design, methods, data

As for the cases, we will be dealing with 15 EU member states (10 old member states, 5 new member states¹). The data used in this paper come from the project INTUNE². Since the data from the second (the most recent) stage of this research will be available only in late spring 2009, in this paper only the data from the first stage will be used (2007). This analysis will later be used as a source of comparison between the first and the second stages of the project.

We should also clarify who is considered to be the elite in the paper. In the framework of the project INTUNE structured interviews were conducted with 80 national members of parliaments of the participating countries. Thus, the elites in this paper are the legislative political elites of the member states. Concerning the definition of the public, a representative sample is selected from the population of the participating countries.

Regarding the process of research, in the first stage the attitudes of the public and the elites will be filed into one of these categories:

Figure 1: Simplified possible attitudes of the elites and the masses



As introduced at the beginning of this paper in Figure 1, 9 types of member states will emerge based on the attitudes of the public and the elite. This 'typology' of member states will allow us to identify the clear-cut trends in the orientations of the elite and the public, and also determine the nature of their relationship.

The next step is to find out which factors are affecting the attitudes of the elite and the public. These two research question are closely connected, since the relationship of the elite and mass public might be influenced by the factors that are shaping the attitudes of these two groups. It is highly possible that these two groups are also affecting one another. (Steenbergen, Edwards and Netjes 2007)

Concerning the statistical operations, we will count the correlation coefficient of all the variables. However, since we are dealing with certain qualitative variables a more useful way to determine relationship between qualitative variables or qualitative and quantitative variables is the analysis of variance (ANOVA)³. Thus, besides the correlations for all variables, we will also present this operation.

Independent Variables and Indicators Affecting Attitudes

We will examine two sets of variables, the first three ones could be called aggregate variables, and the other three variables are representing individual characteristics of respondents.

The first three variables are dealing with the cases aggregately. This means that these variables are trying to find differences or similarities between the member-states as units.

- The economic situation of a country is a commonly used factor to explain the influence on the attitudes of the elite and the public. There are many ways to operationalize this variable. The simplest way would be to use the GDP per capita of a country. It is not clear whether the wealthier countries will be more in favor of European integration, since these countries are net contributors to the EU budget and this might cause negative attitudes. On the other hand, these countries have the biggest benefits from the single European market. Thus, besides the GDP, we will examine whether there is a connection between the net contributions of a country and the attitudes of its population.
- The second important factor useful in determining the attitudes of the elite and the public is the duration of a country's membership in years.
- The third set of variables could be labeled as the variables of the political system. Operationalizing these variables we will find out whether there is a connection between certain features of the political systems and the attitudes on the European integration. The following features will be explained:
 - The number of parties in the system.⁴
 - The type of the electoral system — proportional, majority or mixed.

The second set of three variables is different, since we will look into the individual characteristics influencing the attitudes towards the EU.

- The first variable 'of personality' is derived from the post-functional theory (Hooghe, Marks, 2007): the influence of identity on the attitudes of the elite and the masses. This variable is operationalized as whether the representatives of the masses identify themselves as the members of their nation and as European, or as Europeans only. The hypothesis of the post-functional theory is that the more exclusive the identity is, the more negative the attitude towards the European integration can be expected.
- A quite problematic variable is the left/right divide, since in nearly every country this dichotomy has its own content. A better way to find the relationship between the political orientations and the attitudes to the EU is the method suggested by the post-functional theory: dividing the parties to green/alternative/libertarian and traditional/authoritative/nationalist (GAL-TAN). Thus, we will also examine the influence of this division on the attitudes towards the European Integration.

- The last groups of variables are the demographic variables: age, sex, education, self-proclaimed social status and religion.

The Dependent Variable – Measuring the Attitudes towards EU

The following operationalization was chosen for the dependent variable, which is the attitude towards the EU integration:

‘Some say European unification has already gone too far. Others say it should be strengthened. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a 10-point-scale. On this scale, ‘0’ means unification ‘has already gone too far’ and ‘10’ means it ‘should be strengthened’. What number on this scale best describes your position?’ (Intune questionnaire).

If the answer is from 0 to 4, the attitude is Euroskeptical, the answers from 5 to ‘don’t know’ reveal neutral attitude, while 6 to 10 mean the attitude is pro-integrationist. One more note — if the answer is 5, then the respondent thinks that the unification of Europe currently reached a phase, which does not need changes, so the attitude is neutral since he or she does not think the unification should be strengthened or it has gone too far. If the answer is ‘don’t know’, it means that the respondent has no clear position on the issue, thus the attitude is considered neutral.

Concerning the first research question, we will look into some other variables that show a more comprehensive picture of elite and public attitudes on the EU, or, more precisely, whether the elite represents the mass public on certain specific issues. Thus, examined will be the following indicators:

- The attitude towards the European army;
- Supporting certain changes: a unified tax system, a common system of social security in the EU and a single EU foreign policy

Elite and Mass Attitudes towards the European Integration: Results

Representation

Do the elites represent the public on the issue of European integration? Research shows they do. The attitudes of the elite and the public in the typology represent the majority attitude in the respective group.

According to this typology, in 11 out of 15 cases (types EE and PP) the elites represent the mass public on the issue of European integration, or at least the majority of the elite represents the majority of the public (Table 2).

Table 2: Typology of member states based on the attitudes of the elites and the masses

Mass attitudes	Euroskeptical (E)	Neutral (N)	Pro-integrational (P)
<i>Elite attitudes</i>			
<i>Euroskeptical (E)</i>	EE: UK	NE: Estonia	—
<i>Neutral (N)</i>	—	—	—
<i>Pro-integrational (P)</i>	EP: Austria	NP: Hungary, Bulgaria	PP: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Poland, Slovakia, France⁵

Of particular interest are the cases in which the public is neutral and the elite is Eurosceptic (Estonia) or Pro-integrational (Hungary, Bulgaria). All of these cases are of new member states, so we can assume that the European issue has not penetrated the society yet. Austria is the only case, where the elites are pro-integrational and the masses are Euroskeptical. One of the least surprising results is the Euroskeptical attitude of both the elites and the masses in the UK. Concerning the remaining — most-extensive — group of countries, where the elites and the masses are pro-integrational, there is no pattern there. Thus, once again the question arises whether certain factors are influencing these attitudes.

As mentioned earlier, we looked into the attitudes on some specific policies to ascertain whether the elites represent the masses in certain specific policy areas. Based on Table 3, we can see significant differences between the countries on these issues. However, for example, in the case of support for common foreign policy, the results are very identical (except for the UK). The absolute majority of the elite and the masses has shown support for it. In the cases of unified taxes and common social policy the majority of the elites and the masses are supporting these changes as well. The only exception from these four areas is the common European army.

Table 3: Attitudes on supporting these changes in percents. In the cases of taxes, social system and foreign policy the positive attitudes are sums of strongly and somewhat in favor

	European Army		Unified Taxes		Common social system		Common foreign policy	
	<i>Elite</i>	<i>Mass</i>	<i>Elite</i>	<i>Mass</i>	<i>Elite</i>	<i>Mass</i>	<i>Elite</i>	<i>Mass</i>
Austria	38	22,2	64,1	49,6	50	74,2	80,6	76,4
Belgium	67,1	36,1	57,9	62,6	57,9	69,6	96,1	70,5
Denmark	17,5	13,1	12,3	23,4	33,4	56,1	75,5	57,1
Germany	50	23,8	65,3	67,8	47,3	79,1	86,1	83,1
Greece	17,2	14,4	75,8	61	88,5	78	97,7	75,8
Spain	48,9	28,7	73,9	65,8	85,9	85,1	92,4	77,5
France	10,1	19,0	78,5	65	87,3	55,5	92,4	68,9
Italy	38,3	30,1	64,2	70,2	91,4	76,3	91,4	76,3
Portugal	32,0	12,7	72	49,5	85,3	74	89,4	53,7
UK	2	7,4	2	35,6	20	48,3	4	50,2
Estonia	1,6	13,3	32,8	35,2	57,8	66	93,8	65,6
Hungary	37,2	22,4	70,5	51,1	85,9	82	93,6	69
Poland	3,9	10,1	55,9	67	63,7	82,9	74,1	75,1
Slovakia	20,8	22,1	37,7	51,1	53,3	75,8	84,4	78
Bulgaria	19,2	10,4	72,6	45,2	78,1	59,1	90,5	64,7
Europe (15 selected)	27,4	19,1	57,3	53,3	66,2	70,6	86,3	69,5

The majority of the elite and masses in Europe is pro-integrational. This means that the frequently mentioned democratic deficit in the EU is ill-founded, since the fundamental essence of democracy (the representation of the masses by the elites) is present on the issue of European integration. The institutional system of the European Union might be undemocratic, since the decisive institutions are not directly elected, however, as long as the national elites represent the masses, the democratic checks are secured. However, this statement can be challenged, since we are dealing with national elites and not the 'real' European politicians (whoever they might be).

How It Works?

In this part of the paper we will present a series of correlations between the dependent variable (the attitude towards the strengthening of European unification) and several independent variables outlined in the earlier part of the paper. All of the correlations are expressed by the Pearson correlation coefficients. Correlations are significant at the 0,01 level (2-tailed), if the level is 0,05 we will specify it in the respective places, if the correlation is statistically not significant, the respective block in the table will be left blank. Some of the variables are also expressed in ANOVA plots⁵, which are very useful in the cases of qualitative independent variables. ANOVA plots will be presented only for the aggregate data for whole Europe and only for the variables that imply dependency. All of the ANOVA plots are significant at 0,05 level.

The first set of independent (aggregate) variables seems to have very weak influence on the attitudes on EU (Table 4). The correlations are weak, so we might assume that the connection between these factors and the attitudes is not significant. The strongest correlation is in the case of the duration of membership, which is the most influential factor among these variables.

Table 4: Correlations between the dependent variable and the aggregate independent variables

	Whole Europe (15 selected)	
	<i>Elite</i>	<i>Mass</i>
GDP per capita in PPP	0,093	-0,060
Contribution to EU budget in %	0,119	—
Length of membership	0,166	0,038
Number of parties	0,111	0,020 (sig. at 0,05 level)
Electoral system	—	—

The situation is quite different with the ‘individual’ independent variables (Table 5). The data suggests that the most important factor affecting the attitudes towards the EU is the notion of national identity (exclusive or inclusive). If somebody is attached to one’s own country, it does not mean that she/he will have more negative attitudes. Rather, this variable illustrates the inclusive notion: a person can be both patriotic and European. The influence of the left-right position is quite weak on the level of Europe in general; however, in certain cases this division does affect the attitudes quite significantly, e.g. in UK, Austria, Italy and Poland. The situation is similar with the GAL-TAN division. This division is important in those cases, where strong right-wing populist parties are present in the system (Austria, Italy, Poland). Concerning the demographic variables based on these correlations, we can claim that they do not exert any significant influence on the attitudes of either the elites, or the masses. The only exception is the education in the case of masses in certain countries

(Austria, Belgium, Denmark), where the correlation indicates that the more educated a person is the more positive attitudes she/he will have.

Table 5/Part 1: Correlations between the dependent variable and the independent variables in every country

	Self-identification	Attachment to own country		Attachment to Europe		Left-right		Gal-tan	Gender	
	M	E	M	E	M	E	M	E	E	M
Austria	0,291		0,092	-0,235*	-0,256	-0,384	-0,204	-0,488		-0,116
Belgium	0,191		-0,026*	-0,296	-0,288		-0,094	-0,242*		
Denmark	0,250		0,108	-0,450	-0,182	-0,246*		No data		
Germany	0,242		-0,063*	-0,272 (sig at 0,05 level)	-0,324			-0,258		
Greece			0,034*	-0,152*	-0,073 (sig at 0,05 level)		0,081*			
Spain	0,122		-0,055*	-0,194*	-0,191			-0,226		-0,095
France	0,344		-0,042*	-0,561	-0,443		-0,065*			-0,137
Italy	0,186		-0,0003*	-0,208*	-0,228	-0,342	-0,120	-0,402		-0,121
Portugal	0,155		-0,054*	-0,398	-0,165		0,085*			-0,069*
UK	0,238		0,024*	-0,391	-0,361	-0,530	-0,138	No data	0,354*	
Estonia	0,111		-0,043*	-0,112	-0,195		0,108			
Hungary	0,114		-0,009*	-0,216*	-0,148					
Poland	0,076*		-0,074	-0,498	-0,125	-0,340		-0,469		
Slovakia	0,163		-0,064	-0,397	-0,204		0,182			
Bulgaria			-0,092	-0,135*	-0,170	0,293*			0,237*	
Europe (15 selected)	0,192		-0,018	-0,305	-0,227	0,157		-0,200	0,078	-0,039

Table 5/Part 2: Correlations between the dependent variable and the independent variables in every country

	Age		Education		Social status	
	<i>E</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>M</i>
Austria		0,173		0,202		No data
Belgium				0,179		-0,148
Denmark		0,095		0,166		-0,097
Germany				0,162		-0,161
Greece						
Spain		-0,070*		0,088		
France				0,116		-0,081*
Italy				0,144		-0,105
Portugal						
UK		0,171		0,107		
Estonia						
Hungary						
Poland						
Slovakia				0,136		-0,112
Bulgaria						
Europe (15 selected)	-0,064*	0,045		0,072		-0,079

As mentioned above, we have also taken into account the problems which may not be handled by correlations, i.e. the qualitative variables. We used the analysis of variance to grasp the relationship between this type of variables and the dependent variable. Even though most of the results are statistically significant, only few of them can be labeled as empirically significant. In our analysis, we will present only the latter cases. Figures 2 and 3 confirmed the statement presented above: identity is the most important factor affecting the attitudes of both the elites and the masses. Those who feel attached to Europe have significantly more positive attitudes towards the European integration.

Figure 2: ANOVA plot indicating dependency between attachment to Europe and the attitudes of the masses

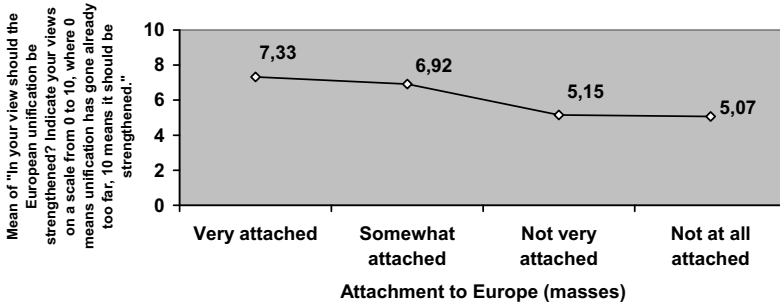
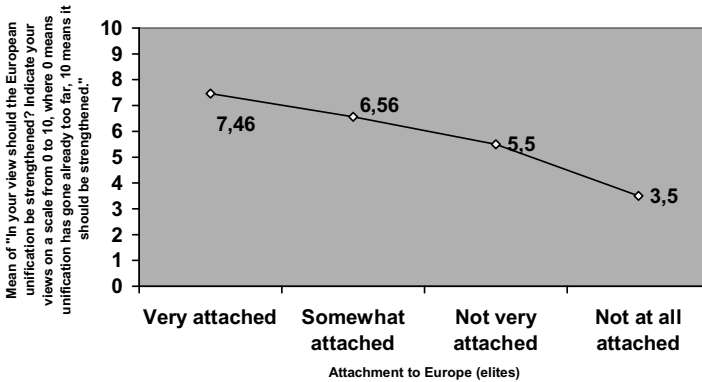
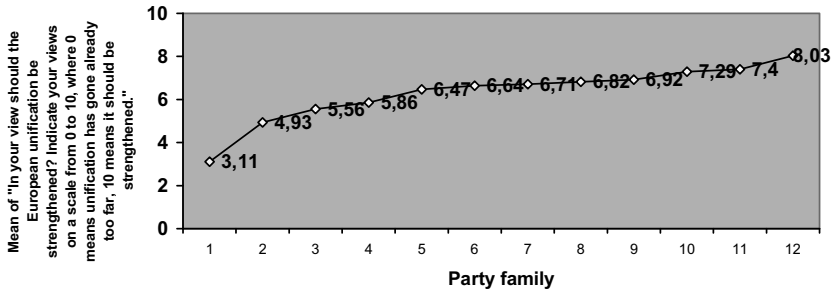


Figure 3: ANOVA plot indicating dependency between attachment to Europe and the attitudes of the elite



The other ANOVA plot that indicates empirical significance demonstrates the relationship between the party family and the attitudes of the elites (GAL-TAN) position (Figure 4). It is quite evident that the TAN parties are on the left side of the plot with the most negative attitudes. The middle section (conservative, Christian democratic parties, etc.) is bridging the two poles, while the right side of the plot is occupied by the GAL parties with the most positive attitudes.

Figure 4: ANOVA plot indicating dependency between the party family and the attitudes of the elites.



1 – Extreme right, 2 – Communist, 3 – Ethnic minority, regionalist, 4 – Agrarians, 5 – Left liberals, 6 – Conservatives, 7 – Christian democrats, 8 – Right liberals, 9 – Liberals, 10 – New left, 11 – Socialist, social democrats, 12 – Greens)

Conclusion

In this paper we made an attempt to answer two basic questions: firstly, whether the elites represent the masses on the issue of European integration and, secondly, which factors are influencing the attitudes towards European integration. Our findings are based on statistical data analysis.

Concerning the first research question we have ascertained that — in contrast to the democratic deficit criticism — the elites do represent the masses on 11 out of 15 issues, and 3 of the 4 remaining cases are those of new member states, where the attitudes of the masses are neutral, so it is quite possible that these attitudes will change in the future. Also some of the specific policy areas showed that the elites and masses agree on the direction of European integration. This means that even though the institutional system of the European Union is not a model case of democracy, the masses are represented by the elites, and this is what actually matters most.

The answer to the second research question is much more complex. The data suggests that the most important factor affecting the attitudes on EU is the identity of the elites as well as the masses. However, there is big difference between the exclusive and inclusive notion of identity. While a person can feel to be attached to his or her country, it does not mean that the attitude on the EU will be negative (this is expressed in the attachment to one's own country). Thus, a strong national identity is not crucial, decisive is whether this identity is exclusive or inclusive, in which case the correlation is the strongest. In the case of the elites the Gal-tan position is also quite important. An interesting fact is that almost all of the correlations belonging to the elites are stronger than those of the masses. This indicates that the attitudes of the elites are much more structured than the attitudes of the masses. So

while in the case of the masses the majority of correlations is very close to 0 (very weak), in the case of the elites the correlations are stronger. This differentiation is even more obvious between the countries. For example, in the case of Austria the majority of the correlations is statistically significant. Another interesting example is France, where the variables of identity indicate very strong connection with the dependent variable. This is also true for the UK, where, besides the identity, the correlation for the left-right elite identification is strong, and even elite gender (women have more positive attitudes to the EU) is significant, which is not important in any other EU member state (except Bulgaria). Even though the correlation between the length of membership and the dependent variable is not strong, based on the statistical significance of all the other correlations, we can conclude that the attitudes of the new member states in general are much less structured than those of the old member-states. For example, in the case of Hungary only two correlations are statistically significant. However, this is true also for Greece. So the question for further research is why certain factors are important in certain countries and not in other ones? The ANOVA plots also showed that the identity and the Gal-tan positions of the elites are the most decisive factors affecting the attitudes on EU.

Notes

- ¹ These 15 cases are selected because data were available both for elites and masses of these countries. Unfortunately, certain interesting cases are not part of project INTUNE, above all Ireland.
- ² Project Intune (Integrated and United) is financed by the 6th framework program of the EU.
- ³ The analysis of variance examines whether the difference between the means of the variables is random or statistically significant. If the result is statistically significant, we can assume that there is some sort of relationship between the variables.
- ⁴ We are fully aware of the fact that the number of parties is not the best criterion of characterizing a party system, since there could be huge differences between the two countries having, for example, 5 parties in the system. However, on the other hand, simply counting with the number of parties is statistically much more useful, which is the reason why we chose this approach.
- ⁵ In every ANOVA plot the Y axis represents the dependent variable, and the X axis is the respective independent variable.

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