

Where Have All the ‘Exiters’ Gone? Contextualising the Concept of Hard Euroscepticism

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Abstract

The article analyses the impact of Brexit on hard Eurosceptic discourses in the Visegrád Group countries from 2015 to 2023. As the negative implications of Brexit for the UK economy became clear, many hard Eurosceptics softened their rhetoric, using the referendum as a proxy for a ‘hard’ exit. Whilst the classical soft–hard typology remains dominant amongst scholars in the study of Euroscepticism, the case of Brexit shows that long-term principled opposition to the European Union (EU) can hide behind equivocal rhetoric. The article suggests studying the changing tactics of Eurosceptics by matching current EU and domestic contexts together with the long-term points of departure of hard Eurosceptics.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe; Czexit; hard Euroscepticism; Huxit; Polexit; Slovexit

Introduction

More than 10 years ago, Cas Mudde (2012) nominated the question ‘so what?’ as the primary constraint on carrying out more extensive studies of Euroscepticism. In the context of the polycrisis of European integration and rising populism (Baldassari et al., 2020; Brack and Startin, 2015; Leconte, 2015; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2013; Usherwood and Startin, 2013) and its politicisation (Nicoli, 2017), scholars are not asking such questions any more. Opposition to the European Union become embedded in European and national politics, and research on Euroscepticism has spread from party politics and public opinion to referenda, the media and civil society (Bijsmans, 2021; Leconte, 2010, pp. 219–125; Treib, 2021; Usherwood and Startin, 2013, p. 5; Vasilopoulou, 2013, pp. 153–154). Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are no longer an exception. The pre-accession unattractiveness of hard Euroscepticism for voters wanting to ‘return their countries to Europe’ (Henderson, 2008, pp. 112–113) no longer applies as the EU lost some of its transformative power and the charm of the elite club they wanted to belong to.

There is, however, a problem with Euroscepticism as it is such a ‘vague, elastic umbrella term’ (Kaniok and Komínková, 2022, p. 80). Our article examines Szczerbiak and Taggart’s (2008) classic hard and soft Euroscepticism divide. Authors have noted the increased permeability between soft Eurosceptic and pro-integration attitudes (Katz, 2008; Kopecký and Mudde, 2002; Treib, 2021, p. 176). According to some authors, hard Euroscepticism does not suffer from having a boundary as blurred as soft Euroscepticism, and its definition is ‘straightforward’ (Nicoli, 2017, p. 314), yet it is not uncontested. Moreover, Brexit, especially during its preparation, fuelled harsh anti-EU opposition across the EU (Brusenbauch Meislova and Buckledee, 2021; Martini and Walter, 2023). In this text, we argue that the political parties in the post-Brexit period

are less likely to call for an immediate exit from the EU. Still, the concept of hard Euroscepticism holds, but we must continuously adjust it according to changing anti-EU discourses.

The goal of our article is twofold. First, we re-assess the concept of hard Euroscepticism in light of current challenges to European integration. Second, we examine to what extent and how the discursive topic of exiting the EU finds repercussions in hard Eurosceptic discourses. We test this using, as examples, the Visegrád Group countries: Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The selection of our cases contributes to both empirical and theoretical debates on hard Euroscepticism. The Visegrád Group countries serve as a microcosm; they include cases with diverse treatments of European integration. There is Czechia, with its of a soft Eurosceptic mainstream, remaining deliberately excluded from the core of the EU. Once clearly pro-integration, Poland and Hungary represent cases of a pro-European public but divided elite where the politics of European integration have become an object of political contestation. Slovakia has remained within the core of the EU, participating in all its key initiatives and policies, yet the level of EU politicisation there is rising. Therefore, our sample offers cases where hard Euroscepticism exists in various domestic contexts yet, as we shall see, demonstrates similar features. Although these countries have shifted their positions on the EU several times (Végh, 2018) and hard Eurosceptic voices have been heard in them before, only Brexit triggered serious public and political discussion, including the ‘exit’ option.

The article is organised as follows. After a conceptual debate that shows the state of the art in defining and researching hard Euroscepticism, we set out our method of analysis and the reasons for focusing on the Eurosceptic discourse. We then describe and compare our empirical cases, and finally, we discuss what it all means for the conceptual debate on hard Euroscepticism.

I. Conceptual Debate

Studies of Euroscepticism have been part of the Europeanist mainstream since the late 1990s (Flood, 2009, p. 912). Leconte (2010, pp. 43–67) demonstrates various sources of Euroscepticism, from utilitarian and political to cultural and chauvinist oppositions. Moreover, ‘opposition to Europe does not mean the same thing in different countries’ (Daddow, 2006, p. 314).

Paul Taggart (1998) offers the most commonly used definition: Euroscepticism ‘expresses the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration’ (p. 366). Sofia Vasilopolou (2009, p. 3) offers the most straightforward definition of Euroscepticism as a ‘negative party position on European integration and the European Union’, yet it is clear that we need a finer grained differentiation. So far, the most commonly applied is the division between soft and hard Euroscepticism presented by Taggart and Szczerbiak:

Hard Euroscepticism implies outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration and opposition to their country joining or remaining members of the EU. Theoretically, hard Euroscepticism encompasses those with principled objection to the idea of any European economic and political integration. In reality such a position is too abstract to be applicable. In practice hard Euroscepticism can be identified by the

principled objection to the current form of European integration in the EU. (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2001, p. 10; see also Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2002, pp. 27–28, 2004, pp. 3–4)

Kopecký and Mudde (2002, p. 300) find even the category of hard Euroscepticism blurry in the sense that Taggart and Szczerbiak's original definition focuses on principled opposition to the current form of the EU, so the criteria separating the hard and soft versions are not clear. They offer instead a typology based on diffuse or specific opposition and have created the category of Euroreject for those who not only are pessimistic about the EU but also detest any form of integration. However, when applying their typology to parties in the Visegrád Group countries, they conclude that some cases are not fully compatible with any of the four types (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002, p. 316).

Vasilopolou (2009, p. 5) criticises the somewhat static conceptualisation of Taggart and Szczerbiak, who stress opposition against the current version of the EU and do not consider the debate on its future or the nuanced category of Eurosceptics of Kopecky and Mudde. She proposes a new typology based on three dimensions: opposition against the principle of integration, EU practices in its current form and its planned future deepening (Vasilopolou, 2009, pp. 5–7). She coins the concept of 'rejecting Euroscepticism', which roughly matches that of hard Euroscepticism and represents rejection of the EU in all three dimensions. Flood and Underwood (2007, p. 6) use the concept of 'rejectionists' for those who reject integration outright.

The basic idea all these concepts have in common remains the same: an absolute 'no' to the current EU. There is a need not to reject the concept of hard Euroscepticism but to refine it to reflect changes in the hard Eurosceptic target: the EU in its current form. Facing criticism, Taggart and Szczerbiak (2013) refine the definition of hard Euroscepticism in their theoretical edited volume, a definition they continue to use in their later works (p. 18):

Hard Euroscepticism is where there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived. (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008, p. 2)

Admitting the definitional discrepancies of soft Euroscepticism, Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008, pp. 3–4) stress principled opposition to transferring powers to supranational institutions – as Verney (2011, p. 52) puts it, 'a fundamental philosophical rejection of European integration'. Vasilopoulou (2013, p. 156) offers other arguments for retaining the categories of 'soft' and 'hard' Euroscepticism. The soft–hard dichotomy has almost universal applicability and is simple and conceptually inclusive. Kaniok and Komínková (2022) confirm substantial differences in rhetoric and behaviour between soft and hard Eurosceptic parties. Hard Eurosceptic discourses might even polarise the debate and push soft Eurosceptics into radicalising anti-EU stances (Wunsch and Bélanger, 2023).

However, some parties float between soft and hard Euroscepticism without producing unequivocal soft or hard discourse (Heinisch et al., 2021). Some parties, like *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Franzosi et al., 2015, p. 114), travel back and forth between hard and soft Euroscepticism. Others (the Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* or *Lega Nord*) are ambivalent in their Euroscepticism and, at the same time, 'combine soft and hard rhetoric and positions depending on the specific EU-related issue and the type of communication' (Heinisch et al., 2021, p. 190). Conceptually, this might not be a problem because neither

the category of soft Euroscepticism nor the category of hard Euroscepticism is engraved in stone. Parties are known to change their positions on many other issues, so they can change their positions on the EU. The categorisation of soft and hard Euroscepticism is not in danger as an analytical device, yet a volatile stance complicates the application of the typology in empirical examples.

Heinisch et al. (2021) suggest expanding beyond the dichotomy of soft and hard Euroscepticism and creating a third analytical category of ‘equivocal Euroscepticism’ for parties that change their rhetorical and political behaviour strategically to let voters and potential coalition partners ‘read’ them as they want them to be: soft or hard Eurosceptics:

[E]quivocal Eurosceptics criticise European integration, the EU, its officials and policies in ways that are often as harsh in tone and even in substance as that of hard Eurosceptics. Nonetheless, like the soft Eurosceptics, equivocal Eurosceptics shy away from expressing an unequivocally principled objection to EU membership and deny that this is their objective. [...] [M]any of their demands for reform represent little less than a complete transformation of the EU in its current configuration. (Heinisch et al., 2021, p. 191)

The motivation issues contained in the concept of equivocal Euroscepticism lead us to an important point. There has been a debate about the extent to which Euroscepticism can be ascribed to parties’ ideological positions or strategic and tactical considerations (Mudde, 2012, pp. 198–199). Parties can switch between hard and soft Euroscepticism as a strategy to represent interest groups, attract voters populistically on single issues (Sitter and Batory, 2008) or increase their coalition potential (Topaloff, 2018, p. 71). Benedetto and Quaglia (2007) confirm the same strategic choices for Western European communists. Kopecký and Mudde (2002, pp. 319–321) discuss the strategy-versus-ideology dilemma parties face when they make European choices and conclude that ideological basics are more important. Treib (2021, pp. 181–184) ascribes the current rise of Euroscepticism to emerging centre–periphery cleavage within the EU. More specifically, Euroscepticism may be seen as a policy of opposition, whereas governmental participation softens the Eurosceptic message (Sitter, 2001). Taggart and Szczerbiak (2013) demonstrate that such an assumption holds but that governmental participation has a moderating effect under many more specific circumstances. Yet, ruling Eurosceptic parties might divert government policies in a Eurosceptic direction.

The concept of equivocal Euroscepticism seems to be the sought-after bridge between its hard and soft versions. Taggart and Szczerbiak’s hard–soft dichotomy holds in cases where Euroscepticism is a product of firm ideological or political concern. In contrast, the equivocal position mirrors the tactic of parties trapped between their objectives and realistic expectations concerning what their voters or potential coalition parties want. Therefore, it is important not only to analyse the content and message of Eurosceptic discourse but also to look for its ideological or strategic motives. Our analysis shows that equivocal rhetoric might be a tactical choice only for parties that operate in a pro-EU environment. Sometimes, they use the discursive ‘proxy’ of a referendum to hide away that they want to exit. The CEE cases show that hard Eurosceptics sometimes act tactically, but a hard Eurosceptic pro-exit stance can be identified as the core idea and option.

Even though we showed critical comments directed against the concept of hard Euroscepticism (see Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2018, pp. 12–13), there are good reasons to retain this typology. It is the dominant approach identified in the academic literature

(Leruth et al., 2018, p. 5; Topaloff, 2018, p. 73). Moreover, it works with what is essential for the use of the Brexit moment in CEE Eurosceptic discourses: with the element of leaving the EU and therefore with a hard rejection of the current patterns of integration.

We briefly analyse the reasons, arguments and motives for exiting the EU given by CEE political parties to demonstrate that we can retain the concept of hard Euroscepticism. Yet we have to pay close attention to the changing context. In our view, Eurosceptics depend on the changing scope, nature, policies and issues of European integration. As the early stages of Brexit offered new fuel to hard Eurosceptic vehicles, its materialisation not only cooled public pro-exit sentiments but also deprived hard Eurosceptics of many arguments in favour of regained sovereignty. Therefore, the way forward is not to abandon the concept of hard Euroscepticism but to re-contextualise it within the changing framework of European integration. The reflexivity of Eurosceptic politicians (and/or the lack of hard Eurosceptic socialisation) can be a clue as to why they toy with 'exit' rhetoric and soften it when they see it does not work.

Therefore, we pay most attention to party Euroscepticism, but to complete the picture, we look at impactful individual 'exiters' from beyond the sphere of party politics where appropriate. Our comparative empirical analysis of 'exit' discourses amongst CEE Eurosceptic parties includes the following items: (1) hard or equivocal Euroscepticism, (2) the government–opposition dichotomy and (3) the ideological or strategic motives of 'exiters'.

II. Data and Method

Following Van Klingeren et al. (2013), we can expect that discursively expressed issues, like identity-based argumentation, will pay off at least as well as an economic critique of European integration. Euroscepticism is not a full-fledged ideology but a specific political discourse (Flood and Usherwood, 2005, p. 7). Leconte (2015, pp. 257–259) suggests following a constructivist turn in EU studies and studying Euroscepticism as a discourse with the potential to mobilise voters and polarise and (re-)construct the political debate on integration. Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008, p. 6) stress discourse as a key element of 'measuring' Euroscepticism.

We researched the available 'exit' discourses contained in parties' manifestos and other public statements (Heinisch et al., 2021, p. 193; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008, p. 9) in the 2015–2023 period to find out how they constructed the ideas of 'Czexit', 'Huxit', 'Polexit' and 'Slovexit'. We also searched for available press releases and other 'exiters' communication pieces. We included the parties that at least toyed with the idea of exiting the EU and qualitatively examined their 'exit' discourses and related narratives. Following existing research (Brack, 2020, p. 3), we did not pay attention to salience but to the mere presence of an 'exit' discourse. Overall, the analysis is divided, with respect to the countries under study, into four case studies that examine individual hard Eurosceptic debates. These are instrumental case studies (Stake, 1995), which aim at a better understanding of theoretical issues by studying selected cases. In the analysis, we focus on parliamentary parties because, as the relevant political forces, they have the greatest potential to influence Eurosceptic narratives in the country. The analysis also includes some important non-parliamentary hard Eurosceptic parties or leading intellectuals whose positions resonated in the media (e.g., Václav Klaus, etc.).

The individual parties working on the topic of leaving the EU in the selected period were chosen as follows. In our search for mentions related to leaving the EU, we combined (a) the identification of such parties through the literature on Central European Euroscepticism (Havlík and Mocek, 2018; Kaniok and Komínková, 2022) with (b) search tools of archive media content databases (NewtonOne and Opoint), as well as (c) the main news servers of each country (Idnes, Novinky, Magyar Nemzet, etc.). In Czechia, we looked at Tricolour (*Trikolóra*) and its successor party Freedom and Direct Democracy [*Svoboda a přímá demokracie* (SPD)], the Freedomists (*Svobodní*) and Communists [*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy* (KSČM)]. In Hungary, we included the far-right Jobbik, Our Homeland [*Mi Hazánk* (MH)] and Fidesz because some of its leaders at least contemplated the idea of leaving. In Poland, we examined Law and Justice [*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS)], Confederation Liberty and Independence [*Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość* (KWIn)], Sovereign Poland [*Suwerenna Polska* (SP)] and National Movement [*Ruch Narodowy* (RN)]. In Slovakia, we looked at Kotleba's People's Party Our Slovakia [*Ludová strana Naše Slovensko* (LSNS)] and Republic (*Republika*).

Articles in quality newspapers and tabloids were used not only to find out how the parties are talking about a possible exit from the EU but also to determine the overall context, especially to reveal their motivations. We found hundreds of entries in the Newton Media database, from which we selected 25 entries in the Czech, 19 in the Hungarian, 13 in the Polish and 11 in the Slovak press. We avoided any duplicates and all articles where only the word 'exit' was used without any other substantial content or connotations. From the entire corpus, we selected only a few texts (all cited in the list of references) relevant to our twofold research goal: to précis the 'exit' discourse and to unravel its particular motives. If it was possible to discover this from the context of the media text, we then investigated (1) who is communicating the exit position for the party (a key party figure or someone else) and (2) in what context he or she is doing so (e.g., an official speech or an indirect statement made in response to a journalist's question, which is subsequently denied). It is this approach that will then allow us to have a look at the circumstances in which the parties oscillate between hard and soft Euroscepticism.

When examining the circumstances in which parties oscillate between calls for EU withdrawal and softer positions calling for EU reform, the ongoing Brexit process, which affected most of the period under review, logically emerges as a variable. Brexit needs to be 'unpacked' and seen as a 'series of overlapping processes and debates' (Oliver, 2018, p. 1). Thus, in the analysis that follows, it is practical to distinguish phases and faces of Brexit such as (1) Brexit as a decision of the British electorate (referendum), (2) Brexit as the withdrawal of a member state from the EU, (3) Brexit as a process associated with difficult negotiations and (4) Brexit as a series of different consequences resulting from the new set of relations between Britain and other countries.

III. Hard Eurosceptic debates in Central Europe

Czechia

The Czech debate on Czexit is diverse because of the number of political parties, movements and personalities that have commented on the topic. Typically, the promoters of Czexit are parties of the far right, but there are also some prominent personalities. The

topic of Czexit is often raised by the SPD parliamentary party (Freedom and Direct Democracy), which is the party that calls most often for a referendum on staying in the EU (CNN Prima News, 2021) but also issues explicit statements calling for an exit. The party's chairman, Tomio Okamura, did this, for example, in connection with the topic of migration at the end of 2020: 'The ordered acceptance of immigrants is completely unacceptable for the SPD movement. It turns out that the EU is not helping, but harming. The sooner we leave it, the better' (Facebook Profile of Tomio Okamura, 2020). Okamura is one of the few hard Czech Eurosceptics who did not soften their demands for withdrawal after the negative impact of Brexit on Britain became evident and, on the contrary, held up the British decision as a model even several years after the referendum.

There are also several non-parliamentary (but still quite visible), far-right, hard Eurosceptic parties and movements, the most prominent of which are Svobodní and Trikolóra. The Trikolóra movement oscillates between, on the one hand, a strategy of occasionally mentioning a referendum on withdrawal (Parlamentní listy, 2020b) and even, shortly after Brexit, formally rejecting Czexit on the grounds of economic disadvantage (Facebook Profile of Václav Klaus Jr., 2020; Parlamentní listy, 2020a) and, on the other, a strategy of explicitly calling to leave the EU, with the party's deputy chairman, Petr Štěpánek, even saying: 'Where there's a stupid person, there's danger. And Brussels is full of such idiots. The only way to respond to such concentrated idiocy is: Out of the EU. Before it's too late' (Parlamentní listy, 2022). Similarly, Svobodní (2023), in its official programme, declares itself in favour of Czexit because 'remaining in the EU, which is currently based on the supremacy of every Euro nonsense over Czech law', is unacceptable. Even the Communists (KSČM), who were a parliamentary party until 2021, have played with the question of a referendum on withdrawal here and there (Kubičko, 2021; Parlamentní listy, 2021), although the current leadership of the now extra-parliamentary party is against it.

A strong pillar of Czech hard Euroscepticism is the former President Václav Klaus (Sr.), who can be seen as a driver of the movement in the long term (Havlík and Mocek, 2018). The intensity with which Klaus Sr. has raised this issue over the years is interesting, as is the variability of his positions on the verge of soft and hard Euroscepticism. Whilst in 2017, the then president was openly calling for preparations for 'our country's departure from the European Union' (Kopecký, 2017), by 2019, in response to Brexit, he had pragmatically U-turned: 'I think [Czech] withdrawal today is a childish proposal that only an irresponsible person would make' (Novinky, 2019).

The ideological roots of hard Euroscepticism are primarily in the EU's response to the migration crisis and Brexit and, in more recent topics, mainly the Green Deal. Debates about withdrawal are sporadic and respond, amongst other things, to opinion polls indicating Eurosceptic sentiment in the country.

Hungary

Hungary's hard Euroscepticism is a commonly debated topic in the media, mainly because mentions of Huxit often come from government circles. Leaving the EU is not on the official agenda of the Fidesz party, which has long had a national-conservative profile with strongly Eurosceptic but still pro-system rhetoric. What is interesting, however, is the plethora of personalities within the party or its inner circle who regularly

take up the topic of Huxit. For example, Orbán's chancellery minister, János Lázár, declared in 2016 that he would not vote in favour of remaining in the EU in a referendum. However, he added later that the government was not planning any such referendum (Kuruc info, 2016). Similarly, Zsolt Bayer, one of the founders of the Fidesz party and close to Prime Minister (PM) Orbán, was quite clearly in favour of Huxit in 2017: 'If the EU continues along its current path, then we have to leave the Union' (Hungarian Free Press, 2017). Speaking about the EU's 'green folly' in 2021, László Kövér, the speaker of the parliament, somewhat evasively said that if a decision on Hungary's accession to the EU were made today, then he would vote against it, however much he thought Hungary would be better off in the Union than out (Hungary Today, 2021a). Finally, Tamás Fritz, a Hungarian political scientist close to the Fidesz party (Hungary Today, 2021a, 2021b), also referencing Brexit, published an opinion piece on the front page of the prestigious daily *Magyar Nemzet* (2021) beginning with the words, 'I know it is taboo, but someone has to write down the term (and not necessarily as a deterrent): Huxit'. Fritz's article was echoed in the media, which do not admit the possibility of a 'coincidence' and point to the author's connection to the ruling party.

PM Orbán tends to avoid statements about leaving the EU. Still, in 2022, discussing the future of the EU, he said that Hungary should reflect on the benefits of EU membership, and if it did not find a positive answer, it should 'draw conclusions' (Idnes, 2022). Of the other parliamentary parties, Jobbik, originally a radical and hard Eurosceptic party, after 2015 began to move towards the centre and abandoned its radical rhetoric, even proposing a referendum to prevent parliament from voting to leave the EU in the future (Telex, 2022). In hard Eurosceptic positions, Jobbik was replaced by the Our Homeland movement (MH). Brexit has impressed the party with fluctuating intensity. Back in the 2019 European Parliament (EP) campaign, Party Leader Toroczkai supported a referendum but with the caveat that 'If we left the EU tomorrow, we would be bankrupt' (Farkas, 2019). The party made a similar statement in its electoral programme for the 2019 EP elections: 'Our Homeland is the only party that would renegotiate the Accession Treaty and that wants a referendum on our membership in the EU' (MH, 2019). In Vice President Dóra Dúró's later statement, however, we already see the abandonment of narratives of reform or the risk of economic decline and clearer support for leaving the EU: 'Hungary must prepare for life outside the EU (which realistically could take place from 2030), and according to the Our Homeland Movement, Hungarian society must decide on this in a referendum' (Facebook Profile of Dóra Dúró, 2020; Hungary Today, 2020; Szabad Európa, 2020). Overall, it is noteworthy that the Hungarian debate on Huxit reaches the highest level in and around the Fidesz party and thus often, understandably, permeates the mainstream media. The whole debate looks like testing public reactions, with individual politicians making radical statements but tempering or directly denying them a day later (cf. Népszava, 2023). In the case of Our Homeland, despite cautious statements during the Brexit negotiations, we see subsequent clear calls to leave the EU, however muted through the proxy of a referendum.

Poland

Polexit is often discussed in the context of the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS), although its role in these debates is often relatively passive. Opponents of the party accused

its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, and his colleagues of paving the way for Polesxit in the campaign before the 2019 parliamentary elections, which PiS leaders firmly and consistently rejected (Paruch, 2022). As Szczerbiak (2021) shows, the opposition likes to accuse PiS of favouring Polesxit as it is a toxic word in a country with an evident majority of people feeling European and wanting to stay in the EU. PiS leaders have always rejected the idea that the steps of the Polish PiS government should and would lead to Polesxit.

Hard Euroscepticism is more likely to be found in smaller parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties. An argument backing Polesxit was developed by the far-right nationalist and extremist party National Movement (RN), founded in 2012 and later part of an electoral coalition with Confederation Liberty and Independence (KWiN). For RN (2016), the EU is a fundamental threat to the development of the Polish nation because it proposes a 'Western model of modernisation' characterised by 'colonisation by the ideology of globalism', which entails political, economic and cultural colonisation of Poland by the West (p. 22). RN's (2016) manifesto calls for a process of gradually leaving the EU, starting with an information campaign convincing the Polish people that Poland should go.

KWiN has represented a nationalist stream of Polish politics. Ideologically, KWiN remains internally heterogeneous, a combination of the so-called national liberals (or market nationalists), libertarians, conservatives and nationalist populists. What unifies KWiN politicians are their opponents: as one of the KWiN leaders, Sławomir Mentzen, put it, 'We don't want Jews, homosexuals, abortions, taxes or the European Union!' (Tomasiewicz, 2020, p. 15). The stress put on Poland as a sovereign state and nation remains the strongest unifying moment within the party. In the words of Janusz Korwin-Mikke, 'We have only one shared point, but it's a strong one – "to hell with the Union"' (Tomasiewicz, 2020, p. 18). Overall, KWiN (2020) calls for the supremacy of the constitution over international agreements and criticises the 'systematic distortion of the Polish political class' (pp. 17–18). The party leader's statements at the time of the party's founding in 2019 indicate an implicit hard Euroscepticism. For example, Korwin-Mikke explicitly looked to the UK's UK Independence Party (UKIP) for inspiration (TVP World, 2019). Whilst he has said of the RN leader that he wants Polesxit, he himself wants to 'break the Union' (Dorzeczy, 2018). KWiN does not formally embrace Polesxit, but its political priorities are incompatible with membership.

Slovakia

Although Euroscepticism is significant in the Slovak party system, Slovexit cannot be perceived as a topic that would resonate much in Slovak debates on the EU. The Slovak people have supported EU membership for a long time, and Slovakia is firmly anchored in the 'hard core' of European integration through its membership in the Eurozone.

The radical and far-right scene almost exclusively addresses the topic of Slovakia's withdrawal from the EU. The far-right People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), led by Marian Kotleba, announced in 2016 (a parliamentary party at the time) that it would collect signatures to call a referendum on Slovakia's withdrawal from the EU (Idnes, 2016; Sita, 2016). In doing so, they explicitly referred to Brexit: 'LS Our Slovakia will work intensively to ensure that the Slovak Republic follows the British example and leaves the European Union as soon as possible – and leaves this modern dungeon of nations before

it is too late!’ In 2019, however, the party changed its rhetoric. It declared that ‘Public opinion is currently set in such a way that a large part of the Slovak public is not interested in leaving the European Union, and we as politicians must respect the interest of the public’ (Info.sk, 2019). Similar rhetoric has been produced by the (at that time parliamentary) party Republic, led by Milan Uhrík, which split from ĽSNS in 2021. Although it has not explicitly called for an exit and pretends to want to reform the EU, part of its official programme nonetheless has been the provision that ‘if the EU reform fails to be enforced, we are ready to hold a referendum on Slovakia’s exit from the EU. We want to be part of European cooperation, but not part of the European dungeon of nations under the dictates of progressive Brussels and Washington’ (Hnutie Republika, 2023). Uhrík has claimed that ‘the British came to understand this in time’ (skspravy.sk, 2023), which demonstrates his sympathy for Brexit and for a similar step to be taken by Slovakia in the future. At the peak of the election campaign in September 2023, Uhrík moderated his earlier statements and talked about the need to reform the EU and return it to a purely economic form of cooperation. Only in case of failure does he believe that ‘we will have to get out of the union sooner or later’ (Sita, 2023).

At first glance, the topic of Slovexit is relatively insignificant, even though two small parliamentary parties have discussed it. However, leaving the EU has not resonated in the public discourse, has been avoided by mainstream political parties and has left only a tiny amount of media coverage. The Slovak far right has tried, amongst other things, to work with the issue of leaving the EU by using references to Brexit. However, aware of the relatively high level of support for Slovak EU membership, it has increasingly worked rhetorically with the referendum on withdrawal and later in the election campaign only with the need to reform the Union. In spite of these less radical statements, the planned possibility of leaving the EU has nonetheless appeared in the party’s positions throughout the period under review.

IV. Comparison and Discussion

As expected, many CEE parties included mention of Brexit in their statements and manifestos. Shortly after the British referendum, several leading Eurosceptic figures called for ‘exit in the British way’, including the former Czech President Václav Klaus, prominent (though not the highest ranking) members of the Hungarian ruling party Fidesz and the far-right People’s Party Our Slovakia in the Slovak case. Although individual members of Eurosceptic parties continued to call openly for withdrawal from the EU in the following years, official party documents proceeded with more cautious statements. Typical calls were for a referendum in which the citizens could decide on leaving the Union, for reforms of the Union or, in case of their failure, for a referendum on withdrawal. Variations of these proposals were widely observed in all four countries.

Amongst other things, this confirmed that Brexit cannot be seen as a ‘black box’ in terms of its effect. Whilst early statements by some politicians celebrated Brexit in terms of the outcome of the British referendum, some of these politicians (Klaus) subsequently warned against leaving the Union, referring to the complicated process of the British exit and the possible profound effects on the economies of exiting states. Of course, the British experience has not always worked in the same way. The Czech SPD more or less maintained its positions, and Hungary’s Our Homeland even more clearly began to discuss a

referendum on withdrawal. In most of the cases of changed rhetoric from a 'hard' to a 'soft' exit via referendum, we cannot attribute the opinion change purely to a reflection of the obvious shortcomings of Brexit in the making. Furthermore, we can see an indirect effect of Brexit, which impacted the shifting public and political discussion in CEE countries, pushing even the hard Eurosceptics to be less radical and to suggest a referendum in the context of increasingly pro-remain CEE voters disappointed with Brexit reality. Electoral campaigns, as demonstrated by the example of the Republic movement, and the evolution of public support for the EU, as shown by the rhetoric of the LSNS party, also played roles.

Government–opposition dichotomy played a clear role. Except for Hungarian Fidesz, it can be said that the ruling parties strictly avoided hard Eurosceptic stances, which remained the domain of opposition or extra-parliamentary parties. Parties outside the government varied between hard and equivocal Euroscepticism as part of their strategy. Such shifts are nothing specific for CEE countries; Marine Le Pen, for example, has oscillated between 'Frexit' and the referendum, following the changing dynamics of Brexit and its shifting reception in France (Startin, 2022, p. 436). The strategy of oscillating between calls for leaving the EU and waiting for EU reform (the equivocal approach) was stronger amongst opposition parties with parliamentary participation (LSNS, *Republika* and *Our Homeland*), whilst unequivocal, hard Eurosceptic calls to leave the EU dominated amongst non-parliamentary movements and individual non-partisan personalities (Freedomites and Tamás Fricz).

The conceptual classification of parties wishing to leave the EU upon referendum (SPD) is more problematic when we look at strategic and ideological motives. They put out a hard Eurosceptic message but did necessarily work not only with the term 'referendum on leaving the EU' but also with the term 'referendum on staying in the EU'. Nonetheless, their long-term stance was hard Eurosceptic as was their ideological affiliation with the far right. The conjunctural motives of 'exiters' draw largely from the migration crisis (Hungarian government figures and Czech SPD) and especially Brexit (Slovak LSNS, individual politicians of the Polish PiS, Hungarian Fidesz figures, etc.). Whilst some hard Eurosceptics explained their position using specific arguments, the majority disguised their motivations with a patchy mixture of slogans – such as the 'dictate of progressive Brussels', 'dungeon of nations' and 'corrupt puppets' – which are very passionate but do not address any specific issues or policies.

The problematic grasp of ideology or strategy as the alternative motivation for leaving the EU, resulting in problems with conceptual classification, can best be seen in the case of Fidesz. Hungary is a partial outlier in the sample, where hard Euroscepticism has taken on different dimensions and used different strategies and instruments. It is the only country in our study with visible traces of hard Euroscepticism within the main government party. We found a considerable number of media statements by politicians or Fidesz sympathisers who, in the years following the British referendum, regretted Hungary's accession to the EU, theorised about how they would vote today in a possible referendum or even opened up a straightforward intellectual debate on the topic of Hungary's possible withdrawal from the Union. The media often discussed such statements in the following days, but Fidesz denied any thoughts of Huxit and typically warned against 'media hysteria'. However, the very frequency of such statements does not offer much possibility of coincidence or 'overspeak'. Their context implicitly suggests that hard Euroscepticism

was present within the Hungarian government party, even if its leaders did not explicitly confirm it. However, from a theoretical point of view, it seems highly reductive to speak of soft Euroscepticism in this particular case as the call to ‘reconsider the country’s membership in the Union’ was not infrequent in government circles. It is much more likely to have been a ‘disguised hard Euroscepticism’ strategy that resembled ‘equivocal Euroscepticism’ (Heinisch et al., 2021). The problem with grasping Fidesz’s Euroscepticism conceptually, however, is that it is impossible to determine to what extent this was the strategy articulated by Heinisch et al. (2021), in which ‘equivocal Eurosceptics shy away from expressing an unequivocally principled objection to EU membership and deny that this is their objective’, a strategy of gradual preparation for withdrawal and testing the public through placed party representatives or a purely pragmatic strategy of threatening the EU with eventual Huxit. In other words, the category of ‘equivocal Euroscepticism’ is generally beneficial but, as the example of Fidesz shows, difficult to detect.

Whilst governmental participation and even parliamentary representation seem to moderate potential hard Eurosceptic stances, the question of motivation complicates the conceptual treatment of hard Euroscepticism. Examples of CEE ‘exiters’ show that there were only a few genuine equivocal parties, those that were big enough to host diverse opinions without immediate risk of factionalisation or splitting, such as Fidesz (plus some isolated dissent voices here and there in PiS). Therefore, we propose to retain soft and hard forms of Euroscepticism as the most suitable dichotomy to capture the difference in principle.

Yet, we do not think the category of hard Euroscepticism is self-evident. It needs to be reconsidered in the context of changes in the EU and the changing discourses of its opponents. When a politician calls for a referendum with the ambition to withdraw, it is not an equivocal position but clearly saying ‘no’ in a hard Eurosceptic way. The discourse of Czexit, Huxit, Polexit and Slovexit teaches us that even such a strong moment as Brexit might lose momentum when things go wrong in the blueprint country. We must not abandon the concept of hard Euroscepticism but re-contextualise it repeatedly, following the changing pro- and anti-EU discourses.

Conclusion

To summarise, Brexit mostly lost its charms because of its botched execution and unconvincing impact on the UK economy. Still, the sovereignty discourse and tactical discursive manoeuvres demanding an EU membership referendum allow them to gold plate exit claims with the more popular vision of direct democracy. The equivocal discourse has become a typical tactic of hard Eurosceptic parties, yet their visions, typically only very vaguely explained, of the transformation of the EU into co-operation between sovereign countries are, in fact, similar to the claims in the 1990s and early 2000s of hard Eurosceptics to deconstruct the EU altogether.

Returning to the literature on (hard) Euroscepticism, one can confirm that sometimes even the category of hard Euroscepticism is blurry (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002). Yet, we must differentiate between long-term principled opposition (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004; Verney, 2011) and the short-term equivocal tactical concerns of parties (Heinisch et al., 2021; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2013; Topaloff, 2018). Contrary to

Vasilopolou (2009), we demonstrated that current conditions in the EU are the most influential variable explaining the changing tactics and strategies of hard Eurosceptics, confirming mainstream assumptions, based on Szczerbiak and Taggart's (2008) work. The political implications of direct calls for exit and reform of the EU into a loose organisation of fully sovereign countries are the same as rejection of contemporary integration efforts. Therefore, we can well retain the concept of hard Euroscepticism and apply it to parties that hide their rejection of the EU behind the veil of direct democracy. We confirmed that typically the hard–soft dichotomy is universal and easily detectable (Fidesz was the only somewhat problematic case) (Kaniok and Komínková, 2022; Vasilopolou, 2013).

Subsequent research should cover other European regions, asking what it is precisely that hard Eurosceptics want and why, to develop a broader comparative picture that contextualises the current general state of hard Euroscepticism in Europe, including the diversity of domestic conditions in different member states of the EU. It is essential for researchers to include two dimensions: a principled long-term stance and temporary tactical concerns that might lead to quite an equivocal narrative.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge funding from Grantová Agentura České Republiky (GA22-15856S).

Open access publishing facilitated by Masarykova univerzita, as part of the Wiley - CzechELib agreement.

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