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## **CENTRAL AND EAST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU**

Ця стаття прагне пояснити ставлення до Європейського Союзу в Центральній та Східній Європі. Ми пропонуємо модель, яка поєднує в собі економічні та політичні змінні на двох рівнях пояснення: індивідуальному і національному. Використовуючи дані перетину тимчасових рядів, складену за допомогою результатів барометру обстежень у Центральній та Східній Європі, ми покажемо, що позитивне ставлення до окремих внутрішніх економічних і політичних реформ є добрими провісниками позитивного ставлення громадян до вступу до Європейського Союзу в Центральній та Східній Європі. Такі макропоказники, як економічна і політична діяльність, мають вплив на ставлення до ЄС, особливо в країнах-кандидатах. Нарешті, мультиплікативна модель з ефектами взаємодії між індивідуальним рівнем та макро рівнем припускає, що відносини мають більш сильний вплив на вступ до ЄС за сприятливих внутрішніх умов. Якщо країна знаходиться в поганому стані, ставлення є менш суттєвим.

This article aims to explain attitudes towards the European Union in Central and East European countries. We propose a model that combines economic and political variables at two levels of explanation: the individual and the national. Using a cross-sectional time series data set compiled from Central and Eastern Euro barometer surveys, we demonstrate that individual attitudes towards domestic economic and political reforms are good predictors of citizens' attitudes towards the European Union in Central and East European countries. Macro dimensions, such as economic and political performance, have an impact on attitudes towards the EU, particularly in candidate countries. Finally, a multiplicative model with interaction effects between the individual level and the macro level suggests that attitudes have a stronger impact if the domestic conditions are good. If the country is in bad shape, the attitudes are less relevant.

**Key words:** Central and Eastern Europe, European integration, free market and democratic reforms, public opinion.

**Introduction.** The fall of communist regimes at the end of the European Union (EU) were major international events of the past 15 years. Since the beginning of the 1990s, countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been experiencing an immense transformation process, moving from a centrally planned economy to a market economy and from a foreign imposed communist regime to an independent democracy.

Despite the importance of these changes, very few authors have systematically studied public attitudes towards European integration in former communist countries and the possible links between political and economic reforms and attitudes towards the European Union.

Therefore, the main question of this paper is: what are the implications of economic and political transition for citizens' attitudes towards the European Union in Central and East European countries (CEECs) in the 1990s?

Some recent work has explained support for European integration in Central and East European countries using mainly individual-level variables, such as attitudes towards the political and economic reforms (Cichowski, Ehin, Tverdova and Anderson, Muller).

We propose a model specifically designed for former communist countries during the political and economic transition period. The model combines two levels: the individual and the national. The main questions are:

1) At the individual level: what are the implications of citizens' perceptions of domestic economic and political reforms for attitudes towards the European Union in the 1990s?

2) At the national level: what is the impact of domestic economic and political conditions on citizens' attitudes towards the European Union on the 1990s?

3) Do individual and national levels interact and, if so, in what way?

The individual and national levels interact in the following way: if the country is in bad shape, the effects of attitudes are lower than if the country is doing well.

**Statement or problem.** 1. Conceptualizing attitudes towards the European Union in Central and East European countries.

Few studies take into account different levels of explanation. Most of the researchers focus exclusively on the individual level, and very few take into account macro political or economic conditions. Moreover, most of the studies of public opinion in Central and Eastern Europe are static. This article will therefore focus heavily on the 'time' dimension, which has been neglected in previous work on attitudes towards European integration in Central and East European countries.

Based on the work of Eichenberg and Dalton, we develop a model of attitudes towards the EU that combines two main explanations: economic and political factors within two levels of influence (individual and national).

Table 1 summarizes this transitional model of explanations of citizens' attitudes towards Europe in the 1990s for Central and East European countries.

Table 1 – Conceptualization of the sources of public attitudes towards the European Union (level of influence/factors) in the 1990s

	Individual level	National level
Economic factors	Attitude towards free market Winners/losers from economic transition	GDP growth Inflation
Political factors	Attitudes towards democratic transitions Attitudes towards respect for human rights	'Process of democratization' from the 1980s to the 1990s

### 1.1. Individual-level explanations.

1.1.1. Attitudes towards political and economic transformation. Much research that focuses on public opinion about the European Union argues that people are

badly informed and rely on shortcuts or domestic cues in order to form their opinions (Gabel, Anderson). These authors argue that, if people see the EU as an organization of countries with democratic political systems and free markets political systems and free markets, it is likely that individuals who favor this economic and political model are more likely to have a favorable opinion about the EU.

Attitudes towards free market economy and democratic transition in the 1990s in Central and Eastern countries might be a mix of values, socialization, Western orientation and objective perceptions of the consequences of the economic and political transition. But, whatever these attitudes reflect, if the EU serves as a symbol of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of free markets, individuals with favorable opinions about the economic and democratic reforms should be positively oriented towards the EU.

Individuals with positive attitudes towards the free market economy are more likely to have positive attitudes towards the European Union, whereas those with negative attitudes are more likely to have negative attitudes towards the EU.

Individuals with positive attitudes towards the country's democratic development are more likely to have positive attitudes towards the European Union, whereas those with negative attitudes are more likely to have negative attitudes towards the EU.

Individuals with positive attitudes towards the defense of human rights in the country are more likely to have positive attitudes towards the European Union, whereas those with negative attitudes are more likely to have negative attitudes towards the EU.

1.1.2. Winners from the economic transition. Economic transformation in Central and East European countries has been and will be beneficial to some groups of the population whereas for others it has been costly and characterized by great insecurity.

For post-communist citizens, membership in the EU can function as an implicit guarantee that the economic reforms undertaken since the end of communism will not be reversed and the unprecedented economic transition across the former communist states has divided societies into 'winners' who have benefited from the transition and 'losers' who have been hurt by the transition.

2. National-level explanations. Economic transformations, which is intended to (re-) build a complete economic structure, is accompanied by a rise in unemployment, or at least a threat of unemployment, economic instability, rising inflation, and low growth. Citizens are of course aware of all these economic conditions and problems,

and some of them would prefer the security provided by the planned economy. Turning to the process of European integration, it is often argued that EU accession would help Central and East European states to reinforce democratic institutions and, more specifically in the case of former communist countries, to strengthen the market economy transition.

Winners from economic reforms are more likely to have positive attitudes towards the European Union whereas losers are more likely to have negative attitudes.

2.1. National economic conditions. How might the transformation of the economic system influence citizens' attitudes towards the European Union in Central and East European countries? Whereas some countries were rather successful in reforming their economy, others were not. Because the EU might be seen as a means to strengthen the reforms, we expect that, if the performance of the national economy is quite poor, people will be much more likely to feel the need for some EU closeness.

Among many possible indicators of economic conditions, GDP growth, inflation and unemployment are traditionally used in economic voting studies or to explain support for European integration.

The lower is GDP growth, the more likely it is that individuals will have positive attitudes towards the EU. The higher is inflation, the more likely it is that individuals will have positive attitudes towards the EU.

2.2. The democratic transition. At the national level in the 1990s, analyzing democratic developments in a large number of Central and East European countries reveals that some countries made more progress towards democratization than did others.

From this perspective, citizens of countries with lower levels of democracy might feel the need for a closer relationship with the EU, which might help to strengthen the process of engaging in reforms.

The higher the relative progress of a country's democratization, the less likely it is that individuals will have positive attitudes towards the European Union.

2.3. A question of time. Citizens of Central and East European countries will slowly become socialized to the European Union and might, over time, develop a more positive attitude to European integration. An alternative argument could be formulated about the economic and political reforms: the longer the new democratic regime has existed, the less likely it is that individuals will feel the need for the European Union to improve their situation or to strengthen the reforms.

3. Interaction effects. Political and economic factors at the individual and national

levels can explain attitudes towards European integration. More precisely, at the individual level, the more favorable are citizens' opinions of economic and democratic reforms, the more positive will be their attitudes towards the European Union. At the national level, first, that the worse the economic situation, the more favorable will be citizens' attitudes towards the European Union and, second, the lower the level of democratization, the more positive will be citizens' attitudes towards the EU.

The effects of individual and national variables on opinion about the EU interact. If macro political and economic performances are weak, favorable opinions about the EU are likely to be rather high, whatever citizens' views on reforms.

**Methodology.** 4. Data, model and methodology. To test the hypotheses, we have pooled individual-level Central and Eastern Eurobarometer (CEEB) survey data from 1991 to 1996. We have included respondents from Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine.

The dependent variable used is a measure of the image and perception of the European Union. It is the only question that is available in the series of the CEEB surveys I use. The overall distribution of the dependent variable 'Image of the EU' is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 – Distribution of the dependent variable 'image of the EU' in candidate and non-candidate countries

Image of the EU	Candidate countries	Non-candidate countries	Total
Don't know/No response	21.7	26.4	23.7
Negative	6.0	6.9	6.4
Neutral	31.1	23.8	28.0
Positive	41.2	42.8	41.9
Total	59,711	44,372	104,083

In order to measure people's attitudes towards economic and democratic transition, we rely on a series of questions asking Central and East European citizens whether they are satisfied with the way democracy is developing, to what degree they believe there is now respect for human rights in their country, and whether they believe that a free market is a good thing. For national economic performance and stability, we simply use measures of GDP growth and inflation. Transformation towards a democratic regime (democratization) is measured with the help of a composite indicator 'polity', which is computed by subtracting the

autocracy score from the democracy score. For the time factor we use a measure of regime durability, which is the number of years since the most recent regime change took place.

We decided to split the whole file into two groups, the candidate countries and other countries (non-candidates). We did this essentially because it is now clear that preparations for EU accession started in the mid-1990s for the 12 candidate countries from Central and Eastern Europe.

We run three sub-models: the first includes only individual-level variables taken from the surveys; the second adds domestic economic and political variables; and the third adds the interaction terms. The results of the analysis are presented on the next section.

**Findings of investigation.** 5. Results. Table 3 presents the coefficients and the standard errors for the three models, which are computed for both candidate and non-candidate countries.

Turning to the individual-level model, the results indicate that all individual level independent variables have a significant effect on attitudes towards the European Union, both in candidate and in non-candidate countries. Winners from economic transition and individuals with positive attitudes towards the free market economy are more likely to have positive attitudes towards the European Union than are losers from economic transition and those with negative attitudes towards the free market. Referring to the political hypotheses, the results show that individuals with positive attitudes towards their country's democratic development and those with positive attitudes towards the defense of human rights are more likely to have positive attitudes towards the European Union than are individuals with negative opinions on their country's democratic development or negative attitudes towards respect for human rights. Before interpreting the results more substantively, we will present the coefficients of the second model, which includes both individual- and macro-level factors.

Table 3 – Transition and attitudes towards the EU: Original logit model

	Model 1: Individual		Model 2: Individual + macro		Model 3: Interactions	
	Candidate coefficient	Non-candidate coefficient	Candidate coefficient	Non-candidate coefficient	Candidate coefficient	Non-candidate coefficient
Winners	0.501	0.470	0.515	0.477	0.582	0.556
Winners x GDP growth Free market economy is right	0.744	0.545	0.749	0.547	0.770	0.501
Free market x GDP growth					0.014	-0.006
Satisfaction with way	0.555	0.390	0.550	0.401	-1.370	0.115

democracy is developing: Very satisfied						
Fairly satisfied	0.407	0.335	0.405	0.340	-1.935	-0.082
Not very satisfied	0.177	0.204	0.175	0.204	-1.573	0.032
Very satisfied x Democratization process					0.126	0.027
Fairly satisfied x Democratization process					0.154	0.042
Not very satisfied x Democratization process					0.116	0.016
Respect for human rights: A lot of respect	0.644	0.307	0.648	0.300	0.064	-0.050
Some respect	0.464	0.352	0.466	0.347	0.316	0.147
Not much respect	0.212	0.117	0.212	0.114	1.564	0.041
A lot of respect x Democratization process					0.041	0.037
Some respect x Democratization process					0.010	0.019
Not much respect x Democratization process					-0.089	0.006
GDP growth			-0.025	0.004	-0.043	0.002
Inflation			-0.00029	0.00004	-0.00039	0.00004
Process of democratization previous 10 years			-0.108	-0.001	-0.203	-0.021
Years since last regime transition			-0.120	0.023	-0.124	0.016

The second model tests the impact of domestic political and economic conditions and reforms. We have kept the individual independent variables and added macro-level factors. Again, we distinguish between candidate countries (column 3) and non-candidate countries (column 4).

One of the most interesting results is that the introduction of national economic and political factors does not change the size of the coefficients or the significance of individual factors, which confirms the impact on the individual factors.

A first glance at the results of the second model indicates that the impact of national variables is generally stronger for candidate than for non-candidate countries. Among candidate countries, the lower is GDP growth, the higher is the likelihood that individuals have a positive opinion about the EU.

Turning to macro political factors, the results depict a significant effect of the democratization process, with the expected negative sign for candidate countries. This indicates that the higher the level of a candidate country's democratization, the more likely are its citizens to have negative attitudes towards the EU. Finally, the time since the last regime transition has a negative and significant effect on attitudes towards the EU in candidate countries, even when controlling for year.

In the third model, we add the interaction terms. We have hypothesized that the effect of the individual and macro variables may be not only additive but also

multiplicative. For economic variables, we add an interaction term between ‘winners’ from transition and GDP growth and between ‘favorable attitude towards free market’ and GDP growth. On the political side, we estimate an interaction term between ‘process of democratization’ and all dummies of ‘satisfaction with democracy’ and ‘respect for human rights’, respectively.

**Summary.** We have demonstrated that, for the 1990s, attitudes towards political and economic reforms are quite strong and stable predictors of attitudes towards the European Union in Central and East European countries. The results emphasize that the macro model works quite well in Eastern and Central candidate countries but does not really help to explain attitudes towards the EU in non-candidate countries. We also demonstrate that individual and macro variables interact in a systematic and interesting pattern, which refines the general conclusion drawn on the additional variable. If economic growth or democratic progress is rather weak, the impact of individual-level variables is reduced because there is a general tendency towards a positive image of the EU whatever citizens think of the economic or political reforms.

Citizens’ evaluation of the domestic political system might influence attitudes towards the EU. At the aggregated level, support for integration will be higher in those countries that have little to lose from transferring sovereignty to Europe, namely those suffering from, for example, corruption, poor performance by the state or unemployment. On the other hand, countries with high economic performance, an efficient democracy and a welfare state should be more skeptical about European integration.

This brief exploration, together with the general model, confirms that economic development (and its perception) and political dimensions such as domestic governance performance matter in relation to the question of public attitudes towards European integration. Finally, our analysis encourages us to use more comparative research that takes into account not only post-communist countries but both EU members and candidate countries.

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