Old Wine in New Bottles: Hard Euroscepticism in the 2024 European Parliament Elections

Vít Hloušek,
Vratislav Havlík[1]

Abstract

The article addresses the conceptualisation of hard Euroscepticism, which must reflect current crises and challenges facing European integration, such as the war in Ukraine. The conceptualisation of party-based Euroscepticism remains problematic, particularly in delineating a clear boundary between hard and soft variants. Szczerbiak and Taggart's dichotomous typology is regarded as highly useful, offering two fundamental ideal types. However, its practical application proves more complex. Since Brexit, explicit calls to leave the EU have declined, supplanted by reformist narratives that blur traditional categories. Nonetheless, many political parties maintain fundamental objections to European integration, often concealed by strategic ambiguity. This article argues for the continued – but recontextualised – use of the ideal type of hard Euroscepticism, accounting for contextual and strategic variation and focusing not on the 'essence' of each type, but on the trajectory individual parties take in relation to the EU. It offers a theoretical and empirical framework for analysing manifestations of hard Euroscepticism in the 2024 European Parliament elections, drawing on both case studies and broader regional trends.

Keywords: Hard Euroscepticism; ideal types; party Euroscepticism; European Parliament elections 2024

DOI: 10.5817/PC2025-2-75

1 Vít Hloušek, Metropolitan University Prague, vit.hlousek@mup.cz, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1153-1694; Vratislav Havlík, Masaryk University, vhavlik@fss.muni.cz), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2701-7171

1. Introduction

The current world of party Euroscepticism is not at all easy in terms of trying to grasp it conceptually. While Szczerbiak and Taggart's (2008) classic hard and soft Euroscepticism divide is still a useful (because not entirely overcome) tool for distinguishing between qualitatively different currents of politicians who question more or less aspects of European integration, the problem is that when applied to specific political parties, this dichotomy can appear insufficient. Treib (2021, p. 180) notes in this context that the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' Eurosceptic parties *'has thus become less and less useful for categorizing anti-EU parties'*. Moreover, from a certain point of view, hard Eurosceptics may appear to have 'disappeared' after Brexit, as rhetoric about exit has been replaced by narratives about reforming the Union (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025).

We have thus seemingly seen a rise of the category of soft Eurosceptics, which, hypothetically, includes also any politicians who originally presented themselves as radical. This is, of course, just a problem of outdated perception of conceptual categories. Already Kaniok and Komínková (2022, p. 80) note that Euroscepticism is a '*vague, elastic umbrella term*'. Ideally, this should lead researchers to seek to understand conceptual categories in the context of contemporary politics and thus continuously recontextualise them. Not only do we need to continuously work on defining hard and soft Euroscepticism in such a way that they are applicable in terms of the changing rhetoric of political parties. We also need to consider what types of sources to include in analyses of Eurosceptic attitudes so that they reflect as closely as possible the real positions of the party.

As Havlík and Hloušek (2025) show, 'exit' is not fashionable, and yesterday's hard Eurosceptics talk about EU reform or a referendum on remaining in the EU. But as they also show, these allegorical shortcuts should not mislead us into thinking that the parties in question have abandoned their 'principled objection' to European integration. Thus, there is typically a manoeuvring between the officially declared need for reform the EU and the less officially (e.g. through social media) presented readiness to consider leaving the Union. Thus, more than ever, the study of hard Euroscepticism today requires the inclusion of a wide range of different data and reading them 'between the lines'. Despite the seeming disadvantages of Szczerbiak and Taggart's typology (2008), we argue that it should still be employed, but its use should be recontextualized. We propose to retain hard Euroscepticism as an ideal type – one that may take a range of specific forms depending on local and temporal contexts, as well as on strategic and tactical considerations.

The ambition of this text is to provide a contextual and theoretical basis for a special issue on the manifestation of hard Euroscepticism in the 2024 European Parliament elections. Thus, on the background of the results of the individual articles included in this issue and also the examples of some other parties in the

region, the aim is to systematically describe the patterns of behaviour of hard Eurosceptics today and thus further contribute to the debate on hard Euroscepticism.

This article is structured as follows. The second chapter discusses the plausibility and applicability of the hard and soft dichotomy from a theoretical perspective. The following section then defines hard Euroscepticism as an "ideal type." The fourth chapter presents theoretical expectations based on conceptual definitions and the context of the EP elections. The fifth chapter summarizes the results of the individual articles in this special issue and discusses them in the context of other similar Eurosceptic parties in the region.

2. Soft and hard: Do the ideal types still matter?

Practically speaking, the object of Eurosceptic criticism is seldom any imaginary alternative, but rather the actually existing EU with its institutions and policies. Therefore, party Euroscepticism can be defined as a '*negative party position on European integration and the European Union*' (Vasilopoulou, 2009, p. 3). Despite various criticisms (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002; Nicoli, 2017, p. 314; Treib, 2021, p. 176), Taggart and Szczerbiak's distinction between soft and hard forms of Euroscepticism continues to represent the mainstream of conceptual debate.

Taggart and Szczerbiak (2024) have consistently employed the definitions of both forms that they initially presented in their edited volume from 2008:

> 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. Party-based soft Euroscepticism (...) was where there is not a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas leads to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that 'national interest' is currently at odds with the EU trajectory. (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008a, p. 2)

However, they later simplified the criteria for both forms: soft Euroscepticism as '*being opposed to the current trajectory of deeper European integration but stopping short of opposing European integration through the EU in principle*', and hard Euroscepticism as '*opposing EU integration in principle, generally expressed through opposition to a country's EU membership*' (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024, p. 1174).

As ideal types, the categories of soft and hard Euroscepticism as defined by Szczerbiak and Taggart are functional. Their distinction is clear, and there is no

logical overlap between these two ideal types. More problematic, however, is the application of this distinction in contemporary European politics, where a series of crises – the economic crisis in and beyond the Eurozone (2008–2010), the migration crisis, the Brexit crisis, the COVID-19 crisis, and the war in Ukraine – have substantially transformed both the European and global contexts.

Moreover, certain criticisms of EU institutions or policies have become part of the political mainstream (Leconte, 2015; Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2013). Thus, the crucial question arises: can any criticism of the EU, its institutions, or its policies still be labelled a manifestation of soft Euroscepticism? As Conti (2003) aptly observed, the boundary between soft Euroscepticism and a pragmatic yet cautious pro-integration stance is, at best, blurred – if not entirely absent.

Simultaneously, in the face of the multiple crises unfolding almost continuously since 2008, European voters have remained loyal to the very idea of the EU and have consistently expressed greater trust in EU institutions than in their national governments (European Commission, 2024). This reality makes life more difficult for hard Eurosceptic politicians, as openly advocating for withdrawal from the EU entails considerable political risk.

The first problem pertains to the assertion that 'policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived' (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008a, p. 2). For some authors, such a principled opposition represents a more important clue to label a party as hard Eurosceptic than the direct call for leave (Pareschi, 2025). What kinds of policies fall into this category? Are they the same today as they were in the early 2000s, or in 2008 when this definition was first coined? In the early 2000s, we might expect hard Euroscepticism to have entailed rejecting the transformation of the European Communities into the European Union. But does that mean that advocating for limiting supranational institutions in favour of intergovernmental decision-making constitutes hard Euroscepticism?

Indeed, the reinforcement of intergovernmental institutions and the repatriation of powers to the member states are themes commonly invoked even by member parties of the soft Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists Group in the European Parliament. Their intention, however, is not to dismantle the EU, but rather to improve its functioning (Steven, 2025, p. 12).

Therefore, we cannot rely solely on the parties' surface-level statements. To determine the nature of their Euroscepticism – whether soft or hard – we must consider the deeper context of their narratives and relate those narratives to their political performance. Who are a party's fellow travellers? Which European Parliament group and European party family does it belong to? In a manner analogous to the criteria used for assessing party families (Hix & Lord, 1997, pp. 25–27), factors such as a party's origins, historical allegiances, and developmental trajectory help us distinguish its fundamental identity as either a soft or hard Eurosceptic party.

For example, Meloni's party, Brothers of Italy, originally entertained ideas such as abandoning the Eurozone (FdI, 2014, p. 1). However, it soon repositioned itself as a 'Euro-realist' (i.e. soft Eurosceptic) party (Sondel-Cedarmas, 2022), and has behaved even more constructively since entering government (Moury & Pritoni, 2024).

On the other hand, if a party seeks to exit the Eurozone following the Eurozone crisis and the experience of the Greek debt crisis – where the idea of leaving the Eurozone effectively equated to leaving the EU altogether (Sotiropoulos, 2020) – this would indicate the adoption of a hard Eurosceptic stance. Similarly, the outright rejection of any supranational forms of cooperation within the EU would amount to advocating the dismantling of the entire institution. Thus, a purely intergovernmentalist position can easily overlap with hard Euroscepticism, whereas a moderate preference for intergovernmental solutions – such as accepting the adoption of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in certain key policy areas – reflects a soft Eurosceptic position.

The second problem relates to the desire to leave the EU, which has become more problematic in the meantime. Brexit, in particular, demonstrated how costly and unattractive such an option can be for voters, especially those with even partial alignment to the political mainstream (Martill, 2021). While comparing the attitudes of EU-27 citizens before and after Brexit, Catherine de Vries (2017) found increasing support for EU membership, linked to expectations of a negative impact of exiting the EU on the British economy and the country's political standing. Moreover, European media reported Brexit in terms of crisis undermining stability and prosperity (Krzyżanowski, 2019). Consequently, the boundary between soft and hard Euroscepticism has also become increasingly blurred. Even hard Eurosceptic parties have sought to soothe voters unsettled by their previously pro-exit stance, employing softer and more ambiguous narratives. Some parties float between the two types (Franzosi et al., 2015), while others adopt ostensibly unequivocal positions (Heinisch et al., 2021), which nevertheless remain ambiguous and allow for tactical manoeuvring both in relation to their electorates and, even more so, to potential coalition partners.

In current day-to-day European politics, the clear distinctions between soft and even hard Eurosceptic behaviour are being eroded. Many political parties operate in line with the basic assumption of the North Carolina School of Euroscepticism studies, which conceptualises pro- and anti-EU positions as existing along a continuum (Mudde, 2012; Bakker et al., 2015). While such an approach captures the complexity and fragility of empirical party positions, it does not provide a sufficiently robust conceptual or typological framework for understanding the phenomenon of Euroscepticism.

Without denying the value and significance of the Chapel Hill Survey and the North Carolina School, we argue that there is no need to abandon the hard–soft typology of Euroscepticism, provided it is treated as a set of Weberian ideal

types (Weber, 1949). Ideal types distil a colourful and diverse empirical reality into its essential elements. They represent abstract constructs composed of the most distinctive and internally coherent features, enabling the interpretation of complex realities in a comprehensible manner (Bouckaert, 2022, p. 2). Drawing inspiration from the use of ideal types in the study of populist parties (Zaslove, 2008) and reactions to crises in European integration (Glencross, 2023), we propose to retain hard Euroscepticism as an ideal type – one that may take a range of concrete forms depending on local and temporal contexts, as well as on strategic and tactical considerations.

For instance, small, non-parliamentary radical right populist parties, such as Tricolour (Trikolóra), openly advocated for Czexit prior to Brexit exposing the negative consequences of leaving the EU. Thereafter, they shifted to promoting a referendum with an open-ended outcome (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025, p. 357). Conversely, large radical right parties such as the National Rally (RN) in France, which aim to attract mainstream voters, have substantially softened their originally explicit hard Eurosceptic rhetoric (Ivaldi, 2018; Lorimer, 2022). Does this mean that these parties have moved entirely from hard to soft Euroscepticism? In the case of the RN, already established as one of the major poles of the French party system, the answer is most likely yes. In the case of small extra-parliamentary challengers, which compete not only with the mainstream but – perhaps more intensely – with one another, the answer is most probably no.

The Czech Tricolour can serve as an example once again. Its leader, Zuzana Majerová Zahradníková, commented on the referendum regarding the Czech Republic's exit from the EU. While she did not explicitly state a desire to leave, she framed the entire debate around the referendum in a manner that portrayed the current European Union as detrimental to Czech national interests. After outlining the complex procedure required to hold a referendum, she added: 'So much for the road map. What does that mean? Does that mean we should give up on Czexit? Not at all!' (Majerová Zahradníková 2022). This quote aptly illustrates a subtle rhetorical shift from an openly declared desire to exit, to advocating departure framed within the narrative of direct democracy.

Looking beyond the official party materials into the broader communication of particular leaders and top politicians allows as most probably seeing more examples of hard Eurosceptic stances. There is also a possibility that the parties will revert to openly calling for an exit from the EU, thereby facing yet another crisis of integration. The shadow of Brexit can hardly persist indefinitely.

Therefore, it is first necessary to outline the contours and clarify the content of hard Euroscepticism as conceived in the form of an ideal type. It is equally important to examine its contemporary modifications and topical manifestations.

3. Hard Euroscepticism as an ideal type

To retain the concept of hard Euroscepticism as an ideal type requires the delineation of its fundamental features. The principal point of departure is that hard Euroscepticism entails opposition to the European Union itself, rather than to the general idea of cooperation among European states. Typically, the argument of a hard Eurosceptic party against the EU combines a sovereigntist narrative with criticism of the elitist and bureaucratic nature of the so-called 'Brussels' institutions (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025). While there may be support for cooperation among culturally and historically similar European countries, this is usually expressed through advocacy for a loose framework of inter-state collaboration – one in which no sovereignty is ceded to either supranational or even intergovernmental institutions. The ultimate aim of an ideal-typical hard Eurosceptic party is not merely to dismantle but to crush the existing institutional structure of the EU and to significantly reduce the current level of supranational cooperation, except perhaps in the domain of the free market.

When turning from the ideal type to its empirical variants, the clearest expression in political practice is the call for a country's exit from the EU. However, as previously noted, such an explicit stance does not always prove politically advantageous, prompting some hard Eurosceptics to adopt more equivocal or ambiguous positions. As a result, an explicit call for withdrawal is no longer the only means of expressing hard Euroscepticism. Alternatives such as proposing referenda or advocating for a radical, revolutionary overhaul of EU institutions may now serve as more palatable and strategic forms of articulating irreconcilable opposition to the current model of European integration.

Geopolitical considerations may also shape these stances. Even sovereigntist parties often favour certain forms of international cooperation – for example, engaging in trade with China or aligning strategically with Russia. In particular, nationalist populist movements in the Balkans or in Eastern European countries still aspiring to EU membership may offer such narratives as plausible alternatives to their domestic electorates (Belloni, 2016; Panagiotou, 2020; Jaćimović et al., 2023).

Let us now briefly examine the contemporary reframing of hard Euroscepticism, using the examples of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Taggart and Szczerbiak (2019) are correct in noting that Brexit did not have the same profound impact on party systems across Europe as the Eurozone or migration crises. Nevertheless, it significantly influenced the strategies and rhetoric of hard Eurosceptic parties. The consequences of Brexit, the arduous nature of the subsequent UK-EU negotiations, and especially the economic downturn experienced by the UK since its departure, all contributed to problematising the rhetoric of continental Eurosceptics. These actors had previously advocated notions

such as 'Frexit' or 'Czechit' without hesitation. Prior to the clear emergence of Brexit's negative consequences, hard Eurosceptics presented it as a window of opportunity to undermine the EU (Kaniok & Hloušek, 2018). As the realities of Brexit deteriorated, strategic guises emerged – such as proposing referenda as proxies – enabling parties to discuss potential exits without alienating voters increasingly aware of the economic fallout associated with leaving the EU (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025).[1]

A more typical response was demonstrated by the German AfD, which intensified its criticism of the EU while avoiding an explicit call for withdrawal. Instead, it adopted a flexible approach, allowing the party to remain sharply critical of the EU's capacity for reform, without openly promoting departure (Roch, 2023). Brexit, therefore, did not present a viable window of opportunity for advancing hard Eurosceptic arguments in favour of exit, although it also did not lead to a broader decline in criticism of the EU (van Kessel et al., 2020).[2]

The COVID-19 crisis and associated anti-pandemic measures created fertile ground for politicisation and contestation (Bobba & Hubé, 2021). The prominent role played by the EU in managing the crisis (Boin & Rhinard 2023) invited critical responses from Eurosceptics. The temporary suspension of key institutions, such as the Schengen border regime (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021), revealed the fragility of integration. Nonetheless, the pandemic did not give rise to an overt hard Eurosceptic agenda. Rather, soft Eurosceptic criticism prevailed, at times even manifesting in complaints of some hard Eurosceptics that the EU was insufficiently proactive in coordinating vaccine procurement and other critical measures.

Hard Eurosceptic parties in Central Europe, for example, developed narratives alleging that the EU exploited crisis management to advance a progressive agenda and to accrue power at the expense of member states (Hloušek & Havlík, 2024). Familiar sovereigntist themes were thus repackaged in light of the pandemic, albeit only partially, and without openly promoting exit – an option perceived as too risky even by some of their own voters.

> An ideal type deserves conceptually clear definition or at least a dense description of its main features. According to Andrea Pareschi (2025, p. 5):
> A party as hard Eurosceptic if it systematically demonstrates principled opposition towards the EU as an integrated common market, the legitimacy of its supra national layer, the possibility of expanding its competences or any core value expressed in the TEU and the Copenhagen criteria. A party need not endorse any such elements, but manifest, consistent rejection translates into hard Euroscepticism.

Even if we set aside the argument that there is no such thing as a historical mainstream of European integration (Kný & Kratochvíl, 2015), we should

exercise caution when working with Pareschi's definition. Does it imply that if a party fundamentally opposes one of the identified elements, it is automatically categorised as hard Eurosceptic? Or is a full-fledged combination of such oppositions required?

The examples of Fidesz and Lega Salvini cited by Pareschi seem to support the former interpretation, as neither of these parties targets the integrated common market. Moreover, opposition to the values enshrined in the TEU and the Copenhagen criteria is often associated with nativism and populism (Pirro & Stanley, 2022). Even though empirically, there are clear overlaps between nativism, populism, and Euroscepticism (Pirro & Taggart, 2018), there is no necessary intrinsic liaison among these concepts. The concept of hard Euroscepticism should not be overstretched. Instead, attention should be given to its core political argument when constructing the characteristics of hard Euroscepticism as an ideal type.

The key characteristic of a hard Eurosceptic party is its intention to alter its country's status quo in relation to the European Union – either through advocating for withdrawal from the EU, or through promoting a fundamental transformation of the Union based on the rejection of supranational institutions and organisational structures, in favour of a vision of fully sovereign states forming only a loose intergovernmental '*Europe des patries*'. This constitutes the definition of the core beliefs and foundational principles of an ideal-typical hard Eurosceptic party – principles that are continually reaffirmed and reformulated, following the changing context of European integration and its domestic politicisation.

Recognising that hard Euroscepticism possesses a substantial ideal-typical core, alongside its more contingent and temporally framed manifestations, we may now proceed to analyse its status in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections in Central and Eastern European countries. What is the current context in which the ideal type of hard Eurosceptic political parties operates? What are the opportunities and constraints for hard Euroscepticism in the period surrounding the 2024 elections? What are its current manifestations? And, considering the previously discussed tendency of hard Eurosceptics to adopt guises, what are its most recent façades?

4. What trajectory of Euroscepticism can be expected from the EP elections in 2024?

European Parliament elections, which are the focus of this special issue, are typically considered second-order elections (Reif & Schmidt, 1980). This entails, among other things, several characteristics, such as lower voter turnout or addressing issues of rather national importance. However, this standard view has been confronted by a series of crises in the last two decades, which in turn have

led the literature to speak of Europeanisation (Braun, 2021) and continuous politicization of European integration. Yet politicization does not happen all the time, but rather in the context of 'politicizing moments' (Hutter et al., 2021; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019) that have the potential to polarize. The 2024 European Parliament elections coincided with the sharp phase of the war in Ukraine, which had considerable potential to polarize. It is therefore to be expected that Eurosceptic parties took advantage of the potential offered by the security crisis to sharply criticise the EU for aid to Ukraine (financial, arms, material) that only 'prolonged the war' and 'prevented peace'.

At the same time, we know Brexit has had a specific effect on the Eurosceptic parties. While it has led to the politicisation of European issues, in the long run it has led parties to a real or at least apparent shift away from hard Eurosceptic positions, which have been replaced by more moderate positions calling for EU reforms, possible referendums on remaining, etc. (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025). The underlying assumption is that the war in Ukraine and the accusations of warmongering against the EU have not been enough incentive for the Eurosceptic parties to move to hard Eurosceptic positions, because (a) the financial disadvantages for Britain of Brexit were still fresh in the minds of those parties' voters, (b) many European economies had fallen into recession after the Covid crisis and the idea of much greater economic hardship in the event of a departure from the EU seemed unacceptable. Therefore, we can expect the opposite of radical positions, i.e., a continuation of the post-Brexit trend and a softening of exit rhetoric.

5. Features of Hard Euroscepticism in EP elections 2024

The topic of leaving the EU is clearly not attracting attention, at least not as much as it used to be. This is what some of the texts of this issue suggest in their contributions. Petrúšek et al. (2025) show very strong support of Czechs for remaining (only 9.4% are in favour of 'Czexit'). Similarly, Hungarians clearly support staying in the Union, as shown by the text of Horváth (2025) as well as Benedek and Sebestyén (2025). According to the 2023 poll (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2023), 72% of Hungarians are in favour of staying in the Union, and although support for membership is as expected higher among voters of liberal-left parties, a clear majority of Fidesz and Mi Hazánk voters are also supporters of EU membership. At this point, 2 things are interesting from a theoretical point of view. Hard Eurosceptic Mi Hazánk voters support membership more (62%) than Fidesz voters (60%). This data supports first of all the assumption that some hard Eurosceptic parties might be less engaged with the exit issue because there is simply not much interest in it among voters. It also explains why Fidesz members or supporters oscillate between soft and hard Euroscepticism, because according

to this survey it is Fidesz that has the most sympathisers (albeit still a minority) who support 'Huxit'.

Moreover, as shown again by the research of Petrúšek et. al. (2025), voters' position on Czexit is only weakly correlated with their choice of political party, and it cannot be said that Czexit supporters clearly support hard Eurosceptic parties and vice versa. Based on this finding, we can deduce that the issue of leaving the EU may be a cross-cutting one for political parties in terms of existing cleavages, which is risky and may lead to a loss of voters. This suggests, at least verbally, a more cautious stance, a necessity of manoeuvring between soft and hard Euroscepticism, rather than 'putting the cards on the table'. This conclusion is confirmed by Horváth (2025) in his analysis of the 2024 EP election campaign of the Hungarian party Mi Hazánk. It is a remarkable finding that the oscillation between more or less hard Eurosceptic positions has finally led to a general downplaying of European attitudes in the party's programmatics, when Eurosceptic positions on the party's Facebook account were far from being one of its main themes in the EP elections campaign.

The tactic of reducing the salience of 'unpleasant' European issues was not used by all parties, of course. Bulgaria's Vazrazhdane party (Lyubenov & Stoyanov, 2025) did not shy away from the topic of Bulgaria's exit from the EU, with party chair Kostadinov talking about a referendum on leaving the EU if the terms of the country's membership are not renegotiated. However, the party's presentation reminds one of the classic tactics of hard Eurosceptics after Brexit. In particular, Stoyanov, the leader of the MEP candidate, used less radical language than the leader of the party, putting the need to solve problems at the forefront and framing leaving the EU as a last resort.

Similarly, Horváth (2025) said Fidesz used European themes visibly more than Mi Hazánk as an issue of contestation in the election campaign. Thus, we certainly cannot talk about the sidelining of European questions when it comes to Fidesz. Havlík and Hloušek (2025, pp. 357–358) have previously described the tactics of this party, which officially denies the consideration of 'Huxit', yet its leaders and personalities affiliated with the party (e.g. Magyar Nemzet, 2021) do here and there clearly call for the possibility of leaving the EU, which the party nevertheless denies the next day. Thus, Vazrazhdane, Fidesz and indeed also Mi Hazánk can be used to show that parties with the aim of avoiding splits within their own electorate do not necessarily have to abandon their hard Eurosceptic positions, they just translate them into a vocabulary 'less stressful' for the voters.

While the war in Ukraine has clearly had an impact on the rhetoric of the Eurosceptic parties, it must be said at the same time that attitudes towards the war cannot be clearly considered a predictor of hard Euroscepticism. We see a close link between radicalised Eurosceptic attitudes and the war in Ukraine, particularly in case of Fidesz in Hungary and Varazhdane in Bulgaria. Fidesz has repeatedly attacked the EU over sanctions against Russia and for its failure

to manage the conflict, all of which the party has described as inconsistent with Hungarian national interests (Benedek & Sebestyén, 2025). Similarly, Varazhdane has presented itself with strongly pro-Russian positions and has seen the EU as an American puppet in this context (Lyubenov & Stoyanov, 2025). In contrast, Mi Hazánk, despite its positions tending towards hard Euroscepticism over the long term, limited itself more to criticism of military aid to Ukraine and its positions can be described as at most mildly pro-Russian (Horváth, 2025). Similarly, while some Lithuanian parties have adopted a 'peace narrative' (but not a pro-Russian one), this has not resulted in a new wave of Eurosceptic rhetoric (Rakutienė, 2025).

Let us complete the picture with the Czech examples. Far right Freedom and Direct Democracy (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, SPD) of Tomio Okamura prefers to talk about peace but, simultaneously, offers relativisation of Russian aggression and Russian claims. NATO is responsible for triggering the war, according to SPD, while Russia was manoeuvred into war by the conspiracy of the USA, NATO and West in general (Kopecký, 2022). Moreover, Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia are Russian, full of people wanting to '*leave corrupted Ukraine*' (Rozsypal, 2025). SPD stresses that Russia is not a danger for Czechs, and the Czech national interests are related to reaching the peace in Ukraine, at any (Ukrainian) costs.

Czech populist Andrej Babiš has remained wishy-washy about Ukraine. He confirmed Russia is the aggressor, rejected to be pro-Russian, and preferred to talk vaguely about peace '*because we do not want war*' (Bartoníček, 2025). For Babiš and Okamura, Russian narrative might be risky and they prefer to stress their traditional topics of migration as a threat to Czech society. For hard Eurosceptic anti-establishment SPD, however, Russia is a sort of proxy how to express general dissatisfaction and deep distrust to the Western institutions of NATO and European Union. Russia does not constitute and independent element of the Czech (hard) Eurosceptic narrative, yet it 'flavours' existing ones, adding a new argumentation line against '*idiots from the Brussels*' (SPD undated). Moreover, 'peace' can work as the same proxy of pro-Russian Euroscepticism, as referendum does for exit.

An important observation relates to prevalence of cultural issues in the toolboxes of Central and Eastern European (hard) Eurosceptic parties and politicians. Nativism, related to cultural and identitarian narratives, alongside the populism and hostility to liberal democracy, are typical for them (Lyubenov & Stoyanov, 2025). Sovereigntist discourses are much more bases in alleged EU attacks on traditional values, traditional family, or traditional division of the gender roles. They have remained much more important discursive issues than elements of economic Euroscepticism (Rakutienė, 2025).

At the same time and despite the proxies mentioned above, the gradual tendency to downplay or guise the exit of the EU does not constitute a universal pattern of Central and Eastern European hard Euroscepticism. There are still undoubtedly parties that have maintained their unquestionably hard Eurosceptic positions not only shortly after Brexit but also later in the EP elections. The Czech

SPD (2024, p. 3) clearly devoted the majority of its election programme to the EU, and there is still a clear 'principled objection' in most of its programme points, including the planned Czexit, 'We will prevent further devolution of powers to Brussels and try to regain maximum powers until the European Union is dissolved and an organisation of closely cooperating European sovereign nations is established.' Similarly, the Czech non-parliamentary, hard Eurosceptic party Svobodní, known for its unequivocal support of Czexit, maintained its position in the EP elections (Svobodní, 2024).

6. Concluding remarks

The original typology developed by Taggart and Szczerbiak, distinguishing between hard and soft forms of Euroscepticism, remains both relevant and analytically useful – provided it is understood not as a perfect reflection of a complex reality, but as a set of Weberian ideal types that constitute a logical opposition in theory and point towards divergent directions in political practice. The definition of hard Euroscepticism takes into consideration only its basic ideal-typical features and remains open for re-contextualisation vis-à-vis the current EU politics. Hard Euroscepticism refers to a principled opposition to the European Union as a political entity, rooted in a sovereigntist perspective and often critical of the EU's perceived elitism and bureaucratic centralisation. While not rejecting the notion of *any* form of European cooperation, hard Euroscepticism advocates for a very loose intergovernmental framework that preserves 'full' national sovereignty and seeks to dismantle the EU and its supranational institutions.

In this context, it is more productive to examine the trajectory of empirically existing political parties as they drift towards either a soft or hard Eurosceptic course, rather than seeking to define their fixed 'essence'.

In the ever-changing landscape of contemporary Euroscepticism, trajectory and general context is key, due to the inherent contextual fluidity of party positions. A succession of contemporary crises – economic, migratory, geopolitical – has blurred the once-clear boundaries between hard and soft forms of Euroscepticism, just as already the pre-2008 development of the EU complicated the distinction between soft Euroscepticism and pragmatic pro-Europeanism. A more flexible analytical framework, combining ideal types with a trajectory-based approach, is thus well suited to examining contemporary Euroscepticism, particularly as manifested in Central and Eastern Europe in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Interpreting such trajectories requires both methodological rigour and interpretative openness. It is essential to consider not only what appears in party materials and what it signifies, but also what is omitted and why. In many cases, proxies have replaced unequivocal statements. Hard Euroscepticism may be concealed behind discourses centred on 'referenda' or 'peace', rather than

articulated through direct calls for withdrawal. In contexts where exit from the EU is not electorally resonant, hard Eurosceptic parties often avoid explicit exit narratives, embedding their opposition instead in critiques of EU bureaucracy, cultural homogenisation, or perceived threats to national sovereignty and identity. At first glance, this puts them in the waters of soft Euroscepticism, but this may just be a matter of temporary tactics. In the final assessment, it is necessary to read 'between the lines' and take into account the quality and long-term nature of individual positions, as well as verbal 'manoeuvring' etc.

The results of individual studies included in this special issue mostly confirm the expectations formulated in this article. The trend toward a 'softening' of originally pro-exit attitudes that emerged in the post-Brexit period persisted in the 2024 European Parliament elections, and there was no new wave of open-voiced hard Euroscepticism, despite the ongoing war in Ukraine and the 'pro-peace' positions of many Eurosceptic parties. A direct call for withdrawal is no longer the sole or even primary expression of hard Euroscepticism. Rather, appeals for a profound reconfiguration of the EU into a looser framework of cooperation between 'fully' sovereign nation-states may prove a more effective discursive strategy – particularly in a global context where voters may perceive complete isolation as impractical or undesirable. Hard Eurosceptic positions frequently intertwine with populism, nativism, and opposition to liberal democratic norms. This does not preclude the use of additional themes, including references to external crises (such as the war in Ukraine) or external actors (such as China or Russia). However, such elements tend to amplify existing narratives – for instance, those concerning migration or cultural issues – rather than introduce entirely new dimensions to the Eurosceptic discourse.

References:

Alexandre-Collier, A. (2018). From soft to hard Brexit: UKIP's not so invisible influence on the Eurosceptic radicalisation of the Conservative Party since 2015. In Esther, L., & Herman, J.M. (Eds.), *Trumping the Mainstream: The Conquest of Democratic Politics by the Populist Radical Right*. London: Routledge, 204–221.

Bakker, R., de Vries, C., Edwards, E., Hooghe, L., Jolly, S., Marks, G., Polk, J., Rovny, J., Steenbergen, M., & Vachudova, M. A. (2012). Measuring party positions in Europe: The Chapel Hill expert survey trend file, 1999–2010. *Party Politics*, *21*(1), 143–152. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068812462931

Bartoníček, R. (2025). Ohrožuje Rusko Českou republiku? Babiš a Okamura se jasné odpovědi vyhýbají. *Aktualne.cz*, 27 March 2025. Retrieved from: https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/volby/ohrozuje-rusko-ceskou-republiku-babis-a-okamura-se-odpovedi/r~7112970c0afa11f0bf960c-c47ab5f122/

Belloni, R. (2016). The European Union Blowback? Euroscepticism and Its Consequences in the Western Balkans. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 10*(4), 530–47. doi:10.1080/17502977.2016.1211387

Benedek, I., & Sebestyén, A. (2025). No Country for Hard Euroscepticism: EU-supportive Public with Eurosceptic Leaders in Hungary. *Czech Journal of Political Science, 32*(2).

Bíró-Nagy, Juhász, V., Szászi, Á, & Varga, A. (2023). *Milyen Európát szeretnénk? A magyar társadalom és az Európai Unió 2023-ban*. Budapest: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Policy Solutions https://www.policysolutions.hu/userfiles/Policy_Solutions_Milyen_Europat_szeretnenk_2023_Final.pdf

Bobba, G., & Hubé, N., (Eds.) (2021). *Populism and the politicisation of the COVID-19 crisis in Europe*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Boin, A., & Rhinard, M. (2023). Crisis Management Performance and the European Union: The Case of COVID-19. *Journal of European Public Policy, 30*(4), 655–75. doi:10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304

Bouckaert, G. (2022). The neo-Weberian state: From ideal type model to reality? *UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose Working Paper*, 10/2022. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10196024/1/Bouckaert_bouckaert_g._2022_the_neo-weberian_state_from_ideal_type_model_to_reality_0.pdf

Braun, D. (2021). The Europeanness of the 2019 European Parliament elections and the mobilising power of European issues. *Politics*, *41*(4), 451–466. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395721992930

Conti, N. (2003). Party Attitudes to European Integration: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Italian Case. *SEI Working Paper No 70*, and *EPERN Working Paper No 13*. https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=epern-working-paper-13.pdf&site=266

de Vries, C. E. (2017). Benchmarking Brexit: How the British Decision to Leave Shapes EU Public Opinion. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *55*(S1), 38–53. doi: 10.1111/jcms.12579

European Commission (2024): *Standard Eurobarometer* 102 – Autumn 2024. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3215

FdI. (2014): *In Europa a testa alta. Programma per le Elezioni Europee 2014*, https://www.fratelli-italia.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/programma-europee-def-28-04-1.pdf

Franzosi, P., Marone, F., & Salvati, E. (2015). Populism and Euroscepticism in the Italian Five Star Movement. *The International Spectator, 50*(2), 109–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2015.1030273

Genschel, P., & Jachtenfuchs, M. (2021). Postfunctionalism Reversed: Solidarity and Rebordering During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of European Public Policy, 28*(3), 350–369. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1881588

Glencross, A. (2023). Riding the Eurosceptic Tiger vs Taming It by Technocracy: The UK and France as Two Ideal Types of How to Manage Hard Euroscepticism. *Journal of European Integration, 45*(5), 785–802. doi:10.1080/07036337.2023.2183197

Havlík, V., & Hloušek, V. (2025). Where have all the 'exiters' gone? Contextualising the concept of hard euroscepticism. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *63*(2), 351–368.

Heinisch, R., McDonnell, D., & Werner, A. (2021). Equivocal Euroscepticism: How Populist Radical Right Parties Can Have Their EU Cake and Eat It. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 59*(2), 189–205. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13055

Hix, S., & Lord, C. (1997). *Political Parties in the European Union,* New York: St. Martin Press.

Hloušek, V., & Havlík, V. (2024). Eurosceptic narratives in the age of COVID-19: the Central European states in focus. *East European Politics*, *40*(1), 154–172. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2023.2221184

Horváth. A. (2025). Hard Euroscepticism in the Shadow of Fidesz: the Our Homeland Movement in Hungary. *Czech Journal of Political Science, 32*(2).

Hutter, S., & Kriesi, H. (2019). *European party politics in times of crisis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hutter, S., Grande, E., & Kriesi, H. (Eds.) (2021). *Politicising Europe: Integration and Mass Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ivaldi, G. (2018). Contesting the EU in times of crisis: The Front National and politics of Euroscepticism in France. *Politics*, *38*(3), 278–294

Jaćimović, D., Deichmann, J.I., & Tianping, K. (2023). The Western Balkans and Geopolitics: Leveraging the European Union and China. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, *25*(4), 626–43. doi: 10.1080/19448953.2023.2167164

Kaniok, P., & Hloušek, V. (2018). Brexit Outside of UK Politics: The Case of Czech Eurosceptics. *European Politics and Society, 19*(5), 507–25. doi:10.1080/23745118.2018.1463841

Kaniok, P., & Komínková, M. (2022). Hard and soft Euroscepticism in the European parliament. *European Review*, *30*(1), 79–95.

Kný, D., & Kratochvíl, P. (2015). Caught in the Deviation Trap. On the Fallacies of the Study of Party-Based Euroscepticism. *Czech Journal of Political Science*, *22*(3), 200–215. https://doi.org/10.5817/PC2015-3-200

Kopecký, J. (2016). Vypadnout z EU a kontrolovat hranice, doporučuje Klaus mladší z ODS. *iDnes.cz*, 23 June 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/vypadnout-z-eu-a-kontrolovat-hranice-doporucuje-klaus-mladsi-z-ods.A160723_153021_domaci_kop

Kopecký, J. (2022). Hnutí SPD odsoudilo invazi Ruska. Okamura má postoj jiný, napadl NATO. *iDnes.cz*, 22 February 2022. Retrieved from: https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/spd-postoj-k-invazi-ruska-na-ukrajinu-odlisny-postoj-okamura.A220222_124101_domaci_kop

Kopecký, P., & Mudde, C. (2002). The Two Sides of Euroscepticism. *European Union Politics, 3*(3), 297-326. Krzyżanowski, Michał (2019). Brexit and the imaginary of 'crisis': a discourse-conceptual analysis of European news media, *Critical Discourse Studies*, *16*(4), 465–490, doi: 10.1080/17405904.2019.1592001

Leconte, C. (2015). From pathology to mainstream phenomenon: Reviewing the Euroscepticism debate in research and theory. *International Political Science Review, 36*(3), 250–263. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512115576236

Lorimer, M. (2022). Pro-European, anti-EU? The National Rally and European integration. In Sondel-Cedarmas, J., & Berti, F. (Eds.), *The Right Wing Critique of Europe: Nationalist, Sovereignist and Right-Wing Populist Attitudes to the EU*. London: Routledge, 49–59.

Lyubenov, M., & Stoyanov, D. (2025). Political Polarisation as a trigger of Hard Euroscepticism: the case of Bulgarian 2024 EP Elections. *Czech Journal of Political Science, 32*(2).

Magyar Nemzet. (2021). Tamás Fricz: It's Time to Talk About Huxit. *MagyarNemzet.hu*, 17 August 2021. https://magyarnemzet.hu/english/2021/08/its-time-to-talk-about-huxit

Majerová Zahradníková, Z. (2022): *Přínosy a úskalí referenda o vystoupení ČR z EU*, 14 February 2022. https://volimtrikoloru.cz/komentare/prinosy-a-uskali-referenda/

Martill, B. (2021). Unity over diversity? The politics of differentiated integration after Brexit. *Journal of European Integration, 43*(8), 973–988. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1877285

Moury, C., & Pritoni, A. (2024) Introduction. The post-Berlusconi centre right and the challenge of governing, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, *16*(2), 107–121, doi: 10.1080/23248823.2024.2331849

Mudde, C. (2012). The comparative study of party-based Euroscepticism: the Sussex versus the North Carolina School. *East European Politics, 28*(2), 193–202. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2012.669735

Nicoli, F. (2017). Hard-line Euroscepticism and the Eurocrisis: Evidence from a Panel Study of 108 Elections Across Europe. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *55*(2), 312–331. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12463

Panagiotou, R. (2020). The Western Balkans between Russia and the European Union: Perceptions, Reality, and Impact on Enlargement. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies, 29*(2), 219–33. doi: 10.1080/14782804.2020.1798218

Pareschi, A. (2025). How Hard Does It Have to Be? Reconsidering European Integration and Hard Euroscepticism, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, online first, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13745

Petrúšek, I., Kudrnáč, A., Mahesh Davenport, A.J., & Bocskor, Á. (2025). Voting for Hard Eurosceptic Parties in 2024 European Parliament Elections in the Czech Republic: The Role of Salience and Support for Remain/Czexit. *Czech Journal of Political Science, 32*(2).

Pirro, A. L. P., & Stanley, B. (2022). Forging, Bending, and Breaking: Enacting the 'Illiberal Playbook' in Hungary and Poland, *Perspectives on Politics, 20*(1), 86–101. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001924

Pirro, A. L. P., & Taggart, P. (2018). The populist politics of Euroscepticism in times of crisis: A framework for analysis. *Politics, 38*(3), 253–262. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718770579

Rakutienė, S. (2025). Features of euroscepticism in the euro-optimistic society: case of Lithuania. *Czech Journal of Political Science, 32*(2).

Reif, K., & Schmitt, H. (1980). Nine second-order national elections–a conceptual framework for the analysis of European Election results. *European journal of political research, 8*(1), 3–44.

Roch, J. (2023). From Qualified to Conspirative Euroscepticism: How the German AfD Frames the EU in Multiple Crisis. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies, 32*(2), 538–54. doi:10.1080/14782804.2023.2271854

Rozsypal, M. (2025). Okamura: Ruska se nebojím. Víc peněz na obranu dávat nemusíme. *Novinky.cz*, 20 March 2025. https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/podcasty-politalk-okamura-ruska-se-nebojim-vic-penez-na-obranu-davat-nemusime-40513832

Sondel-Cedarmas, J. (2022). Giorgia Meloni's new Europe Europe of sovereign nations in the Brothers of Italy party manifestos. In: Sondel-Cedarmas, J., & Berti, F., (Eds.), *The Right-Wing Critique of Europe. Nationalist, Sovereignist and Right-Wing Populist Attitudes to the EU*, Londýn: Routledge, 60–75.

Sotiropoulos, D. A. (2020). In the Eye of the Hurricane: Greece. In Morlino, L., & Sottilotta, C. (Eds.), *The Politics of the Eurozone Crisis in Southern Europe*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 57–83.

SPD (2024). *Main programmatic positions for the European Parliament elections 2024*. Retrieved from: https://www.spd.cz/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Program-pro-volby-do-EP-2024-1.pdf

SPD. (Undated). *Tomio Okamura: Sankce vůči Rusku byly od počátku naprostá hloupost. Retrieved from:* https://www.spd.cz/tomio-okamura-sankce-vuci-rusku-byly-od-pocatku-naprosta-hloupost/

Steven, M. (2025). The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR): 'Eurorealism' in the ninth European Parliament, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, online first, doi: 10.1080/13572334.2024.2448933

Svobodní (2024). *We belong to Europe, not to Europe, the election manifesto of the Svobodní party for the 2024 European Parliament elections*. Retrieved from: https://svobodni.cz/eurovolby/

Szczerbiak, A., & Taggart, P. (2008a). Introduction: Researching Euroscepticism in European Party Systems: A Comparative and Theoretical Research Agenda. In Szczerbiak, A., & Taggart, P., (Eds.), *Opposing Europe? Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives 2*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1–27.

Szczerbiak, A., & Taggart, P. (2008b). Theorizing party-based Euroscepticism: problems of definition, measurement, and causality. In Szczerbiak, A., & Taggart, P., (Eds.), *Opposing Europe? Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives 2*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 238–262.

Szczerbiak, A., & Taggart, P. (2024). Euroscepticism and Anti-Establishment Parties in Europe. *Journal of European Integration, 46*(8), 1171–91. doi:10.1080/07036337.2024.2329634

Taggart, P., & Szczerbiak, A. (2013). Coming in from the Cold? Euroscepticism, Government Participation and Party Positions on Europe. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 51*(1), 17–37. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2012.02298.x

Taggart, P., & Szczerbiak, A. (2019). Putting Brexit into perspective: the effect of the Eurozone and migration crises and Brexit on Euroscepticism in European states. In Bulmer, S., & Quaglia, L. (Eds.), *The Politics and Economics of Brexit*. London: Routledge, 106–126.

Treib, O. (2021). Euroscepticism is here to stay: what cleavage theory can teach us about the 2019 European Parliament elections. *Journal of European public policy*, *28*(2), 174–189.

Usherwood, S. (2018), The Third Era of British Euroscepticism: Brexit as a Paradigm Shift. *The Political Quarterly*, *89*(4), 553–559. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12598

van Kessel, S., Chelotti, N., Drake, H., Roch, J., & Rodi, P. (2020). Eager to leave? Populist radical right parties' responses to the UK's Brexit vote. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *22*(1), 65–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148119886213

Vasilopoulou, Sofia. (2009). Varieties of Euroscepticism: The Case of the European Extreme Right. *Journal of Contemporary European Research, 5*(1), 3–23. https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v5i1.106

Weber, M. (1949). Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy. In Shils, E.A., & Finch, H.A. (Eds.), *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Glencoe, Illinois: Glencoe Free Press, 50–112.

Zaslove, A. (2008). Here to Stay? Populism as a New Party Type. *European Review, 16*(3), 319–336. doi:10.1017/S1062798708000288

Endnotes:

1 One exception from the rule constituted Václav Klaus junior in 2016. Later leader of the small Tricolour party and back than Czech MP for soft Civic Democratic Party said 'I see no other way than to get out of the European Union and tightly control our own borders. Even if it means becoming a third poorer' (Kopecký, 2016).

2 Brexit was not a one way track, though. For example, British Conservatives radicalised their approach to implementation of Brexit, being pushed by competition of UKIP (Alexandre-Collier, 2018), although in the long-term perspective, getting Brexit done subdued importance of the traditional Eurosceptic agenda in Britan in general (Usherwood, 2018).