In the aftermath of the multiple crises that have hit the EU, Euroscepticism has emerged as a variegated front, able to challenge the very existence of the Union. Despite the fact that Euroscepticism is now considered a political phenomenon structurally embedded in European societies and well represented in the European Parliament, this is still a very contested concept, without a clear and univocal definition.

The difficulty in providing a definition of Euroscepticism is feeding the risk of falling into conceptual stretching when it comes to the identification of Eurosceptic parties. The financial and economic crises have augmented the problem, because the number of parties that have expressed (sometimes harsh) criticism against the EU has steadily risen. In this framework, the problem is that any party that does not express full and unconditional support to the current setup of the EU may, at least potentially, be considered Eurosceptic.

**Defining Euroscepticism**

For the above reasons, we have considered the opportunity to explore a new point of view about the contentious issue of Euroscepticism. Is it possible to define the latter in a clearer way? We believe that the answer is yes. Our solution is to provide a narrower definition, which consistently reduces the number and quality of parties that can be gathered into the Eurosceptic group. A possible way forward is to consider as Eurosceptic only those parties that show a clear anti-systemic charge—using Sartori’s well known definition—vis-à-vis the supranational political system. In this way, we will be able to distinguish between parties that want to disrupt the Union—labelled Eurosceptic—from those parties that are critical to the EU yet remain pro-systemic.

*The outstanding and defining element of Euroscepticism is the open contestation of the EU political regime: EU political outputs are considered illegitimate because they are products of a non-recognised political system, and because any supranational political authority that may weaken national sovereignty is refused.*
Euroscepticism can therefore be defined as an articulated structural opposition that can be labelled as opposition of principle, which challenges the very existence of the supranational political regime from a disruptive perspective. Such opposition has accomplished the paradoxical function to integrate European citizens within the EU political structure, finally leading to a real politicisation of the integration process. From this point of view, we can define the politicisation promoted by Euroscepticism as the political conflict over this specific form of regional cooperation and integration.

The outstanding and defining element of Euroscepticism is the open contestation of the EU political regime: EU political outputs are considered illegitimate because they are products of a non-recognised political system, and because any supranational political authority that may weaken national sovereignty is refused. Within such conceptualisation, Eurosceptic parties can be identified by either their dissatisfaction with the current functioning of the EU or the hostility/refusal to future EU’s strengthening. Eurosceptic parties reject the idea that the EU may have a defined political structure, which overtakes the duties and functions of nation-states. We can consider as Eurosceptic all those parties that clearly refuse the “dominant political values” that are authoritatively allocated in a society, as stated by Easton. From these values, the European institutional organisation as well as EU areas of intervention and limits originate.

In our narrower definition, Eurosceptic parties are related to what Sartori calls anti-system party:

> an anti-system opposition abides by a belief system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates. According to the strict definition, then, anti-system parties represent an extraneous ideology—thereby indicating a polity confronted with a maximal ideological distance.

By means of this approach, we highlight the delegitimizing power exerted by anti-system Eurosceptic parties within the EU. It is worth underlining that the EU is a multilevel polity. This implies that this delegitimizing action against the EU can take place both at the national and supranational level (in the latter case, we refer in particular to the political conflict which takes place within the European Parliament).

To sum up, there are two possible kinds of opposition to the EU: anti-system and constructive. The former is the more detrimental, because it undermines the very bases of the EU project’s legitimacy. A puzzling phenomenon is that anti-system parties are more
successful in some European countries than in others, albeit all countries share the common membership in the Union. Although we may find examples of anti-system parties all over Europe, only in some political systems have they been able to reach higher vote shares.

What causes Euroscepticism?

The Euromanifesto project provides information on the placement of national parties in Europe along an anti-EU integration dimension, where ten is the highest score obtainable. Here, we look at Western Europe only. If we assume that anti-system parties are those scoring eight or higher, we find that, in the 2014 European elections, anti-system parties obtained votes in 11 countries. However, only in eight countries did their overall vote share exceed the average of votes obtained by all anti-system parties in all political systems. In particular, anti-system parties were electorally successful in Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. This success is likely to have been driven by widespread anti-EU sentiments and attitudes. The question is thus why in some countries anti-system parties find the space to flourish, whereas in others they look less attractive.

The causes of anti-integration public opinions can be economic; cultural-identitarian; politico-institutional; or socio-ideological. For our purpose, we focus on those factors that have proved to be the most influencing according to existing research. With regard to economic factors, the rate of unemployment seems to exert a major impact, which can be exacerbated by economic crises. In a nutshell, the higher the unemployment the higher the likelihood of anti-EU attitudes and voting behavior.

Higher unemployment rates are associated to successful anti-EU parties, especially where they are present alongside exclusive national identities and/or a longer membership of the EU. Moreover, in some cases in which people trust national institutions more, strong anti-EU attitudes emerge.

Secondly, an exclusive national identity as well as higher trust in national institutions can be
facilitators for anti-system parties. From an institutional viewpoint, important factors may be both the national government’s effectiveness and the year of entry in the European Union, (older membership seems to facilitate Euroscepticism). Finally, the presence of anti-EU mass media helps anti-EU sentiments spread out. However, it is not clear which (significant) factor has the upper hand when it comes to forging systemic opposition to Europe. Moreover, we should ask why some countries lack successful anti-system parties, not only why anti-EU attitudes form.

For this purpose, we should look for the condition of the opposition to the EU and their combinations. Some conditions may well be effective only when others are present (or absent). The success of anti-EU parties in a given country could depend on some factors that are, conversely, not relevant in other situations. Similarly, lower vote shares for anti-system parties could be the result of alternative combinations of factors.

Considering, where applicable, the mean values for Western Europe, various sources (i.e., Eurostat; Eurobarometer; World Governance Indicators; secondary literature) tell us that higher unemployment rates are associated to successful anti-EU parties, especially where they are present alongside exclusive national identities and/or a longer membership of the EU. Moreover, in some cases in which people trust national institutions more, strong anti-EU attitudes emerge. The same relationship involves national government effectiveness and successful anti-system parties, but one should take in consideration the role of economic performances and identity together with this.

Finally, anti-EU media can actually have an impact, but it remains to be seen if good national institutional performances have a mediating effect. One plausible explanation of the impact of (positive) government performance and trust in institutions could be that citizens under the rule of effective national institutions are more critical towards EU’s shortcomings in terms of policy outputs and democratic quality. This would be a further insight that the EU should try to strengthen its legitimacy in the eyes of citizens to cope with Eurosceptic challenges. The road towards this could pass through the creation of better economic performances and a new European identity, which both refer to factors that are likely to have an impact on the formation anti-EU sentiments.