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**Post-Accession Congruence in Bulgaria and Romania: Measuring mass-elite
congruence of opinions on European integration through mixed methods**

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Abstract: This article proposes a mixed methods measurement of the mass-elite congruence of opinions on the EU based on a combination of speech and survey data. It focuses on two countries (Bulgaria and Romania) that were known for their pro-European profile until their EU accession, but which faced many political difficulties afterwards. The analysis covers the 2013-2017 period that includes a great deal of these post-accession difficulties. The article illustrates how we can make meaningful comparisons between short-term, dichotomous mass and elite attitudes with timeframes determined by non-electoral events.

Keywords: elite-mass congruence, mixed methods, Central and Eastern Europe, European Union

Introduction

The congruence of opinions between society and political elites in Central and East European member states on the European Union (EU) in the post-accession period is important. For the EU it can be an indicator of its legitimacy in a region characterized by increasing challenges for the quality of democracy and by more critical voices against the European project. For the member states, the congruence of post-accession attitudes can provide a source of stability and continuity with the pre-accession attitudes, thus reflecting democratic responsiveness as an important element of regime stability (Powell, 2004). The stability or change of congruent opinions can inform both the wider public and political elites about how much they grow apart on this topic. So far, with few notable exceptions (Jerez-Mir, Real-Dato and Vázquez-García, 2009; Dolný and Baboš, 2015), little has been done to document empirically the post-accession congruence of opinions in post-communist countries. In particular, the evolution of attitudes over time is relevant because it reflects how they change and could explain why important issues such as democratic backsliding happen (Levitz and Pop-Eleches, 2010; Gherghina and Soare, 2016).

In addition to the challenges outlined in the introduction to this symposium (Shim and Gherghina, 2020), the measurement of mass-elite congruence in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) faces three important challenges. The limitations of existing measurements are described in detail in the following section and can be summarized as follows. Most of them focus on long-term trends without accounting for short-term changes that are increasingly common; they are to a large extent about the degree of correspondence between the opinions of both sides; they rely extensively on electoral or synchronic surveys that fail to cover changes between elections over time.

This paper suggests a remedy to these problems and provides a mixed-methods alternative to measure the mass-elite congruence. This is intended to gauge the short-term

changes of the mass-elite congruence for countries where elite-level surveys are scarce or do not provide sufficient information. This alternative combines aggregate survey results for mass attitudes and speeches and media report data for elite attitudes. It focuses on measuring levels of congruence year-by-year to capture potential changes. This can serve as a reliable basis for a closer study on the causal mechanisms for the particular level of mass-elite congruence. Our measurement focuses on the congruence on the most general attitudes of the elites and the masses on European integration¹ at a policy level.

Our analysis focuses on Bulgaria and Romania as examples for CEE cases of significant short-term changes of mass-elite congruence. The two countries share a few common features: They joined the EU in 2007, were among the most Europhile member states, noticeable in a clear and broad social and political consensus in favor of the EU, but also faced important challenges after their accession. For example, they are the only two EU member states that are still monitored on their progress on judicial reform and fight against corruption. Their post-accession political dynamic is marked by political instability, including several waves of anti-government protests or failure of different government coalitions. All this instability seems to question whether the pre-accession consensus and support for EU memberships still exists among the people and politicians of both countries. The timeframe of this study is between 2013 and 2017 that covers a great deal of the political instability in both cases. The main events occurred mainly outside the electoral campaign thus making an electoral survey or manifesto data unlikely. The insights from these cases are particularly informative to reveal the hollowing out of democratic institutions in contrast to the open

¹ We include such measurement for the sake of simplicity in order to show the general benefits of using the mixed-method for measuring short-term mass-elite congruence of opinion on European integration. Other theoretical frameworks that, for example, distinguish between opinions on integration in general from opinions on particular policies of integration can also be easily applied with this method.

challenge to a liberal democratic order observed in Hungary or Poland (Dawson and Hanley, 2016). By focusing on Bulgaria and Romania our article contributes also to the existing literature by revealing another mode of interaction between political elites and wider society.

The following sub-section provides details about the Bulgarian and Romanian cases and data we use to measure the congruence. The third section reflects on the mixed-methods suggested as alternative measurement. The final section of the article discusses the benefits of this method for the broader field of mass-elite convergence of opinions.

Existing measurements and their limitations

The study of the mass-elite congruence of opinions about the EU takes a variety of forms. Scholars are particularly interested in the dynamics of party competition (Dolný and Baboš, 2015), the support for particular policies (Rosset and Stecker, 2019), or the various forms of politicization (Leconte, 2015). These topics are associated with different types of research designs. The analysis of trends and policy responses is almost exclusively quantitative, usually looking for the level of congruence between the average positions of the elites (most often, political parties) and masses (voters, in particular) (Mattila and Raunio, 2012), or the alignment between the distributions of different positions on European integration across elites and masses (Real-Dato, 2017). The research on politicization includes a significant number of qualitative works with a focus on discourses, frames, signifiers and/or frequencies of their use (Ray, 2007; Helbling and Tresch, 2011; Leconte, 2015).

There are three main issues about the existing measurements. First, they often focus on long-term trends, usually exploring a particular question within several electoral periods to obtain reliable and robust results. Very little has been, however, said about any potential short-term developments related to the mass-elite congruence of opinions. Measuring the mass-elite congruence much more frequently has three main advantages: a closer

investigation of the interplay between mass and elite attitudes (Linden and Pohlman, 2003; Sanders and Toka, 2013), a higher number of observations even when focusing on a limited number of case studies with effects on the generalization of results, and flexibility in setting the timeframe for research. Rather than exploring a particular case between electoral periods, a focus on short-term measurements of mass-elite congruence of opinion can be situated around non-electoral events, as we demonstrate with the cases of Bulgaria and Romania.

Second, the current measurements of mass-elite congruence focus almost exclusively on the degree of correspondence between the opinions of both sides. It rarely presents nuances that could reflect on the relevance of this correspondence. This is helpful to understand the process in a particular case. For example, qualitative studies on the mass-elite congruence of opinion on European integration present cases in the dichotomous terms of “congruent” or “incongruent” in order to establish how the elites or masses achieve these levels or respond to them. While this presentation often involves the use of mass survey data and secondary literature, there is a lack of a more reliable and objective approach for assessing a case as “congruent” or “incongruent” that is based exclusively on primary data.

Third, data on mass attitudes are easily available through surveys. Current studies on the mass-elite congruence of opinion on European integration relied mainly on a number of useful surveys, e.g. World / European Values Survey, the European Social Survey, or the Eurobarometer. The measurement of mass-elite congruence in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) relies extensively on electoral or synchronic surveys. This raises several problems. They do not cover the changes between elections, associated with extraordinary events with an increasing occurrence over the last decade, i.e. protests, political instability. Moreover, data availability and comparability remain a challenge due to the absence of many countries from international datasets.

In contrast to the availability of data on mass attitudes, it is a challenge to find and use reliable data on elite attitudes. Existing studies are resolving the issue by involving a variety of sources, ranging from roll calls to speech data. Table 1 provides an overview of the available methods with their usefulness assessed according to three criteria: 1) validity (the extent to which the tool measures elites' opinions); 2) longitudinal (the ability of the tool to measure elite opinions over time), and 3) comprehensive (the extent to which the tool includes a variety of opinions). Our assessment is based on the Bulgarian and Romanian cases, for which – as we indicated in the introduction – data is often missing.

[Table 1 here]

Roll-call votes meet only the criterion of longitudinal measurement of elite opinion because they are recorded over a long period. They are low on validity because votes are not always cast according to policy opinions but to other factors such as party loyalty. They are not comprehensive since not all votes are recorded. Party manifestos are comprehensive because they cover a broad range of opinions, but they lack validity since the provisions do not reflect elite opinions only. Among others, they are about salient issues in society. The longitudinal element is also problematic since manifestos are absent between elections. The legislative speeches often reflect elite opinions and can be recorded longitudinally, but they are not comprehensive since they often refer to particular policies. There is a question mark about validity since the speeches are often prepared with a competitive goal in mind, oriented against other political parties and not necessarily reflecting the genuine opinions of the speakers.

Elite interviews are high on validity and comprehensive because they reflect policy opinions. They allow for a comparison with mass attitudes at the individual level. However,

such data is rare and usually not fit for diachronic comparisons, being limited to one point in time (Best, Lengyel and Verzichelli, 2012). Nevertheless, some sources include data from both, mass and elite positions on the same EU-related issue. Examples of such sources are the EU Engage or IntUne datasets, which have the disadvantage of having limited information on most EU member states from Eastern Europe, as well as being conducted every two to four years, which makes them unsuitable for the study of short-term changes.

Expert surveys can be a useful tool because they provide a longitudinal assessment of what elites believe and they can be comprehensive. The problem with these is that experts may have a different understanding than politicians about policies, thus falling short to reflect the elite attitudes on this particular topic. The same shortcoming applies to newspaper descriptions.

The two tools that systematically cover the three criteria are elite surveys and the public speeches of elites. In the absence of elite surveys, public speeches understood in broad terms as any unabridged statements expressed by elite representatives are the most suitable data source that allows measuring the mass-elite congruence of opinion on European integration as a dichotomous and short-term variable. This is for two main reasons. First, speech data is generally available for any period, as elites regularly provide a running commentary on a wide variety of matters through media appearances, public speeches and statements, etc. This provides a significant advantage compared to manifesto or program data, for example, that is usually released less frequently. Second, speech data resolves the challenge of finding reliable elite data for any case, given that such data exists in any political setting and comes directly from elite representatives rather than from indirect channels. In contrast to manifesto or program data that often presents an agreed version of the opinion of a particular part of the elite, speech data provides more room to explore the nuances of the taken positions. While the relevance of a particular statement may vary depending on the role

of the elite representative making it, it is nevertheless valuable information about the on-going discussion among the elite.

Measuring convergence with mixed methods

The measurement of short-term mass-elite convergence of opinion on European integration as a dichotomous variable involves the use of secondary sources in the form of mass survey data and elite speeches. We use mass survey data due to their availability and comparability over time. Alternatively, focus groups or interviews can be helpful to measure mass-elite congruence of opinions as long as they are conducted as part of a longitudinal project. We are not aware of such a project on European integration that includes such data, so our focus remains on survey data. In this respect, the Eurobarometer is by far the most suitable data source for measuring short-term levels of mass-elite congruence of opinion on European integration. It is a regular survey, carried several times in a year across the EU member and candidate states and asks a basic set of EU-related questions that remain largely unchanged across time and space, thus, making it a suitable source for cross-national and longitudinal analyses. Its use of representative probability samples ensures that it provides a reliable snapshot of the mass attitudes on EU-related matters among European societies.

Mass survey data from the Eurobarometer surveys include both cases of interest – Bulgaria and Romania. Considering the timeframe of this study (2013-2017), the most useful Eurobarometer surveys are 80.1, 82.3, 84.3, 86.2 and 88.3 that mark the attitudes of the Bulgarian and Romanian societies at the end of each year between 2013 and 2017. The analysis focuses on a question with the same wording in all five Eurobarometer surveys: “At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in the European Union?” All respondents with the answer “things are going in the right direction” indicate the level of support for European integration. The data

includes all survey respondents, including those that chose the “do not know/no answer” option.

Speech data on the Bulgarian and Romanian elites comes from the public speeches and statements of party leaders, usually reflected in the media or presented on their party websites. Political parties often lie at the core of elite-level preference aggregation (Shim and Gherghina, 2020). These persons combine their party duties with official positions, mainly as leaders of the opposition or prime ministers, which makes them crucial actors within the national elites that determine its overall attitude on a given matter.² We focus on those parties with consistent parliamentary presence for the 2013-2017 period given the rising levels of electoral volatility in the party systems of both countries. In Bulgaria those parties are Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) and Attack (Ataka). Romania also provides four cases: Democratic Liberal Party (PDL), National Liberal Party (PNL), Social Democratic Party (PSD) and Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR). DPS and UDMR are representatives of ethnic minorities of the two countries, whereas PDL merged in 2014 into PNL and is, thus, excluded from the analysis of the subsequent years. All eight parties cover a great deal of the ideological spectrum in both countries and had experienced a number of leadership changes within the timeframe, thus, increasing the number of observations.

The mixed-methods approach that we suggest with these types of data requires three phases of analysis. Although we focus here on a particular set of attitudes (i.e. towards the EU), our approach can accommodate a wide variety of choices of theoretical frameworks and

² Again as with the choice of framework, we focus on party leaders for the sake of simplicity in demonstrating the usefulness of the mixed method. Potentially, studies may involve speech data from other elite representatives as well, such as heads of states, business, or religious leaders.

definitions of masses and elites. In doing so, we aim to provide an approach with broader applicability to the study of opinions. The first two phases can be done in any order, depending on the particularities of the conducted research, but the third one should always come last. The first phase uses quantitative data to identify public opinion on the policy dimension throughout the investigated period. Table 2 reveals for Bulgaria that despite the overall picture of rather negative public attitudes on the EU, there is a gradual increase of support for the European project since 2015, following a major dip immediately before that. The Romanian society stands in significant contrast in its attitudes on the EU. With the major exception of 2013, people in Romania seem more enthusiastic about the direction of the EU than Bulgarians. Furthermore, a gradual decline of the public support for the EU is evident, but not on the same degree as the decline in Bulgaria between 2014 and 2015.

The second phase captures the elite attitudes through speech data. Of main importance in this respect is to use the available text to denote what position a particular part of the elite takes and in what way is this position different from a previous position. In other words, instead of exploring the discourses, as qualitative discourse analysis does (Stanivuković, 2013), or the frames, and/or their frequencies, as content analysis does (Helbling and Tresch, 2011), we move a level above on the ladder of generality to ascribe a particular position to a particular statement based on a theoretical framework of available positions. Hence, the public speech data serves as evidence for the particular elite position on European integration.

This approach includes several steps for each year within the timeframe of this study. It involves the identification of EU-related topics that each party leader addressed in the particular year, followed by an assessment of their expressed attitudes. We searched the media sources that represent the broad ideological and pro/anti-government variety of perspectives among the most-read outlets in both countries. For the Bulgarian case, these included the websites of 24 Chasa, Trud, Sega, Dnevnik, and Duma. For Romania, we

covered at Mediafax, ziare.com and Euractiv. We used the search functions of those websites, setting them for the period between 1 January 2013 and 31 December 2017 and entered as keywords the name of the particular party leader, the full name or abbreviation of his/her party and the words “Europe”, “European” or “EU” in the respective native language. The returned results were then assessed in detail on whether the particular article provides relevant information about the party leader’s position on European integration. If the article does so, we then applied a general content analysis of assessing whether the overall attitude of the statement expresses a positive or negative opinion on the EU, based on our expert knowledge on the public discourses of the two cases. In doing so, we use a holistic approach that aggregates elite attitudes reflected in speeches and seeks to make sense of them in a similar way as aggregate public opinion does for mass attitudes³.

This holistic approach provided us with the flexibility to properly assess the elites’ attitudes without being at the cost of reliability as illustrated below. The overall attitude of each party leader on the EU at a given year emerges from the overall assessment on his/her statements on the EU. Given their decisive role within the national elites of Bulgaria and Romania, we work with the presumption that the leaders’ opinions are shared by the party in general, as each party aims to avoid internal quarrels. If several party leaders touched upon a common topic during a given year, the overall assessment of their attitudes is being derived mainly from this debate and enhanced by the remaining expressed opinions.

[Table 2 here]

³ In this respect, we refrained from a detailed sentence-based analysis on the degree of a particular attitude, or from the frequencies of reported statements related to a particular position, as such approach moves back to the measuring elite opinion as a matter of a degree and not as a dichotomous pro- or anti-European attitude variable. Nevertheless, other studies may involve such an approach, but this depends on the research question.

The results in Table 2 show that throughout the 2013-2017 timeframe there has been a limited change in the parties' positions on the EU in Bulgaria. The main exceptions in this respect were the slight shifts in the positions of BSP between its period as the main opposition and the main governing party in 2013, as well as GERB's declared pro-European position in 2017, but rather Eurosceptic actions. In Romania, the shifts concern the two main parties in the country: whereas PNL moved from being Eurosceptic to pro-European following the merger with PDL, PSD did the reverse as it turned Eurosceptic since assuming power. Furthermore, the overall trend in the two countries differs noticeably. In Bulgaria there is a balanced divide between pro-European and Eurosceptic parties, whereas in Romania pro-European political forces seem to dominate.

The third phase of the analysis assesses the bigger picture by relating the trends of the mass and elite opinions year by year and by identifying potential explanations for them. In this respect, the main finding of this stage is that the general trend for Bulgaria and Romania for the 2013-2017 period is one of lasting mass-elite incongruences of attitudes towards the EU with brief moments of congruence. In Table 1 convergence is coded as "+", while divergence as "-". In Bulgaria there is a significant incongruence of attitudes, given that the lasting divide among the Bulgarian elite fails to reflect the growing support for the EU among the Bulgarian society. The only year of congruence is 2015 when the divide between the pro-European and Eurosceptic parts of the Bulgarian elite seems to coincide with the declining support for the EU among the Bulgarian society. On the other hand, there is a much more noticeable congruence between Romanian society and elite on the EU between 2014 and 2017. Yet, this could not be said of the year 2013 where despite the dominance of Europhile forces in Romanian politics, the Romanian society remained skeptical towards the EU.

The strengths of speech data and usefulness of mixed methods measurement

This section briefly outlines the strength of the speech data, which can contextualize elite attitudes. This type of data shows on what ground parties oppose or favor the EU integration process, and under what circumstances. The points below on opposition-ruling party dynamics show that speech data can help us understand elites' position better.

The context of the trajectories observed in the two countries provides a more nuanced and accurate assessment. First, in Bulgaria the elite divide on the EU cuts across government-opposition lines, so the point of congruence in 2015 should not be overestimated. More importantly, whereas between 2014 and 2015 public support for the EU in Bulgaria declined sharply, a pro-European coalition government has been formed as a result of early parliamentary elections in 2014. Similarly, despite the growing pro-European sentiments among the Bulgarian society since 2015, the country ended up with a significantly more Eurosceptic right-right coalition government in 2017 after another instance of early elections. Similar discrepancies can be observed in Romania. Despite the numerical dominance of pro-European attitudes among the Romanian elite, the main Eurosceptic party in the country belongs to the government. Also, although the Romanian government entered major clashes with the EU institutions during the timeframe of our study, the Romanian society remained significantly pro-European. This effectively reveals a major incongruence between the mass attitudes on the EU and those of the government of the day.

The congruence of mass-elite opinions is also usually related to major developments in the two countries. In Bulgaria (2015), the rising public discontent with the EU handling of the migrant crisis seems to be successfully captured by the Bulgarian political elite, as evident by the growing electoral support for parties with anti-migration messages in 2017 early elections. In Romania, the aftermath of the 2012 constitutional crisis in the country, caused by a conflict between the president and the government (Gherghina and Soare, 2016),

provides a convincing explanation for the congruence of critical attitudes against the EU in 2013. As this crisis has been resolved by the election of a highly popular grand coalition government, its open conflict with the EU over its handling of the political opposition and the increasing concentration of power caused a considerable public discontent with the EU in Romania. Afterwards, mass support for the EU increased and in 2015 there is another moment of congruence when no political elites were critical against the EU.

The use of mixed methods makes four important contributions to the study of mass-elite congruence and comparative politics. First, it provides a reliable tool to determine the presence or absence of mass-elite congruence as a dichotomous variable. This is important, given that earlier studies either take the congruence or divergence for granted without providing convincing evidence or measure the congruence as a matter of degree without providing clear criteria when such congruence turns into divergence. Second, the mixed-methods measurement allows for studying the short-term developments of the mass-elite congruence of opinion on European integration. This enables a more nuanced study of the interactions between mass and elite opinions on European integrations, as well as for increasing the number of observations without necessarily increasing the number of cases. Third, this type of measurement for mass-elite congruence is useful when facing challenges of data availability and conceptual incompatibility. As illustrated in the example of the post-accession mass-elite congruence of attitudes on the EU in Bulgaria and Romania, there is limited availability of quantitative or qualitative data for research. The resolution of this challenge is the use of mixed methods that helps bridge the existing gaps in the data. Fourth, this measurement helps in understanding the sources for the legitimacy of the EU. By exploring the presence or absence of mass-elite congruence of attitudes on the EU within a given period, the mixed methods measurement provides an important theoretical and empirical basis on the trends of increasing support or contestation of the European project. In

such a context, future studies require to include in their analysis such measurement as an initial step. More importantly, in circumstances of improved data availability and more fine-tuned theoretical basis, such measurement may yield even more reliable outcomes than the ones present in this article.

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Table 1. A Comparison of Measures for Elite Opinions

	Validity	Longitudinal	Comprehensive
Roll-call votes		✓	
Party manifesto			✓
Legislative speeches	✓	✓	
Interviews	✓		✓
Expert surveys		✓	✓
Newspaper descriptions		✓	✓
Elite surveys	✓	✓	✓
Public speeches	✓	✓	✓

Table 2: The Distribution of Elite and Mass Attitudes towards the EU per Year (%)

Bulgaria		2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Mass	Right direction of the EU	44.9	47.2	41.2	43.2	46.4
Elite	Europhile	BSP (in opposition), DPS, GERB	DPS, GERB	DPS, GERB	DPS, GERB	DPS, GERB (officially)
	Eurosceptic	Ataka, BSP (in government)	Ataka, BSP	Ataka, BSP	Ataka, BSP	Ataka, BSP, GERB (in action)
Congruence		–	–	+	–	–
Romania						
Mass	Right direction of the EU	37.1	54.9	52.3	48.6	48.5
Elite	Europhile	PDL, PNL, PSD, UDMR	PDL, PNL, PSD, UDMR	PNL, PSD, UDMR	PNL, UDMR	PNL, UDMR
	Eurosceptic	PNL	PNL		PSD	PSD
Congruence		+	–	+	–	–

Notes: N for public opinion: Bulgaria between 1006 and 1051; Romania between 1005 and 1069