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Article

## Downplaying Euroscepticism in Mainstream Media: The Schengen Accession of Romania and Bulgaria

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### Abstract

Scholars have expressed concern about the growth of Eurosceptic discourses in the media since Taggart's (1998) article on Euroscepticism. While some progress has been made in understanding the media's role in increasing Euroscepticism, previous studies have primarily focused on Western European media discourses. This research aims to address the knowledge gap on Eurosceptic discourse in Eastern Europe by analysing the impact of the veto against Romania and Bulgaria's application to join Schengen, as reflected in mainstream media. The research question is: To what extent the Eurosceptic discourse arose in both countries in the weeks before and after the Justice and Home Affairs Council (8–9 December 2022)? The findings indicate that mainstream-mediated discourse employed a strategy of downplaying Euroscepticism. The Romanian and Bulgarian political class labelled the failure to join Schengen as "disappointing," "unfair," "unjustified," and "regrettable." This research provides evidence of how mainstream media discourses addressed the issue while promoting the European integration project by minimising Euroscepticism.

### Keywords

Bulgaria; Euroscepticism; mainstream media; populism; Romania; Schengen Area

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The disappointment of Romanian civil society with Austria's rejection of Schengen accession resulted in a boycott against Austrian companies (Olariu, 2022) and customers withdrawing their money from Austrian banks or demanding the nationalisation of the OMV oil company. Romanians started posting under #BoycottAustria on Twitter and other social media platforms after Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer stated that Vienna would not support Romania's accession to Schengen. Politicians were held responsible for the failure, and the political class from Bulgaria and Romania could have transformed social dissatisfaction into political populism by appealing to Eurosceptic, anti-EU messages. Certain Bulgarian politicians even proposed boycotting the Netherlands ("#BoycottAustria campaign goes viral,"

2022). This study examines the politicians and mainstream media discourse from Romania and Bulgaria aimed at managing popular discontent. This article will address the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the major themes presented in the mainstream media and politics in Romania and Bulgaria during and immediately after the decision to postpone the accession to the Schengen Area?

RQ2: Do the major themes in the establishment discourse emphasise or downplay Euroscepticism in the Schengen accession project?

RQ3: What is the role of discursive populist elements in the mainstream media and politicians' statements? And how are they connected to Euroscepticism?

To answer these questions, the article is structured as follows: It starts with an analysis focused on the dynamics between Euroscepticism and Europeanisation, and on the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism—commonalities and differences. Then it succinctly describes the stages of the EU integration of Romania and Bulgaria and their candidacy for the Schengen Agreement. After presenting the methodological approach, it exposes the findings on the predominant themes of the Schengen Agreement process within the mainstream discourse of media and politicians, emphasising the presence/absence of Eurosceptic and populist elements.

## 2. Theoretical Review

### 2.1. Euroscepticism and Europeanisation

In the past two decades, various definitions of Euroscepticism have been developed, and different analytical models have been created. Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008, p. 239) view Euroscepticism as a “generic, catch-all term, encapsulating a disparate bundle of attitudes opposed to European integration and in opposition to the EU in particular.” This definition is based on Taggart’s (1998, p.365) seminal observation that Euroscepticism “was used as a term for contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration” and consider the fact that Euroscepticism must be rated a “phenomenon imminent to the construct of the EU right from the beginning” (Bürkner, 2020, p. 550).

Taggart and Szczerbiak (2001, 2004) have refined the definition of Euroscepticism in several publications and working papers, differentiating between “hard” and “soft” Euroscepticism. The distinction is mostly applicable to Central and Eastern European candidate states at the beginning of the 2000s, where there was a “relatively high degree of consensus among political elites about the positive nature of European integration and specifically of their respective state’s need to join” (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2001, p. 9). The quoted authors divide Euroscepticism into “hard” for those outside the consensus who express hostility to the idea of European integration, and “soft” for those expressing limited objections to the nature of the accession process. They identify two types of “soft Euroscepticism,” both compatible with support for the European project: “policy Euroscepticism” expressed in terms of reluctance to specific extensions of EU competencies and “national-interest Euroscepticism,” which involves employing the rhetoric of defending or standing up for “the national interest” in the context of debates about the EU (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2001, pp. 10–11).

Kopecký and Mudde (2002) have criticised Taggart and Szczerbiak’s model, arguing that it is too broad, lacks specific criteria of categorisation, and that every disagreement related to any aspect of the EU could be categorised as soft Euroscepticism. The distinction can be made

between Euro-optimism and Euro-pessimism. These lead to four types of positions that can be recognised: Euro-enthusiasm, Euro-pragmatism, Euroscepticism, and Euro-rejection. Although a variety of populist discourses can be found in any of the four categories, the majority of populists are at least Euro-pessimists.

We contend that the typology that distinguishes between hard and soft Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008) can serve as a successful analytical model. As such, this article employs the definition of hard Euroscepticism as “a principled opposition to the project of European integration as embodied in the EU, or the ceding or transfer of powers to a supranational institution such as the EU” (p. 247). Soft Euroscepticism arises when there are no objections to the European integration project, but “there is opposition to the EU’s current or planned trajectory based on the further extension of competencies that the EU is planning to make” (p. 248).

Euroscepticism can be defined by its adversity towards political institutions and cultural values, but also by constantly relating to borders and national territories. Bürkner (2020, p. 562) states that “Euroscepticism might prove to be much more heterogeneous than political and media narratives of rising populism and radicalism throughout Europe currently suggest.” The author proves that, ever since the EU’s inception, Euroscepticism contested the Europeanisation process described “as the manufacturing of political consent about rules, procedures and institutions of the European Union” (Radaelli, 2004, as cited in Bürkner, 2020, p. 546). Europeanisation always generated counter-movements rooted in nationalism, regionalism and “opposition to EU-imperialism.” While Europeanism, including Schengen, stands for the erasure of internal borders, Euroscepticism militates for raising fences at the member states borders, particularly at the EU periphery, considering that “their significance rises with the degree of destabilisation or the speed of change that these borders are subject to” (Bürkner, 2020, p. 560). The supporters of the political-cultural Euroscepticism are endorsing “the restoration of traditional state boundaries” (Vollaard, 2018, p. 223).

Taggart and Pirro (2021) examined the stances of political parties in EU member states regarding European integration, ranging from soft to hard Euroscepticism. Their research indicated that the participation of populist parties in government is no longer a peripheral phenomenon. They examined the correlation between the electoral expansion of European populist parties, their increasing influence on politics in national governments, and the EU and their Eurosceptic agendas. Populist radical right parties are the most Eurosceptic party group.

This article combines the definitions of Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008) with the typology of Kopecký and Mudde (2002) while taking into account the aforementioned recent developments. The study focuses on Romania and Bulgaria, which joined the EU in 2007 and have yet to receive extensive research attention.

2.2. Euroscepticism and Populism: Commonalities and Differences

Rooduijn and van Kessel (2019) researched the affinity and tandem between Euroscepticism and populism. The authors note that populist parties may display varying degrees of Euroscepticism. Therefore, the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism, as well as the impact of populism on European integration, are matters of scientific interest.

Mudde (2004, pp. 543–544) defines populism as “a thin, rarefied ideology, considering that society can be divided into two antagonistic groups: the virtuous people versus the corrupt elite, arguing that politics should express the general will of the people.” Pappas (2019, p. 39) identifies democraticness and illiberalism as the constant properties of populist regimes.

The variable properties of the populist ideology include the strategic use of polarisation (“us versus them,” with the elite/others as “the enemy of the people”), the populist discourse (“appeal to the people”), the particular communication style, and the charismatic leadership.

Populism has been studied as a strategic political discourse (Laclau, 2005), a type of rhetoric (Reinemann et al., 2016), or a communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) of chameleonic entities (Taggart, 2000)

such as populist parties. More recently, it has been studied as a political ideology (Abts & Rummens, 2007) or even a political regime (Pappas, 2016, 2019).

The populist communication style is centred on several discursive elements, including the “people” vs. “elite” antagonism (Canovan, 1981; Gherghina & Mişcoiu, 2010; Laclau, 1977, 2005; Taggart, 2000). Populists claim to speak for ordinary people “against the power block” (McGuigan, 1992). The “power block” includes politicians, mainstream media, and experts (Stanyer, 2010, p. 149). Anti-elitism is an important constituent, allowing radical critique of the establishment (Canovan, 1981, 2002).

2.3. European Integration of Romania and Bulgaria

Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU on January 1, 2007, following the Accession Treaty signed in Luxembourg on April 25, 2005. Neither country has yet adopted the euro currency or become part of the border-free Schengen Area, both of which are political objectives that have been continuously utilised in electoral campaigns. Since 2007, the level of Euroscepticism in both countries has increased as expressed by a decreasing trust in the EU. According to statistical data aggregated by the authors from 18 Standard Eurobarometers published between June 2014 and February 2023 by the European Commission (see Figure 1), ordinary people’s

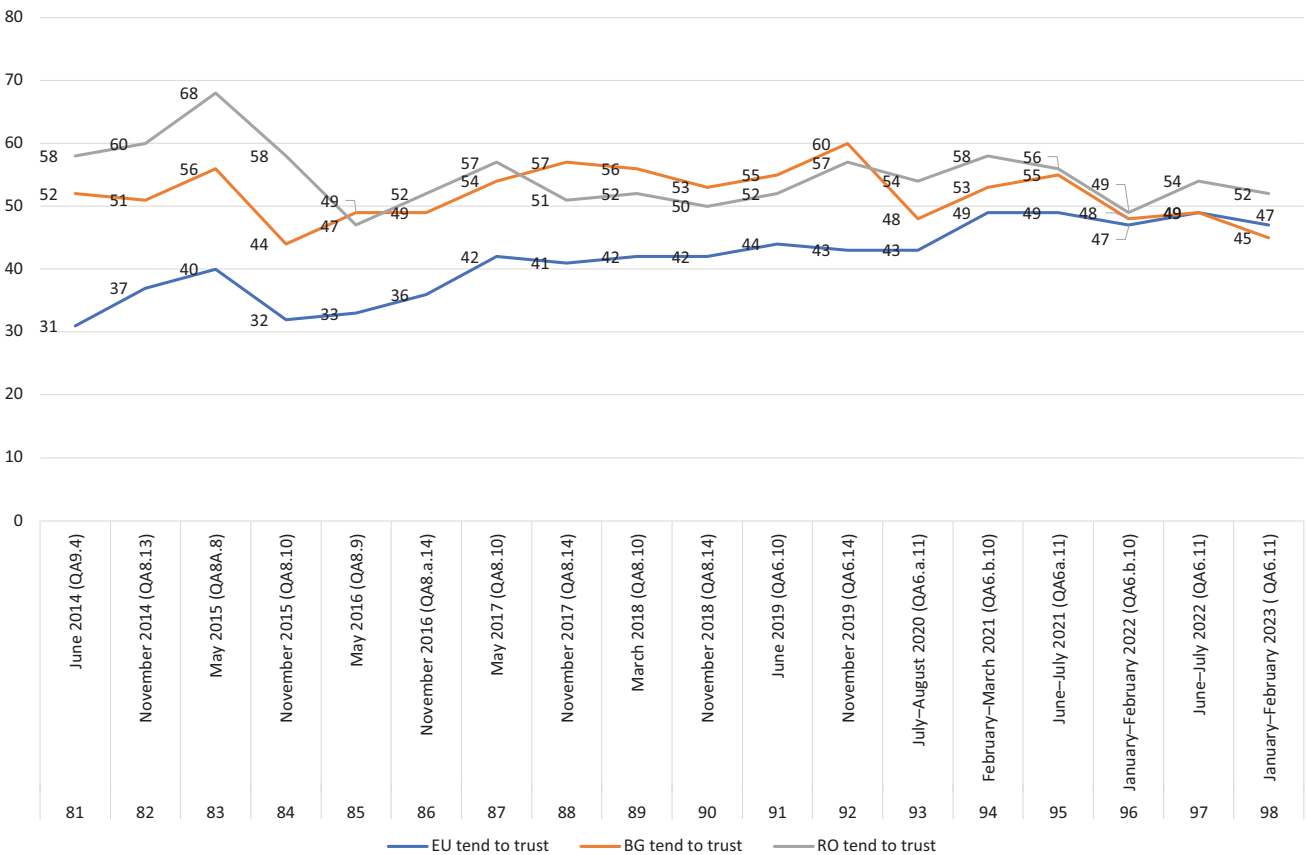


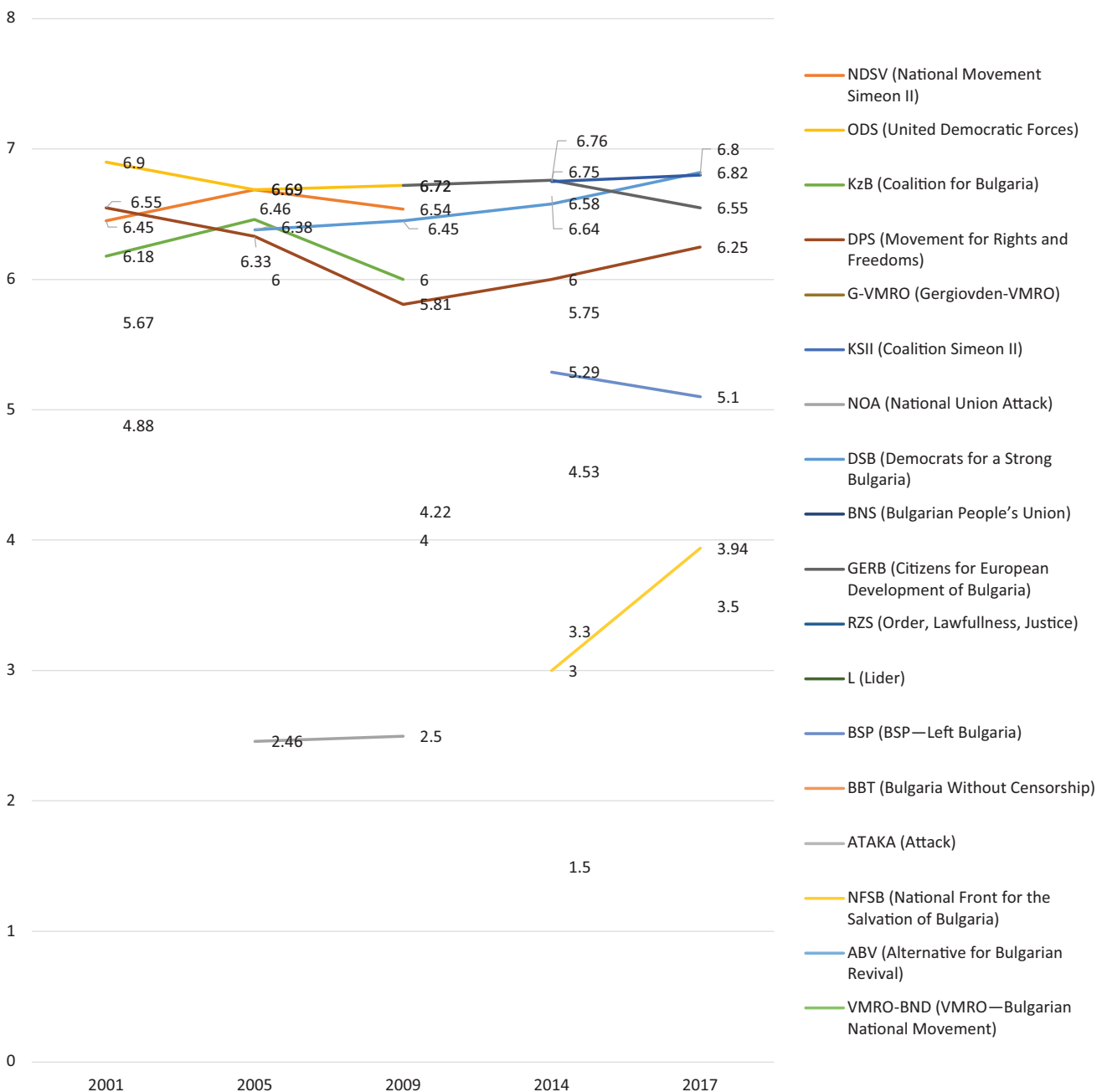
Figure 1. The evolution of the trust in the EU, 2013–2023. Source: Authors’ work based on data from European Commission (2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b).

trust in the EU has decreased from 52% to 45% in Bulgaria and from 58% to 52% in Romania (with a peek of trust in 2015, 68%) in the last decade, aligning with the European average, which is in 2023 at 47%.

Moreover, as it results from the Chapel Hill experts survey, there is an increase in the number of Eurosceptic voices in the Bulgarian political arena and the adoption of Eurosceptic themes in the discourse of mainstream parties (e.g., the social democrats).

Nevertheless, with some exceptions, the political establishment in both countries (see Figures 2 and 3) have supported the EU, leaving a possible gap to be filled by Eurosceptic discourses.

In both countries, the Eurosceptic parties are rather an exception, such as Nacionalno Obединenie Ataka in Bulgaria with scores of 2.4 and 2.5 and a minimum of 1.5 in 2014, while at the European level, there are parties with scores lower than 1.5. In Romania, the lowest scores were attributed to a party that disappeared soon after the EU integration (scores of 3.55 and 3.7). Mainstream parties in Romania and Bulgaria display high scores of 5 and 6 which in the quoted study signify a low presence of Euroscepticism in the political discourse. We also note that one common feature of both countries is the low representation of EU themes in political debates even during the electoral campaign for the



**Figure 2.** Overall orientation of Bulgarian parties toward European integration measured on a scale from 1 (*strongly opposed*) to 7 (*strongly in favour of*). Source: Authors' work based on data from Jolly et al. (2022).



**Figure 3.** Overall orientation of Romanian parties toward European integration measured on a scale from 1 (*strongly opposed*) to 7 (*strongly in favour of*). Source: Authors' work based on data from Jolly et al. (2022).

EP elections. For example, Styczyńska (2015) observed that during the 2014 European Parliament election campaign, none of the Bulgarian parties who took part in the elections debated the major issues that Europe was facing at the time. Similarly, in Romania, during the same elections, mainstream parties paid more attention to national themes than to European ones (Ștefănel, 2017).

The accession of former communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe to the EU and EU enlargement fuelled Western populism (Bélanger & Wunsch,

2022, pp. 653–672; Berman, 2021, pp. 71–88). This populism primarily focuses on combating extra-community immigration to the EU while also seeking to protect national states from internal EU immigration, particularly from Eastern Europe (Betz, 1993, pp. 413–427; Meardi, 2007, pp. 39–56; Shehaj et al., 2021, pp. 282–293). Populism in Eastern Europe has expanded along with the transition to the market economy, globalisation, and EU integration (Bretter, 2022, pp. 183–206; Kende & Krekó, 2020, pp. 29–33).

However, populist parties in Romania have generally been supportive of the EU and have not attributed all of the country's issues to the EU or its leaders (Florian & Climescu, 2012, pp. 9–15, 18–19, 24). Romanian populists have not promoted Eurosceptic messages or described the EU project as a threat to Romania, given the high level of trust Romanians have in the EU (Corbu et al., 2016, p. 328).

In Bulgaria, the most influential mainstream parties have adopted a banal, “soft” nationalism and a “catch-all” strategy, unlike the more radical messages promoted by ultra-nationalists. For instance, Slavi Trifonov and his ITN party have utilised popular culture to cultivate patriotic sentiments and connect with compatriots both domestically and abroad (Brankova, 2021).

Bulgarian scholars contend that the country is experiencing a new type of populism that differs significantly from the radical right-wing populism witnessed in Western Europe during the 1990s. This “soft populism” employs a more moderate and distinctly pro-EU (albeit still populist) rhetoric that resonates with mainstream voters. The 2008 global economic crisis has also sparked increased nationalist sentiments and mounting Euroscepticism (Andreev, 2009, pp. 375–393). It has given rise to the number of nationalist parties (two such political formations were represented in the 2014 Bulgarian parliament) and deepened the nationalist EU divide: “Soft” populists have been more successful than extremist right-wing populists and their supporters have similar demographic profiles to those of the mainstream parties' supporters (Zankina, 2017).

Krasteva (2020, as cited in Bürkner, 2020) analyses Bulgaria's path from Europeanisation to present-day ethnonationalist Euroscepticism, considered to be the outcome of successive periods of state-influenced debordering and rebordering. The post-communist elite fed on people's disappointment with the EU's unfulfilled promises and became stronger during the recent EU crises, which reinforced the national identity based on ethnic and cultural exclusion. For example, supporting the borders meant keeping out the Syrian refugees. In this context, several embraced a so-called crypto-Euroscepticism, as Krasteva argued. The political mainstream was infused with right-wing extremist or populist elements oriented against EU domination, globalisation, and cosmopolitanism. Krasteva defined this as a process of identitarian symbol formation, in which bordering aligns with state power and national identity construction: the top-down political instrumentalisation of “native” sentiments is the main driver of Euroscepticism.

### 3. Case Study, Data, and Methodology

#### 3.1. Schengen Agreement

The accession to the Schengen Area involves abolishing internal EU border checks and is stated in the EU Accession Treaty of the Republic of Bulgaria and Romania

(Protocol concerning the conditions and arrangements for admission of the Republic of Bulgaria and Romania to the European Union, 2005). The European Parliament and Commission have an advisory role in the accession process, and the Justice and Home Affairs Council (JHA) within the EU Council makes the final decision by unanimous vote. The Schengen Area functions based on: (a) effectively managing the EU's external borders; (b) consolidating internal measures related to police cooperation, security, migration management, and the National Signalling Information System; (c) ensuring solid preparation and governance (Losneanu et al., 2022). In Special Eurobarometer 474 (European Commission, 2018c), over 60% of Romanians and Bulgarians declared that the Schengen Area was one of the EU's main achievements.

In May and October 2022, the Commission recommended that Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia be admitted to the Schengen Area after meeting the accession criteria, as stated in a journalistic report on the state of the Schengen Area for 2022 (Gavril et al., 2022). In November, the Commission requested the Council make the necessary decisions without delay to allow full accession of these three countries (“EC: Romania is ready to join Schengen,” 2022), considering their successful application of Schengen rules. The report of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism presented on November 22 by the European Commission showed that Romania and Bulgaria fulfilled their commitments upon joining the EU (Chirileasa, 2022). In December 2021, the Council confirmed that Croatia fulfilled the conditions to become a Schengen member (“Schengen decision looms,” 2022).

Despite the Commission's recommendation, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer stated he could veto Romania and Bulgaria's accession due to insufficient efforts to stop illegal migrants, claiming that “about 75,000 of the 100,000 illegal migrants who entered Austria in 2022 were not registered in any EU country on their route to Austria” (“The chancellor of Austria,” 2022). The Austrian authorities' investigations allegedly revealed that most of these migrants passed through Bulgaria and Romania.

On December 2, the Dutch government announced that it would accept Romania's accession to Schengen but would block Bulgaria for not meeting the necessary conditions. On December 6, Chancellor Nehammer declared that Austria opposed the accession of both Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen Area. The subject of the application of the Schengen acquis in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania was on the agenda of the JHA on December 8–9 (Council of the European Union, 2022). The Council adopted Decision No. 14239/22 on the full application of the provisions of the Schengen acquis only for Croatia and blocked the accession bids for Romania and Bulgaria.

This article argues that a sceptical discourse emerged regarding the ability of the Romanian and Bulgarian political classes to achieve their objective. The objective

of this study is to identify the discourse strategies used by mainstream media and politicians to communicate the European Council's decision from December 8, 2022, which postponed Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen Area to an undetermined date. This research aims to identify the Eurosceptic-related themes in the mediated discourse of Romania and Bulgaria during this major political event. While progress has been made in understanding the media's role in increasing Euroscepticism, previous studies focused primarily on Western and Central European media discourse (Bijmans, 2021; Caiani & Guerra, 2017).

### 3.2. The Methodological Approach

This research employs a qualitative approach to discourse analysis to identify the main themes present in mainstream media reports, TV, and radio shows from Romania and Bulgaria over four weeks (November 24—December 22, 2022). The selected period covers the days before, during, and after the December 8, 2022 vote in the JHA of the EU Council. Through this vote, Romania and Bulgaria's accession bids were rejected, while Croatia, the third candidate and also the newest member of the EU (2011), was unanimously accepted. Although the accession of Croatia is significant, the present study focuses on Romania and Bulgaria as they are evaluated in tandem when it comes to European integration (Dimitrov & Plachkova, 2020; Dimitrova, 2021).

The corpus consists of 561 standard pages, that comprise 418 media texts such as news agency reports, television and radio show transcripts, media conference transcripts, politicians' declarations, and print and online newspaper or magazine articles from Romania and Bulgaria. While the corpus can be characterised as a convenience sample, it provides a good illustration of how the political establishment reported and commented on the event. The selection of media texts was provided by the RADOR news agency from Romania, which applied the "Schengen" filter on all its databases during the aforementioned time frame. RADOR aggregates news from Romania and other European countries, including Bulgaria, and has a database with transcripts of radio and TV programmes. The texts from both countries were in Romanian. Qualified translators working for RADOR translated Bulgarian and English texts into Romanian. Due to the linguistic limitation caused by the translation of Bulgarian and international news and political declarations into Romanian, the research focuses on the latent level of the text.

The study uses a deductive–inductive approach, starting from the premise that mainstream politics would express a low level of Euroscepticism. Therefore, the definition of the situation (accession to Schengen) and its characterisation are key elements that the study covered. Based on this observation, a series of open codes was generated, and their occurrence was analysed using NVivo 12. In addition, by using an inductive approach,

the open coding process generated two more themes: Romania and Bulgaria as "second-rate countries" and time as a downplaying element for Euroscepticism.

Each intervention in texts made by journalists, politicians, spokespersons, experts, or ordinary citizens was coded ( $N = 1,220$ ) and analysed to identify the occurrence of codes. We conducted an inter-coder reliability test on 10% of the sample ( $n = 122$ ), with a calculated Krippendorff's alpha score above 0.8.

The methodology used the thematic analysis framework (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017), which enabled the identification of key themes and sub-themes in the context of a rich data corpus, presented in Table 1.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Defining the Intricate Issue of Romania and Bulgaria's Accession to the Schengen Area

The complex phenomenon of Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen Area was presented uniformly and non-Eurosceptically by mainstream media and politicians in both countries (see Figure 4). The decision to postpone the accession of Romania and Bulgaria and to accept Croatia, taken in JHA on December 8, 2022, was approached more as a "reluctant gesture," "political hesitation," and "objection" rather than a "clear opposition" (TVR 1, Bulgarian National Radio, *Trud*, December 8). While media texts emphasised the veto of Austria and the Netherlands, the overall discourse downplayed the political failure, noting the support shown by other European countries such as Sweden, Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, Greece, Italy, and Poland.

Of these countries, Germany is consistently mentioned as a supporter of both Romania and Bulgaria. Sweden is presented as having doubts (Bulgarian National Radio, Radio România Actualități, December 2), particularly when it comes to Bulgaria's accession. Hungary vigorously supports the accession and exploits the moment in a populist manner, with news agencies including political declarations in which a Hungarian minister condemned the "endless hypocrisy" (Magyar Távirati Iroda, December 9, 13; RADOR, December 9) of the EU. Lithuania, Estonia, and Greece are also mentioned as supporters. Additionally, key figures in the EU, such as Roberta Metsola, the president of the European Parliament, Ylva Johansson, the Home Affairs commissioner, and Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, called for a decision in favour of Romania and Bulgaria.

News reports and declarations by political figures underline or at least mention the support of countries with high symbolic value for the EU, noting that Germany and Sweden were previously against Romania and Bulgaria's accession. Regarding Austria and the Netherlands, certain politicians from opposition parties supported the accession, claiming that ruling parties were against it. Many media reports and



**Table 1.** The coding results.

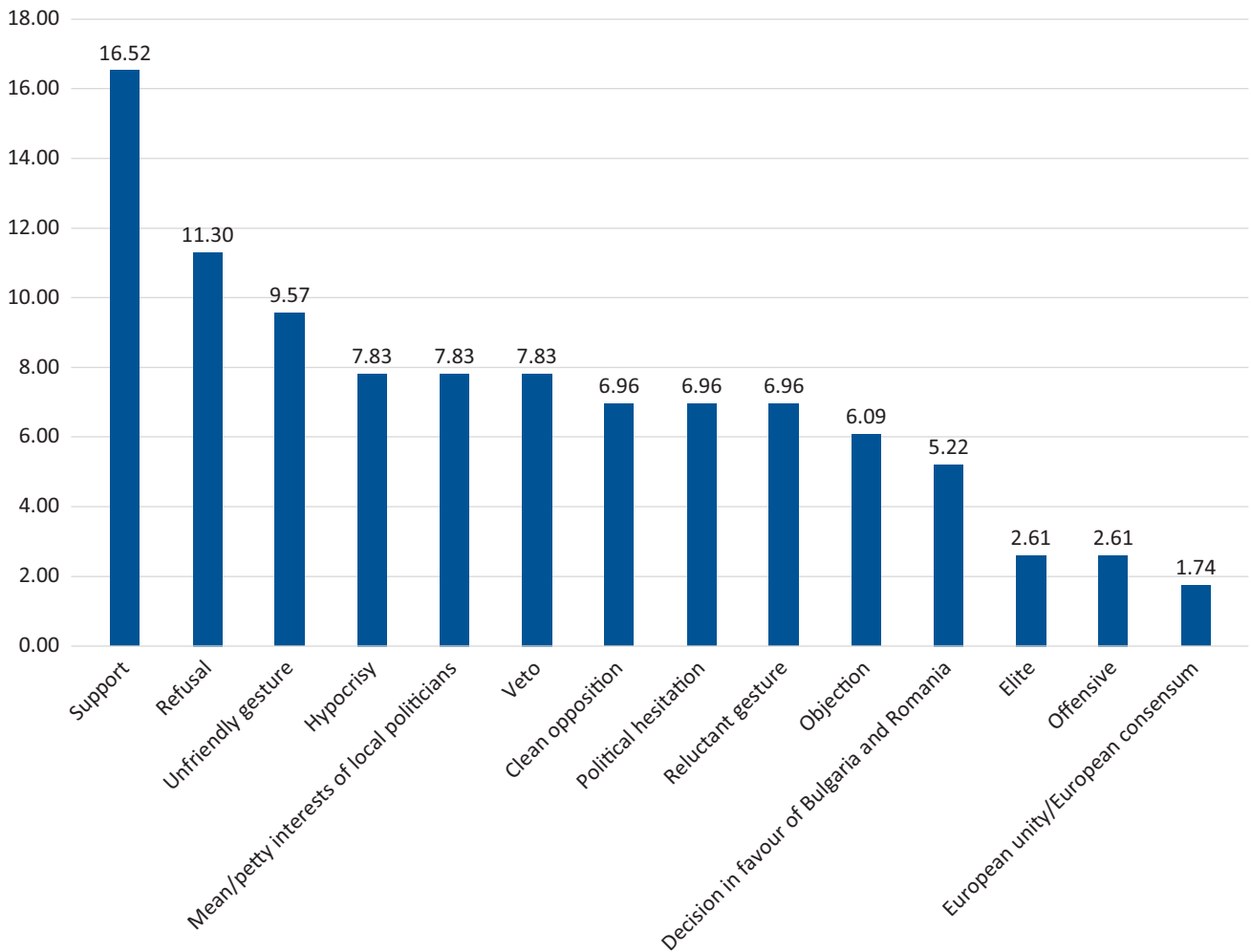
Themes	Open-coded category	Occurrences (percentages from theme)	Occurrences (percentages from total)
1. Defining the problem	Support	16.52	5.79
	Refusal	11.30	3.96
	Unfriendly gesture	9.57	3.35
	Hypocrisy	7.83	2.74
	Mean/petty interests of local politicians	7.83	2.74
	Veto	7.83	2.74
	Clean opposition	6.96	2.44
	Political hesitation	6.96	2.44
	Reluctant gesture	6.96	2.44
	Objection	6.09	2.13
	Decision in favour of Bulgaria and Romania	5.22	1.83
	Elite	2.61	0.91
	Offensive	2.61	0.91
	European unity/European consensus	1.74	0.61
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>35.06</b>
2. Qualifying the JHA decision	Disappointing	18.33	6.71
	Unfair	18.33	6.71
	Unjustified	17.50	6.40
	Regrettable	16.67	6.10
	No valid reasons for the veto	11.67	4.27
	Solidarity	7.50	2.74
	Cynicism	5.00	1.83
	Inflexible position	3.33	1.22
	European unanimity	1.67	0.61
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>36.59</b>
3. Second-rate countries	Political games	35.29	5.49
	Tandem	35.29	5.49
	Double standard	13.73	2.13
	Peripheral countries	9.80	1.52
	Suppliers of cheap labour	3.92	0.61
	Grey zone	1.96	0.30
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>15.55</b>
4. Time	Postponement	35.71	4.57
	More time	30.95	3.96
	Not now	16.67	2.13
	Prematurely	16.67	2.13
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>12.80</b>

politicians emphasise that 25 EU countries generally support the accession, while only two oppose it (*Dnevnik*, December 6; RADOR, December 8, 10).

Romania and Bulgaria are presented as having met the technical and political criteria and making extraordinary efforts to accede to the Schengen Area (RADOR, December 12; *24Chasa*, December 13). In Bulgaria's case, President Rumen Radev and other officials publicly responded to Mark Rutte's remarks about Bulgaria's ability to guard its borders by qualifying them as "offensive" and stressing the efforts and sacrifices made by Bulgarian border control. Rutte was reported to imply

that "migrants could illegally cross the country's border if they paid €50 for the transaction" (Liboreiro, 2022).

Romanian mainstream politicians characterised the declaration of Austrian representatives regarding migration as not related to the subject and as an "unfriendly gesture" (Radio România Actualități, December 6). Austria's internal political issues become a motivation for the veto expressed by this country, which is shared by experts and politicians. Moreover, the same argument is also present in media reports and politicians' declarations from Bulgaria, with a focus on the Netherlands' veto.



**Figure 4.** The coding result for the theme Defining the Problem.

There is no reference to the EU, its institutions, or other traces of Eurosceptic discourse. However, the subject is treated in a populist way, with a focus on the polarisation between European unity (“consensus”) and singular elements that oppose it (the “elite” from Austria and the Netherlands). Media texts include declarations of politicians and experts who argue that there are “mean/petty” interests of local politicians from Austria and the Netherlands, suspecting a connection with the Ukraine war and Russian interests.

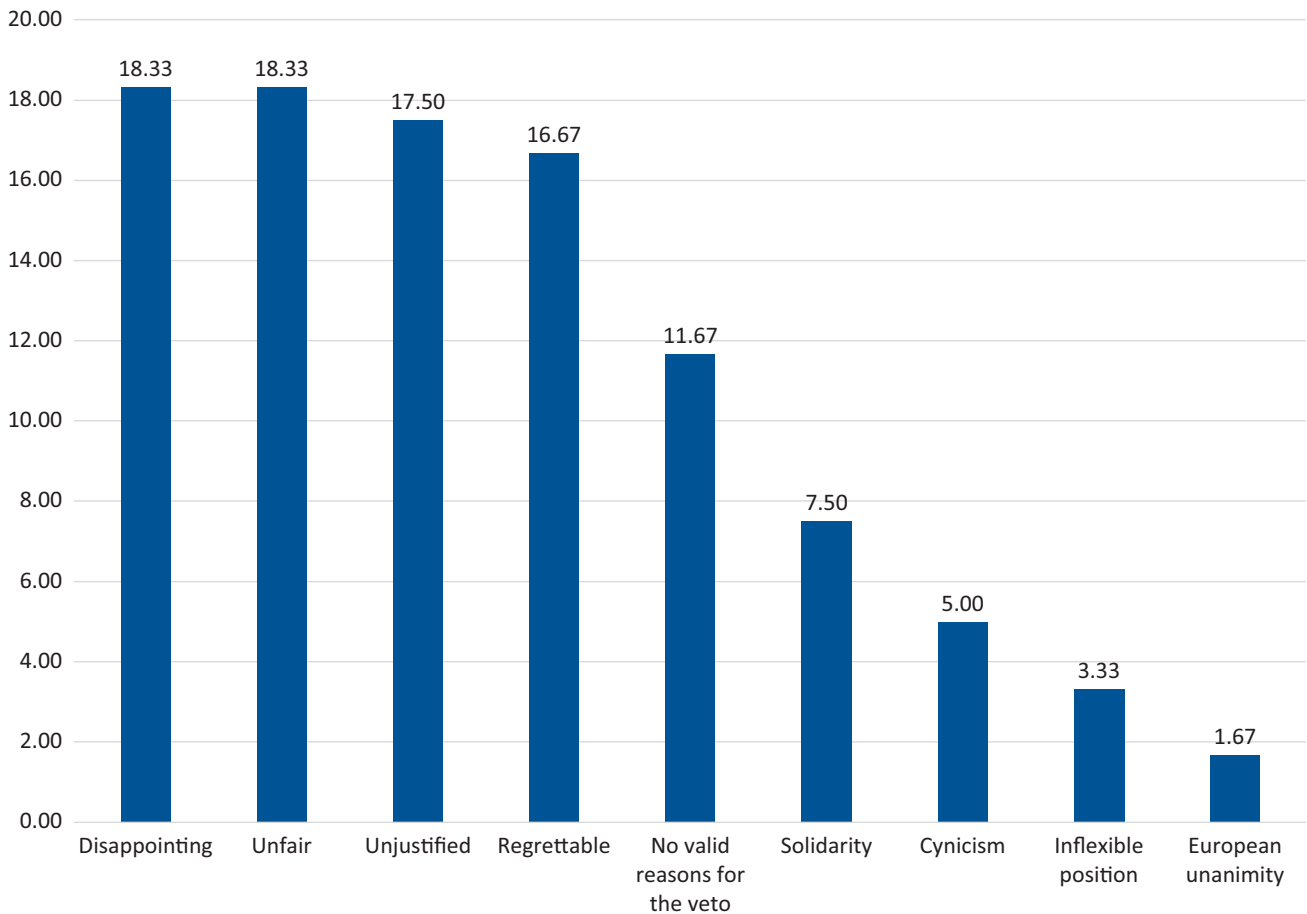
#### 4.2. Qualifying and Justifying the Justice and Home Affairs Council Decision

The decision made by JHA on December 8 was labelled as “disappointing,” “unfair,” “unjustified,” and “regrettable” by various Romanian and Bulgarian politicians (see Figure 5). The Romanian prime minister and president highlighted Austria’s “inflexible position,” which ignored the realities of Romania and blocked “European unanimity” (RADOR, December 8). In Bulgaria, the president and other officials denounced the decision as “unfair” and a breach of “European principles of solidarity and unity.” On December 15, the Bulgarian interim foreign

affairs minister argued that only two countries used their veto and “broke the philosophy of European integration” (Trud, December 15).

Both Romanian and Bulgarian politicians emphasised that there were no valid reasons for the veto by Austria and the Netherlands. While the issue of migration was presented as the primary obstacle for both countries, Romanian politicians explained that the migration phenomenon is complex and cannot be resolved by excluding Romania from the Schengen Area. Bulgarian politicians emphasised that national border control contributes to the security of all EU countries at the cost of human lives.

President Radev of Bulgaria wrote on his Facebook profile that Bulgaria received cynicism instead of European solidarity. The Bulgarian MEP Anghel Djambazki (VMRO) further elaborated that Western countries have treated Bulgaria and Romania as second-rate countries for 11 years. Djambazki claimed that the reasons for excluding Bulgaria and Romania from the Schengen Area are purely economic as Western countries support their transport sector and do not want Bulgarian and Romanian transport sectors as rivals (BTA, December 22).



**Figure 5.** The coding result for the theme Qualifying the JHA Decision.

#### 4.3. Romania and Bulgaria as “Second-Rate Countries”

The literature reviewed describes Romania and Bulgaria as countries that are closely linked in their efforts towards EU integration (Dimitrova, 2021) and Schengen. The politicians in Bulgaria tend to take a populist stance, viewing the two countries as second-rate. An example of this is a statement made by Bulgarian MEP Anghel Djambazki, who criticised the treatment of Romania and Bulgaria as “second-rate countries” subject to “double standards” and considered them to be “peripheral countries,” part of a “grey zone,” and “suppliers of cheap labour” (Novini.bg, December 3).

On December 8, the traditional media in Romania quoted an opinion poll where two-thirds of respondents agreed that their country is a second-level member of the EU. However, politicians did not adopt the rhetoric of “second-rate countries” and instead made negative comments about the “dirty” political game played by Austria (see Figure 6). Despite this, Romanian citizens initiated a boycott of Austrian companies, which mainstream politicians did not encourage in their discourse.

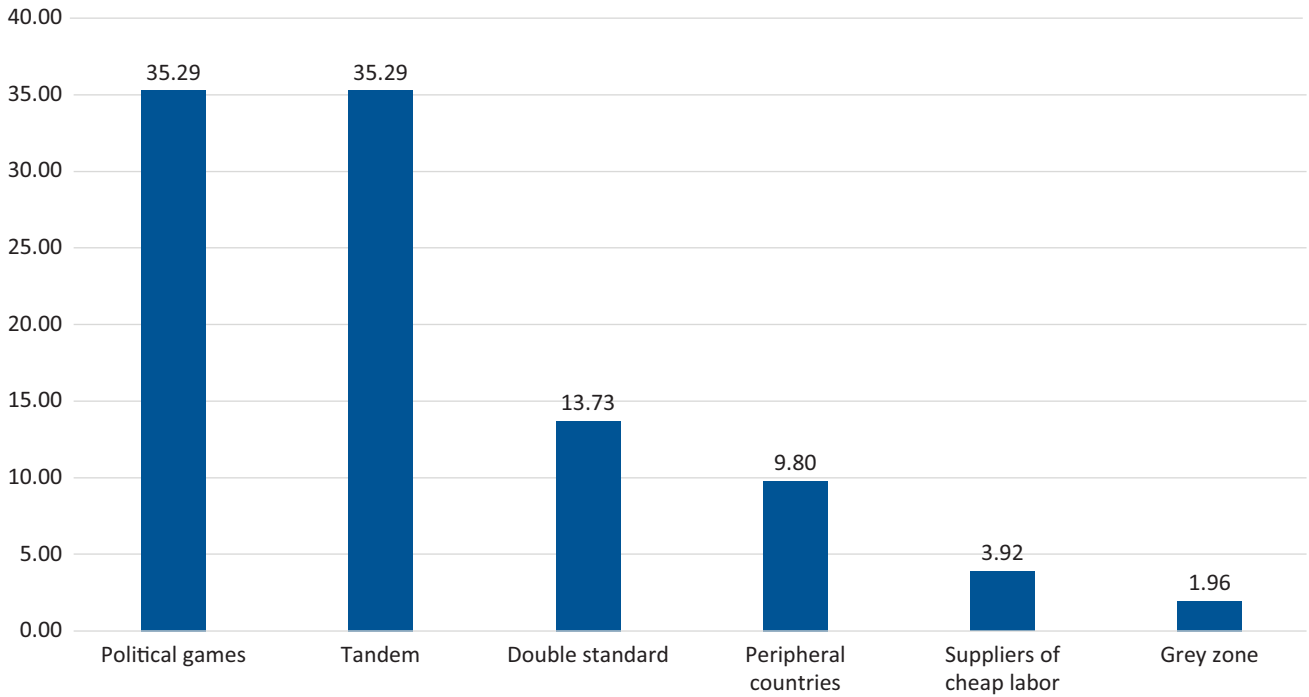
#### 4.4. Time as a Downplaying Element

Since the pre-accession period, the issue of time has been important in the presentation of topics related to

the EU for Romania and Bulgaria. Time has become a discursive resource that feeds Eurosceptic populist discourses. The label of “reform laggards” and a series of related stereotypes have been attached to both countries. Their accession to the EU was perceived as taking place “prematurely” (Dimitrova, 2021, p. 295).

Before the JHA Council (December 8), the Romanian and Bulgarian media started to mention a possible “postponement” of the decision, which would have given Austria and the Netherlands more time to analyse the progress regarding border control, the rule of law, and corruption (see Figure 7). The news portal *Novini.bg* presents a declaration of the Dutch prime minister who pointed out that the Netherlands “does not say ‘no’ to Bulgaria but ‘not now’” (*Novini.bg*, December 6). In Romania, the RADOR news agency quotes the Austrian chancellor saying that his country needs “more time” (RADOR, December 8).

In his speech on December 8, the Romanian president stated that Schengen remains a strategic objective, and Romania will not stop pursuing it. The Romanian Minister of Internal Affairs underlined that Romania has been protecting EU borders for 11 years, investing in human resources, capabilities, and modern technologies. The economic loss of not having free movement within the EU is “incommensurable” (Radio România Actualități, December 15).



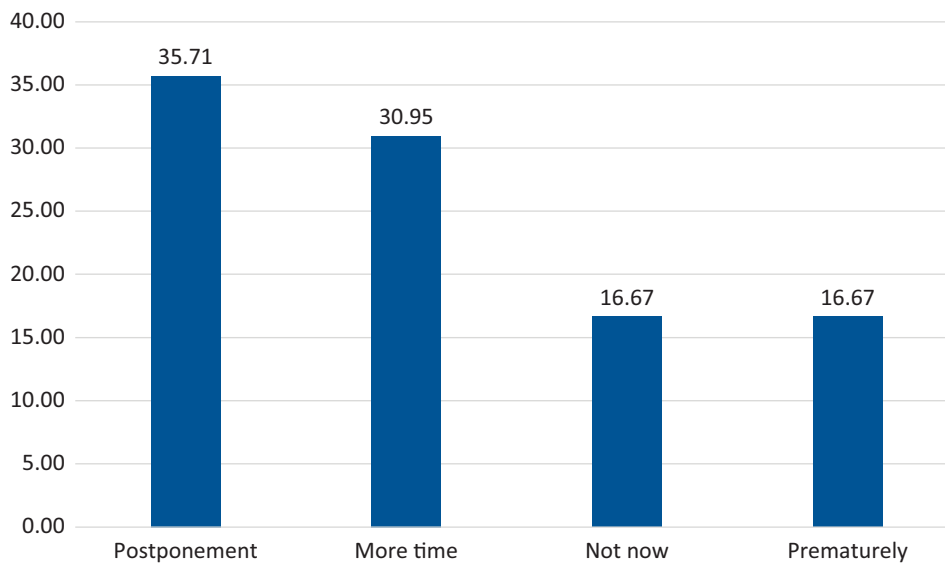
**Figure 6.** The coding result for the theme Second-Rate Countries.

The objective of this article was to identify the mainstream media discourse strategies related to the Schengen decision. The research showed that the establishment—mainstream media, politicians, and experts—chose a discursive strategy that downplayed the significance of the JHA decision from December 8, 2022. Although the Schengen veto intensified the Eurosceptic discourse of certain populist actors, mainstream politicians tried to minimise its significance using euphemisms and moderate optimism regarding a positive decision in the near future.

Regarding RQ1, we note that the major themes presented in the mainstream media and politics in Romania

and Bulgaria during and immediately after the decision were: minimising the veto through expressions like “reluctant gesture,” “a political hesitation”; criticising the decisions of the member states Austria and the Netherlands as “disappointing,” “unfair,” “unjustified,” and “regrettable”; Romania and Bulgaria described as “second-rate countries”; time and near future as downplaying elements.

As for RQ2, we conclude that the themes in the establishment discourse downplayed Euroscepticism related to the Schengen accession as a strategy to minimise the postponement of the decision. We consider that downplaying Euroscepticism in Romania and Bulgaria



**Figure 7.** The coding result for the theme Time.

occurs for a pragmatic reason: The mediated message is not to leave the EU, but to negotiate in favour of the future entrance in the Schengen Area (Euro-pragmatism). Although they use populist elements in their speech, downplaying Euroscepticism in the media has the effect of supporting the integration process.

RQ3 aimed to identify the role of discursive populist elements in the mainstream media and the politicians' statements and their connection to Euroscepticism. Our findings show that there is a polarisation between European unity and the "singular elements" that oppose it (Austria and/or the Netherlands). There is also an antagonism between the fact that the Romanians and Bulgarians "deserved" to join Schengen, but politicians with local electoral interests opposed the decision. The populist argument of the Romanian and Bulgarian politicians was that without joining Schengen, the countries will face economic issues and that the Eurosceptic trend will grow because the Eastern states are not treated equally to the other EU member states.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

There is a possibility that the Euroscepticism of Romanians and Bulgarians could be enhanced by the delay of the decision to be accepted into the Schengen Area. Joining the Schengen Agreement signifies that the EU member states abolish permanent physical border control between them and opens the way to gain economic advantages. In this context, in line with the literature review, we argue that Euroscepticism may take the shape of the revival of national states and their ethnic values favouring borders, ethnic nationalism, and local patriotism. This study emphasises Euroscepticism as a reaction to rejection from or delay in joining the European structures and institutions. The discourse of the mainstream media and the political establishment in Romania and Bulgaria criticises the opposing member states (in the 2022 case, Austria and the Netherlands), without encouraging the EU exit and without criticising the EU as an institution. Romania and Bulgaria present themselves in the mainstream media discourse as "defenders of the EU borders," not of their own national territories, nor as supporters of the borders between the member states.

Downplaying Euroscepticism in Romania and Bulgaria occurs for a pragmatic reason: The mediated message is not to leave the EU, but to negotiate in favour of the future entrance in the Schengen Area (Euro-pragmatism). Although politicians use populist elements in their speech, downplaying Euroscepticism in the media has the effect of supporting the integration process. The Romanian and Bulgarian politicians from the establishment minimised the importance of the JHA December 8, 2022 decision through populism discourse and endorsed soft Euroscepticism by blurring the Schengen non-performance. The mainstream media approached a state-interest Euroscepticism, defending "the national interest," and softened the

Schengen decision in their discourse with an attitude of Euro-pragmatism.

The present research presents evidence on how mainstream media discourses are created to promote the European integration project, by downplaying Euroscepticism. There is no reference to the EU and its institutions or other traces of Eurosceptic discourse. Despite the anti-Austrian sentiment in Romania or anti-Dutch sentiment in Bulgaria surrounding the decision to block the country's Schengen accession, the political establishment minimised the veto on the Schengen bid by downplaying Euroscepticism in mainstream media.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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