

Ideological context and social representations of the European Union

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to explore and evaluate the impact of the context on the social representations of the European Union in two Eastern-European countries: Romania and the Republic of Moldavia. According to the SR theory, when analyzing the dynamics of social representations, one must take in consideration the discursive context (or situational) and the social context (Abric & Guimelli, 1998). In this study we tried to analyze the influence of the social (ideological–global) context derived, on one side, from an ideological factor (social norms, values) and, on the other side, from the social status of a person, their place in society, in groups (placing the individual in a social organisation, social stakes and, values). The participants (N=560) filled in a free task association (Verges, 1992; Abric, 1994) where the stimulus – word was “European Union”. The research was organised in two stages. The first stage took place in 2006 when Romania was preparing to be integrated into the European Union (January, 1st 2007) and, the Republic of Moldavia was governed by politicians who were against the process of European integration. The second stage took place in 2010, when Romania was, already integrated in the European Union and the Republic of Moldavia was governed by a pro-Europe coalition. In the first data collection we had 260 subjects: 134 Romanians and 126 Moldavians. In the second stage, we collected data from 300 subjects: 170 Romanians and 130 Moldavians. The statistical data such as the prototypicality technique (Verges, 1992) underlined the modifications induced by the three contextual variables: (the years of data collection, country, and linguistics affiliation for Moldavia) to the social representations of the European Union.

Keywords: European Union, social representations, ideological context, dynamic representations

INTRODUCTION

The European Union as a concept of European unity is based on the Schuman plan developed by the French Prime-minister, Robert Schuman. The first step that marks the forging of an alliance between several European countries is the Treaty of Paris, 1951 signed by Italy, Belgium, France Germany, Luxembourg and, Netherlands. This treaty represents the first form of European cooperation known as the European Coal and Steel Community.

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The treaty of Rome (March, 25th 1957) gave birth to the European Economic Community (EEC) and to the European Atomic Energy Community (EUROATOM). This treaty affirmed in its preamble that the signatory states were determined to lay the foundations of a closer union among the people of Europe. According to this treaty European unity was to be achieved through economic and monetary unification among European states, free circulation of capitals, services, labour force and, finally, through political unity.

A new treaty was signed in 1992 (TEU) known as the treaty of Maastricht which constitutes a turning point in the evolution of the European Union. The treaty stipulates that the union is no longer the EEC but, will be named the European Union. In 2001 the members of the European Union signed a new treaty in Nice promoting the enlargement of the European Union; thus, in 2004, the EU counted 25 members and, in January 2007 Romania and Bulgaria also became members of the EU.

The relationship between Romania and the European Community are dated since 1993 when the two parties signed an “association agreement”. This agreement stipulates the juridical and institutional aspects of the relationships between Romania and the European Union preparing Romania for the integration process (Neculau & Constantin, 2002).

On the 13th of April 2005, the European Parliament accepted Romania’s request for integration with 497 votes for and 93 against. Later on, Traian Basescu, the Romanian President, signed Romania’s Official Treaty of Adherence to the European Union along with the Bulgarian Prime-minister and in the presence of the 25 representatives of the European countries; thus, in January 2007 Romania officially became a member of the European Union. European integration was seen as a manner to promote national interests, development of the economical potential as well as Romania’s cultural heritage. It also became an interesting topic to study from a psycho-social point of view.

Several studies, developed before the integration, have underlined a positive, optimistic but vague attitude on the integration. Romanians had a vague and confusing image of the European integration; their perceptions regarding the concept of “European Union” were weakly structured; their opinions about the possible negative effects of the integration were vague and the positive effects were over estimated (Neculau & Constantin, 2002) most often associating the integration with well-being, prosperity, money without having a clear image of the implications of this process.

Other studies (Boza, Constantin & Dartu, 2002) confirmed the same results: the majority of the Romanians investigated have favourable attitudes towards the integration; young people and the ones living or having had experiences abroad tend to be even more focussed on the positive effects of the integration process and neglect or underestimate the negative effects.

The main goal of this study is to investigate the possible changes that have occurred in the perceptions, images that people have regarding the integration process and, the dynamic of their social representation about the European Union before and after the integration process took place in the case of Romania. We are, also, interested in exploring and evaluating the impact of the context on the social representations of the European Union in two Eastern-European countries: Romania and The Republic of Moldavia.

We have chosen Romania, as it was one of the countries preparing for the European integration. The political discourse underlined a pro-attitude towards the European integration and encouraged different changes in the social, economic, political systems in order to achieve the European standards.

As to Republic of Moldavia, we believe there are a few political events that deserve being mentioned and have impacted people's views towards the European Union. Thus, on the 6th of December 1999, Moldavia became a Parliamentary Republic and Petru Luchinski, the president at that time assigned Vladimir Voronin as prime-minister; a few months later, on the 4th of April 2001, Vladimir Voronin became the president of the republic (1999 - 2000). His political agenda included strengthening political relations with Russia, opposing possible NATO integration, fortifying its independence and, promoting an "anti-European Union" attitude justified by the idea that collaborating with the European Union could put their relations with Russia in danger. A key moment that changed the attitude towards the European Union is represented by September 25th 2009, the date at which Vlad Filat became president of the Republic. Vlad Filat is a member of the Alliance for European integration and the political agenda of his new government includes fortifying the relations with the European Union.

We chose the framework of the social representations theory when approaching this topic as we believe it is appropriate when dealing with social objects whose image derives from the experiences and interactions of social groups. Social representations, as defined by Moscovici (1976, 1997), express the values, norms and attitudes of social groups towards a specific object of representation. The concept of social representation is well suited for analyzing how a new object, European integration, was perceived and defined once it became a reality for which Romania has worked on for several years. As new objects of representations often illicit new practices, we assume that the integration process will have a certain influence on how people define the European Union and how they positioned themselves as new European citizens (Guimelli, 1994).

The empirical investigation is based on the structural perspective developed by the Aix-en-Provence School researchers (Abric, 1976, 2003). According to this perspective the social representations have two main components: a central, stable and rigid core which people from different social groups share and, a peripheral system, with context-based elements, which are derived from people's personal experience with the social object.

Another important theoretical aspect we took into consideration is related to the impact of the context on the dynamics of social representations. Abric & Guimelli (1998) mentioned that one can never analyze the construction and transformation of social representation without taking into account the discursive-situational and, the global -ideological context. Thus, in this empirical research we are interested in observing the impact of the ideological context on the dynamics of the social representations of the European Union developed by Romanians and Moldavians.

As mentioned before, the main objective of this study regards the impact of the context on the social representations of the European Union in the two Eastern countries. Thus, we formulated four qualitative objectives:

(1) Describing the main elements of the social representation of the European Union using the prototypicality method introduced by Pierre Verges in 1992.

(2) Comparing the internal structure of the two representations (Romanians versus Moldavians). We anticipated some possible differences between the central cores of the two representations, differences related to the socio-cultural, political and historical context of the two countries.

(3) Analyzing the impact of the “time” variable (2006 and 2010). Thus, we have anticipated changes in the internal structure of the SR of both countries as the political context has significantly changed. Romania became a European member while Moldavia changed from a communist government to a democratic pro-European oriented government.

METHOD

Participants

The study included 560 participants between the ages of 18 and 21 years, all students at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iasi and Ion Creanga Kishinew University. The data collection was undertaken in two phases: January 2006 and 2010 (table 1).

Table 1. Participants according to the independent variables

		2006	2010	Total
Romania		134	170	304
Moldavia	<i>Romanian language speakers</i>	76	65	141
	<i>Russian language speakers</i>	50	65	115
Total		260	300	560

Data collection included the free association technique (Abric, 1976, 1994, 2001; Verges, 1992). The free association technique is one of the most frequently used data collection methods in the study of the social representations (Meier &

Kirchler, 1998; Kirchler, 1998; Cristea et al., 2008; etc) due to the fact that it allows participants to easily express themselves.

Thus, participants were asked to produce 3 up to 5 words that they associated with a stimulus concept/word. The number of associations can be unlimited depending on the research objectives. Our participants (N=560) were asked to produce 5 associations starting from the stimulus word *European Union*.

RESULTS

The data was reorganized according to the principles of the prototypicality method (Verges, 1992; Roland-Levy, 1999; Curelaru, 2006) developed and described by Pierre Verges in a study on the social representation of money (Verges, 1992). The data analysis was done with the help of the statistical package Evoc2000².

Global analysis of the EU's Social Representation

The table below underlines the global structure of the EU's social representation (table 2).

Table 2. The global internal structure of the EU's social representation

<i>Participants (N=560)</i>			
		<i>Rank</i>	
		<i>< 2,8</i>	<i>>2,8</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>>35</i>	Development 107: 2,626 ³	Free circulation 91: 2,923
		Euro 99:2,525	Economic 52: 3,096
		Prosperity 97:2,536	Legislation 51: 3,176
		Freedom 91:2,769	Cooperation 40: 3,300
		Integration 86:2,279	Life standards 39: 2,897
		Union 54: 2,556	Employment 38: 3,316
		Unity 39: 2,231	Education 36: 3,722
		Civilization 38:2,789	

² ANALYSE DES EVOCATIONS 2000 (Pierre Verges - LAMES, Stéphane Scano – MMSH and Christian Junique – MMSH - Aix-en-Provence, 2002).

	<p>< 35</p>	<p>Modernization 32: 2,750 Democracy 31: 2,645 Europe 30: 1,833 Change 30: 2,700 Equality 27: 2,704 Manipulation 23: 2,783 Unity 23: 2,522 Stability 22: 2,182</p>	<p>Opportunities 33: 2,879 Future 32: 3,469 Group of states 32: 2,813 Free market 31: 3,258 High incomes 31: 3,226 Lack of corruption 31:3,161 No borders 31: 2,935 Politics 30: 3,367 High prices 28: 2,964 Power 27: 3,148 Culture 25: 3,440 Safety 24: 2,833 European funds 20: 3,750 Independence 20: 3,500</p>
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The central elements here are considered to be: *development, euro, prosperity, freedom, integration, union, unity* and *civilization*. Here we can distinguish two categories of information: a) related to the international organism EU (*union, integration* and *euro*), b) related to the effects/consequences of the European integration. The whole structure can be reorganized on two dimensions: *identity* and *effects*. The majority of these elements are organized around the second dimension and define mostly the positive effects of the European integration.

Another interesting observation concerns the presence of the term euro (F=99). The data shows that the euro has become one of the most powerful symbols of the European Union.

We, also, noticed the presence of certain concepts that reflect people’s hopes about economic growth such as economical aid, financial opportunities and European funds; hopes about achieving higher life standards: better life, employment and high incomes; hopes regarding free movement and circulation in the Western part of Europe: free circulation, no frontiers or hopes about solving social difficulties: democracy, change and lack of corruption.

Participants also, mentioned concern about our country’s security and peace: *stability* (F = 22) and *safety* (F=24).

Comparison according to context (country): Romania – Republic of Moldavia

A comparative analysis according to ideological context (the country of the participant) highlighted some interesting aspects regarding the influence of the ideological context on people’s discourse about the social object, European Union.

Table 3. Global structure of the EU's social representation for the Romanian participants

		<i>Romania (N=304)</i>	
		<i>Rank</i>	
		<i><2,7</i>	<i>>2,7</i>
F	>25	Euro 71: 2,592 Integration 52: 2,077 Development 49: 2,449 Prosperity 38: 2,421 Unity 31: 2,355 Civilization 30: 2,633	Free circulation 44: 2,750 Legislation 37: 3,054 Economical aid 33: 3,273 Freedom 31: 2,710 Opportunities 27: 3,074 Union 27: 2,815 Lack of corruption 26: 2,923
	<25	Change 22: 2,591 Europe 20: 2,000 Modernization 19: 2,684 Equality 16: 2,500 Globalization 16: 2,500	Cooperation 23: 3,435 European funds 20: 3,750 Employment 20: 2,950 Free market 19: 3,211 Education 18: 3,722 No frontiers 18: 3,278 Safety 17: 3,059 High prices 16: 3,250 Group of states 16: 3,000 Power 15: 3,667 Higher incomes 15: 3,333 Politics 15: 3,200

The table below presents the structure for the participants from The Republic of Moldavia (table 4).

Table 4. The global structure of the EU's social representation of the Moldavian participants

		<i>The Republic of Moldavia (N=256)</i>	
		<i>Rank</i>	
		<i>< 2,7</i>	<i>> 2,7</i>
F	>25	Prosperity 59: 2,610 Integration: 34: 2,588 Euro 28: 2,357 Union 27: 2,296	Freedom 60: 2,800 Development 58: 2,776 Free circulation 47: 3,085 Future 26: 3,308 Living standards 26: 2,962

	< 25	Union 21: 2,571 Group of states 16: 2,625 Stability 15: 2,333	Democracy 23: 2,783 Economical aid 19: 2,789 Education 18: 3,722 Employment 18: 3,722 Independence 18: 3,556 Cooperation 17: 3,118 Culture 16: 3,188 Higher incomes 16: 3,125 Politics 15: 3,533
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The data from the two tables presented above offer interesting insights regarding the differences stipulated in the initial objectives of this study. Thus, the data shows that Romanian participants associate the European Union with *unity* (F=31), *legislation* (F=37) and, *civilization*, elements that underline their experience with the integration and its anticipated long-term consequences.

Another aspect that reflects the influence of the integration on the social representation is the decreasing frequency of “*better life*” (F=14) for Romanians in comparison to Moldavians (F=26). It is possible that the hopes of the Moldavians related to the positive effects of possible integration into the European Union are stronger in opposition to Romanians who have developed more realistic expectancies towards the integration once the European adherence took place.

We can also notice that Romanians report different contextual elements like *lack of corruption, opportunities, modernization and globalization* while Moldavians associate terms like *unification* (unification with Romania) (F=21) and *future* (F=26). These associations reflect the specific context of Moldavia, a country with poor perspectives regarding European integration.

In conclusion, we may say that the comparative analysis underlines more similarities than differences between the two social representations, although the two countries have very different political and administrative relations with the European Union. This configuration could be explained by the fact that most of the elements incorporated in the internal structure of the social representations belong mainly to the effects dimension, both concrete, direct effects as well as desirable ones.

We believe that if the European identity was strongly interiorized by the Romanian people, the differences would be more visible. Identity would have been expressed more clearly by the presence of European institutions and symbols.

Comparison according to period (time of data collection): Romania

The next analysis considered a comparison which took into consideration the time of the data collection: 2006 and 2010. The table above presents the data collected from the Romanian group in 2006, just a year before Romania’s integration.

Table 5. The internal structure of EU's social representation for Romanian in 2006

<i>Romania 2006 (N=134)</i>			
		<i>Rank</i>	
		<i>< 2,8</i>	<i>> 2,8</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>>15</i>	Prosperity 35: 2,400 Development 30: 2,267 Integration 30: 1,967 Union 19: 2,789	Euro 26: 2,808 Lack of corruption 19: 3,105 Cooperation 18: 3,500 Education 15: 3,667 Higher incomes 15: 3,333
	<i>< 15</i>	Free circulation 14: 2,786 Civilization 13: 2,385 Legislation 11: 2,545 Freedom 8: 2,750	Safety 14: 2,857 Economical aid 13: 3,000 Higher prices 12: 3,333 Employment 12: 3,083 Change 12: 2,917 Opportunities 10: 3,300 Free market 8: 3,125 Multiculturalism 7: 4,143 Progress 7: 3,857 Uniformization 7: 3,286

The same structure was used to organize the data collected in 2010.

Table 6. The internal structure of EU's social representation for Romanians in 2010

<i>Romania 2010 (N=170)</i>			
		<i>Rank</i>	
		<i>< 2,8</i>	<i>>2.8</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>>15</i>	Euro 45: 2,467 Unity 31: 2,355 Free circulation 30: 2,733 Freedom 23: 2,696 Integration 22: 2,227 Development 19: 2,737 Europe 18: 2,056	Legislation 26: 3,269 Economical aid 20: 3,450 European funds 18: 3,667 Opportunities 17: 2,941 Civilization 17: 2,824

	<p><15</p>	<p>Modernization 14: 2,786 Equality 13: 2,462 Europe's Flag 12: 2,167 Globalization 10: 2,600 Alliance 10: 2,500 Change 10: 2,200 Diversity 9: 2,333 Employment 8: 2,750 Manipulation 7: 2,571 Democracy 7: 2,429 Lack of corruption 7: 2,429 Uniformization 7: 2,000</p>	<p>Group of states 14: 3,000 No frontiers 12: 3,083 Better life 12: 2,917 Power 11: 3,818 Free market 11: 3,273 Politics 10: 2,800 Culture 9: 3,889 European Parliament 9: 3,111 Brussels 8: 2,875 Union 8: 2,875 Progress 7: 3,571</p>
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Analyzing the data included in the upper left cells (central elements), we have noticed that the element, *prosperity*, identified as central at the first data collection, is no longer central for the second data collection ($F_{2006}=35$, $F_{2010}=3$). The four years that passed between the two data collection, have impacted the Romanians image on integration; they finally understood that Romania's adherence doesn't automatically bring prosperity, instead being the result of a longer process.

In a similar manner, other *hopes* and *expectancies* that Romanian people had in 2006, they were reshaped and re-interpreted in 2010. *Cooperation* ($F_{2006}=18$, $F_{2010}=5$) is poorer represented in terms of frequency, just like *education* ($F_{2006}=15$, $F_{2010}=3$) and *higher incomes* ($F_{2006}=15$, $F_{2010}=0$). These changes show that people had expectancies regarding the strong collaboration between Romanian and European authorities, new reforms in the field of education and higher incomes; all these expectancies were achieved in a smaller percentage than initially prefigured.

The data, also, points out some dynamics in terms of use of symbols; thus, *union* becomes peripheral and its place is taken by *Europe*, as a symbol of the European Union. *Euro* becomes more representative and so, new elements of the European identity become salient: the *European flag*, the *European Parliament* and *Brussels*.

Other elements' dynamics such as *unity* ($F_{2006}=0$, $F_{2010}=31$) and *European funds* ($F_{2006}=2$, $F_{2010}=18$) show the change of ideological context and its influence. Considering these elements and others like *modernization* and *globalization*, we can define a significant transformation of the EU's social representation induced by the context reflecting Romanian economic realities.

The common elements, *integration* and *development*, are represented in a similar way in both structures. Other associations like *free circulation*, *freedom*, *legislation*, *civilization*, etc. have certain constancy in terms of frequency of appearance or rank for both representations; these are fundamental values related to culture and human rights, therefore, the context doesn't seem to have a great impact on them.

In conclusion, we may say that the data shows many differences between the two social representations which are related directly to the year of the data collection. Some central elements are stable: *development* and *integration*, therefore, we are dealing here with a transformation of the same representation due to context change and new practices.

Comparison according to period (time of data collection): Republic of Moldavia

The next comparison was based on the time of the data collection (2006-2010) for the Moldavian participants (table 7).

Table 7. The internal structure of the EU's social representation for Moldavians 2006

<i>The Republic of Moldavia 2006 (N=126)</i>			
		<i>Rank</i>	
		<i>< 2,7</i>	<i>> 2,7</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>>15</i>	Prosperity 44: 2,568 Freedom 25: 2,680 Union 24: 2,167	Development 34: 3,029 Integration 29: 2,724 Free circulation 24: 3,292
	<i>< 15</i>	Democracy 11: 1,818 Europe 9: 1,556 Never 8: 2,125	Euro 14: 2,714 Politics 11: 3,364 Equality 11: 3,000 Cooperation 10: 3,500 Group of states 10: 2,700 Modernization 10: 2,700 Future 9: 3,444 Employment 8: 4,125 Education 8: 3,875 Independence 8: 3,500 Peace 7: 3,571 Free market 7: 3,571 Economic aid 7: 2,714

A similar analysis was undertaken for the data collected in 2010 and the results can be seen in the table below (table 8):

Table 8. The internal structure of the EU’s social representation for Moldavians for 2010

Republic of Moldavia 2010 (N=130)			
		Rank	
		< 2,7	>2,7
F	>15	Development 24: 2,417 Unification 21: 2,571	Freedom 35: 2,886 Better life 26: 2,962 Free circulation 23: 2,870 Future 17: 3,235 Prosperity 15: 2,733
	< 15	Euro 14: 2,000 Stability 12: 2,417 No frontiers 10: 2,500 Unity 8: 1,750 Cooperation 7: 2,571 Higher prices 7: 2,429 Power 7: 1,857	Culture 13: 3,154 Democracy 12: 3,667 Economical aid 12: 2,833 Education 10: 3,600 Independence 10: 3,600 Employment 10: 3,400 Higher incomes 10: 3,200 Legislation 9: 3,333 No correspondence 9: 3,111 Perspectives 7: 4,143 Friendship 7: 3,714

The data indicates the existence of two different internal structures. A simple analysis of the central elements indicates the absence of any similarity between the two central cores of the EUs social representation.

Thus, we can see that the EU’s social representation of Moldavian young people from 2006 is more general and more similar to the global representation presented at the beginning of this study. The element *unification* ($F_{2006}=0$, $F_{2010}=21$) dramatically changes its position and frequency and its dynamic shows a powerful modification of the context and of the ideas presented by the mass media, underlining the possibility of becoming an EU member through unification with Romania, a country which is already a European state member.

Surprisingly, the frequency of *integration* ($F_{2006}=29$, $F_{2010}=5$) and *union* ($F_{2006}=24$, $F_{2010}=3$) decreases in 2010. This change confirms the hypothesis that our participants believe that the European integration can be achieved easier through a unification strategy with Romania.

An interesting fact is related to the presence of the term *never* in the structure of the social representation from 2006 and its absence in 2010 ($F_{2006}=8$, $F_{2010}=0$); thus, the pessimistic attitude towards a possible integration modifies in 2010 as a result of the political regime change and its new agenda: in 2010 our participants use the term *no correspondence* ($F=9$). So, if in 2006 Moldavians believed integration was impossible to achieve, in 2010 their attitude had become more realistic as they

become aware of the conditions and standards that needed to be achieved in order to be considered a candidate for integration.

In conclusion, there is a substantial difference in the central core of the two representations indicating a powerful structural change determined by the change of ideological contexts in the Republic of Moldavia. We may conclude that the EU's social representation of the Moldavian young people is going through a process of formation and elaboration while the EU's representation of Romanians is already in the process of consolidation and systematization.

Conclusions

The global context may influence the adoption of a certain vision about life and society and thus, determine the internalization of certain behavioural norms which guide our attitudes, our discourse and actions towards social objects.

Considering the fact that social representations are tributary to the context where the interactions and social communication take place, the study above has tried to establish the effects of political and ideological context on the EU's social representation for Romanian and Moldavian young people.

The results show that the four years that have passed between the two data collections as well as the political regime and the specific relations with the European Union have led to certain differences in the structure of the EU's social representations, which can be explained through the concept of ideological, political and historical context change.

The global social representation of the European Union is structured around three fundamental elements: *euro*, *prosperity* and *integration*. These elements can be found in all the structures we have identified according to the variables considered with little variations due to context modification. These differences can be placed on two levels: *identity/symbolism* and *economic*.

(1) *The identity dimension* is more present in the discourse of the Romanian young people as they have already become a member of the European Union.

(2) *The economic dimension* is represented in a different manner. Once the integration took place, new elements have been identified: *European funds*, *lack of corruption*, *legislation*, etc. Elements like *wellbeing*, *prosperity*, *better life* and *higher incomes* decrease in frequency and rank, thus, underlining a more realistic and adequate discourse towards the possible effects and consequences of the European integration.

In the end, we may say that all the analyzed cases present a slightly different internal structure of the EU's social representation as a result of external influences and changes from the political field.

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