CHAPTER 4

Support based on Values?
Attitudes toward the EU in Eleven Postcommunist Societies

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Introduction

The central attraction of the EU to nations in Central, Southeast, and Eastern Europe are the economic prospects associated with EU membership after these countries experienced a period of economic insecurity and social decline. However, although economic integration is a key aspect of linking new accession countries to Western Europe, the integration process among West European member-states also occurred on the basis of shared ideological values. Whereas the economic attraction of accession for postcommunist states may be clear, the accession of new countries raises the question of whether citizens in new EU member-states share the broad value consensus of West European publics.¹

This chapter takes this observation as its starting point and asks To what extent do value orientations influence citizens’ views about the EU net of economic factors? Using a public opinion survey conducted in 11 postcommunist societies, we test the relative explanatory power of economic factors and value orientations in explaining the views of mass publics about the EU.
We first discuss public attitudes toward becoming a member of the EU and construct our dependent variable. In the next step, we introduce measures of political cues and value orientations. The final step will be to determine the relative meaning of value orientations by also considering public perceptions of the economy and citizens’ sociodemographic characteristics.

The common denominator of the countries included in our analysis is their communist past. We examine public attitudes about the EU, their determinants in countries that joined the EU in May 2004 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia), the current candidate countries (Bulgaria and Romania), the country that hopes to join the EU in the distant future (Albania), one that currently does not want to join (Russia), and a postcommunist country that ceased to exist in 1990 by joining a founding member of the EU (East Germany).

Support for Joining the EU in Central, Southeast, and Eastern Europe

Most comparative studies analyzing support for the EU use data provided by the EU, either the Eurobarometer series for EU member-states or the Central and Eastern Eurobarometer/Candidate Countries Eurobarometer (CEEB/CCEB)\(^2\) for the accession countries (Christin 2003; Cichowski 2000; Jones and van der Bijl 2004; Marks and Hooghe 2003; McLaren 2002; Rohrschneider 2002; Tucker, Pacek, and Berinsky 2002). As Christin states, other surveys concerned with Central and Eastern Europe concentrate either on the political transformation or on the EU, but do not address both fields of research (Christin 2003). The standard question asked in the CEEB is “[i]f [our country] were to join the European Community as a full member in the future, would you feel . . . 1—‘strongly in favour,’ 2—‘somewhat in favour,’ 3—‘somewhat opposed,’ or 4—‘strongly opposed?’” As the results show, the optimistic and almost euphoric attitudes held in the early 1990s has given way to a more skeptical view. Already by 1995, after five years of muddling through the political and economic transformation, support for joining the EU had declined in almost all the accession countries. Generally one can say that the support for joining the EU declined parallel to the likelihood of the country becoming a member.

In all the countries that joined in 2004, support for the EU dropped from about 80 percent in 1991/1992 to roughly 50 percent in 2003.\(^3\)