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Digital media, democracy and civil society in Central and Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

CEE countries faced significant political, economic, social, and technological transformations over the last four decades. Democratic processes, after relative stabilization, tremble again around polarizing values, populist leaders, or nationalistic ideologies. Online communication, especially social media platforms, play a vital role in shaping how citizens interact with the state, political actors, media, and other citizens. The collection of manuscripts focuses on some of the challenges democratic institutions in the region face, in transforming and sustaining civil society and attempts to capture how the digital media environments mitigate or exacerbate those challenges. Included manuscripts focus on the role that online platforms play in the satisfaction with democracy in the CEE region, the interactions between journalists and political actors, the strategic media coverage of elections, affective polarization and political antagonism, and discursive attempts to discourage young people from civic engagement.

Keywords

Digital democracy; Central and Eastern Europe (CEE); social media; citizenship; political communication; affordances

Introduction

The countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have been going through tremendous changes and developments over the last 40 years. The collapse of the Soviet Union saw these countries gain, or seize, their independence in largely bloodless transitions of power. Economic, social and political developments profoundly changed how their societies have been functioning. The nations are largely flourishing market economies, but growing inequalities have fueled migration. Democratic institutions have been created, yet parties are not fully embedded and are often the political vehicles for charismatic personalities (see studies within Eibl & Gregor, 2019). The processes of transformation and development are well advanced in certain countries (especially those that joined the European Union in its enlargements of 2004 and 2013), but are still not fully achieved in others. Some nations did not democratize (Belarus), others struggled to resolve their independence or geopolitical situation (Ukraine, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia), many witness high political polarization and civic protest (Poland, Romania), and there are numerous examples where the CEE nations have witnessed a rise in support for populist politicians (Hungary and Poland).

The transitions to democratic market economies occurred at the same time as the nations of Central and Eastern Europe witnessed sharp technological development. Just as democracy was becoming embedded, citizens gained access to a range of platforms that simplified interactions. New media, Internet-based platforms or social media, facilitated citizens' opportunities to express their opinions, engage in or connect for collective action. However, there remain sharp digital divides in many CEE nations. Although access to the Internet is widespread, it is still lower than in the Western parts of Europe (especially broadband¹ access). There are also sharp divides between rural and urban areas, as well as skills divides (Esteban-Navarro, García-Madurga, Morte-Nadal, & Nogales-Bocio, 2020). Certain groups of privileged citizens have unfettered access, while others have been left behind. The digital divide, often a consequence of infrastructural, educational and financial inequalities, can complement incomprehension and polarization within the society. Restrictions in access to information, differential availability of the Internet affordances to spread civic knowledge, unequal abilities to participate in political discussion or to be active in political discourse lead to divided societies (Dragulanescu, 2002).

It is perhaps all too easy to view the nations of Central and Eastern Europe as being in a pre-development phase, held back by weak governance, insufficient resources and the migration of many of the younger and brighter citizens. However, this important region is pivotal in terms of understanding how civil society can be built and maintained, and how democratic norms of thinking and acting can become embedded within society. It is equally essential for understanding the challenges that democracy faces. The problems confronted by citizens in CEE countries are not unique to this region, they are to differing extents shared by many nations across the continent of Europe and indeed globally (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019). The CEE region has faced severe challenges during the pandemic, but even more so since early 2022, as many of these nations now have a war on their doorsteps and are coping with an influx of refugees displaced due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Facing these challenges successfully requires good governance and a strong, vibrant and inclusive civil society. All the CEE nations are classified by the Democracy Index (EIU, 2023) (Table 1) as flawed democracies; they hold free and fair elections and basic civil liberties are respected, but there remain significant weaknesses in systems of governance, an underdeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation. Of the 16 nations which constitute Central and Eastern Europe, our studies include the highest performing nation, Czechia, two mid-table nations, Poland and Hungary, and lower performer Albania. Kosovo does not have a separate entry within the index. The data shows that most of these nations perform overall better than CEE average but there are key weaknesses, not only in Albania but also deficiencies in civil liberties in Poland and Hungary, and with political participation in Hungary. The Democracy Index scores out of 10 show a mixed picture for the region, although it is worth noting that in terms

of their global rank Czechia is just behind France, equal with Greece and ahead of Portugal and the USA. Poland and Hungary are ranked closely with nations of South America (Brazil and Argentina) as well as Indonesia and Thailand, Albania has a similar ranking to countries such as Ghana and Suriname. This offers a perception of the range of challenges faced in these nations.

It is equally interesting to note that over the history of the Democracy Index 2006–2022 (Table 2), we notice a minor improvement for Albania but also minor decreases in performance for the other three nations. While minor changes, these demonstrate the fragility of democracy in the region. With attacks on media freedom, civil liberties, rights to free speech and protest being infringed, there is a need for a strong civil society to defend core principles of democracy.

Though, since a democratic regime is considered embedded within societies, it is time to examine the relationship between technological developments and the sustainability of civil society within this region. The aim of this special edition is to raise questions regarding the ways in which digital technologies, and specific affordances of platforms, offer the potential for enhancing democratic culture and in what ways they undermine principles of pluralism, having a well-informed citizenry who are confident and able to debate political issues and reach a consensus.

The special CEE collection

The proposed special issue is composed of five papers covering CEE as a region (Placek, 2023), and specific case studies from Albania and Kosovo (Camaj, Çela, & Rexha, 2023), Czechia and Hungary (Macková, Novotná, Čejková, & Hrbková, 2023; Vochocová, Rosenfeldová, Vancsó, & Neag, 2023), and Poland (Adamczewska, 2023).

Table 1. Democracy index rankings for nations included in the research (EIU, 2023).

Nation	Overall score	Global Rank	Region Rank	Electoral Process & Pluralism	Functioning of government	Political participation	Political culture	Civil liberties	Regime type
CEE	5.39	n/a	n/a	7.97	6.74	6.36	6.84	7.77	n/a
Czechia	7.97	25	1	9.58	6.43	7.22	7.50	9.12	Flawed
Poland	7.04	46	7	9.17	6.07	6.67	6.25	7.06	Flawed
Hungary	6.64	56	8	8.33	6.79	4.44	6.88	6.76	Flawed
Albania	6.41	64	13	7.00	6.43	5.00	6.25	7.35	Flawed

Table 2. Changes in the overall democracy scores 2006–2022 (EIU, 2023).

Nation	Overall score 2022	Overall Score 2006	Change
Czechia	7.97	8.17	−0.20
Poland	7.04	7.30	−0.26
Hungary	6.64	7.53	−0.89
Albania	6.41	5.91	+0.50

Placek (2023) offers a broad perspective drawing on six waves of the Eurobarometer data from 2014 to 2019 analyzing the relationship between social media use and its employment for information acquisition with the variation in satisfaction with democracy. The author indicates that those who are searching for information on social media are more critical toward democratic standards. They tend to be satisfied with the functioning of the democracy when the liberal democracy index and the electoral democracy index (v-dem.net) per country are above .7 and .8, respectively (with the score .6 for those not searching). These relations alter depending on the strength or backsliding of the democratic regime.

Adamczewska (2023) examines relations on social media platforms between journalists and political actors in the context of the Polish parliamentary elections of 2015 and 2019. Surprisingly, the density of the links between media representatives and politicians dropped in time. The relations were measured based on reactions to posts by the journalists rather than on interactive exchanges of ideas. Between the two electoral periods, the most visible politicians, mainly from the opposition parties, amplified their online presence and visibility. The growing absence of political actors from the ruling party and journalists linked to public media is observed.

Camaj, Çela, and Rexha (2023) study the public's engagement with news posted by media in Albania and Kosovo. The authors build on the media logic and audience logic theoretical approaches to examine the reasons (interviews with editors) and effects (text analysis) of strategy- or issue-based, personalization and negativity positing tactics within Facebook profiles of 12 news organizations. The audience tends to engage less with negative attacking posts and with posts focusing on issues, except for those covering social welfare, health and immigration. The findings suggest that the audience-oriented modus operandi employed by the editors

involves closely monitoring the community's reactions toward publications. The audience-oriented logic sets the tone for news choices by media but also the strategic behavior of political actors.

Macková, Novotná, Čejková, and Hrbková (2023) examine the relations between social networking sites, affective polarization and political antagonism in Czechia. The authors find substantial contrasts among the predictors: only the level of attitudinal homogeneity has the same effect on both polarization and antagonism, while other explanatory variables (experienced negativity, political unfriending, or political interest) are more context depending. The study suggests that a homogenous pattern of social media contribution to polarization may not exist and that the relationship is more nuanced.

The special issue ends with a paper studying the discursive representation of the youth climate change-oriented movement in Czechia and Hungary. Vochocová, Rosenfeldová, Vancsó, and Neag (2023) provide a study on normative assumptions around the exclusion of the youth from participating in the public sphere expressed via comments on the main newspapers' profiles on Facebook. Findings show the general willingness to dismiss young people from politics. Two argumentation lines are prominent: firstly, denying expertise, experience and rationality for political participation, and secondly, accusing youth of errant values and thus normatively incapable of participating in the democratic processes. Young people seem to be rather discouraged from political activities than being bolstered for further civic engagement.

This special issue is an attempt to bring together a collection dedicated to Central and Eastern Europe within the established and globalized scope of this journal. We are grateful to the Editors for this opportunity. However, still, the main limitation of the special issue remains the insufficient set of countries covered. We wish to encourage future research and publishing by scholars from the CEE countries. Similarly, to other non-Western regions, there is a need from the established research environments to support colleagues and contributors not only in critically reviewing but also by encouraging, actively supporting and suggesting solutions to publish in

established journals. The submission for the special issue was due before the Russia war on Ukraine started, thus the conflict, in which social media play a crucial communicational role, is not included in the proposed collection.

Note

1. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.BBND.P2>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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