# Can the Internet Aid Democratic Consolidation?
# Online News and Legitimacy in Central and Eastern Europe

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Since the fall of communism in 1989, many formerly communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe have undergone a tremendous amount of social, political, and economic change. In the nearly 30 years after communism, these countries have become democratic and integrated into the European Union. Despite these changes, the consolidation of democracy is in question as citizen trust in government remains low and nationalist populism has risen. Given that other studies have shown that online media can affect attitudes toward government and that a massive technological revolution has occurred alongside democratization, it is imperative to better understand whether the Internet can aid consolidation by making citizens more supportive of democratic governance. This study uses Eurobarometer data to evaluate this question empirically and finds that online news consumption leads to more positive evaluations of government in the region.

*Keywords: Internet, political attitudes, democratic consolidation, legitimacy, Central and Eastern Europe*

Since the fall of communism in 1989, many formerly communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have undergone a tremendous amount of social, political, and economic change. During the nearly 30 years since the fall of communism, most of the countries in the region moved toward democracy, and until recently some were even considered to be consolidated democracies. However, some of the most stable democracies recently have passed laws that limit the open competition and liberty required for democracy to flourish. Most notably, in Hungary a new constitution and restrictive media laws have constrained press freedom (Puddington & Roylance, 2017). In Poland, the Law and Justice Party has made several attempts to increase party control over the media, courts, and civil service (Puddington & Roylance, 2017). Elsewhere, scholars have noted that postcommunist nostalgia has risen in the region (Ekman & Linde, 2005), and corruption among political elites has remained problematic (Puddington & Roylance,

2016). Despite these issues, many of the countries in the region, such as the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Lithuania, are strong candidates for consolidation as civil rights and liberties remain strongly protected (Puddington & Roylance, 2017). Given these political developments and the recency of democratization, CEE makes an interesting laboratory to study questions relating to democratic consolidation.

Although many interesting questions could be posed in response to these political changes, little research has examined whether the Internet can aid democratic consolidation both in the region and more broadly around the world. Most of the literature on the Internet and democratization focuses on whether it increases citizen dissatisfaction with nondemocratic regimes or support within the initial transition (Breuer, Landman, & Farquhar, 2015; Groshek, 2010; Groshek & Mays, 2017; Nisbet, Stoycheff, & Pearce, 2012; Ruijgrok, 2017; Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2014). Even less studied is whether the Internet can provide support for democracy during the consolidation stage of democratization. Further, most studies of mass media take place in advanced democracies and thus ignore the role that mass media, generally, and the Internet, specifically, play in democratization and consolidation (Jebril, Stetka, & Loveless, 2013). The current study addresses these gaps with its focus on whether online news can foster support for democratic regimes and citizen engagement in CEE. This article provides a relevant discussion of the previous literature regarding legitimacy and democratic consolidation, the Internet's effects on democratization, and the mass media in CEE. An empirical analysis presents the effects of online news on a person's support for government in CEE. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for both democratic consolidation in CEE and the future of research dedicated to understanding media effects in consolidating democracies.

### Legitimacy and Consolidation of Democracy

In discussing how online news can influence the legitimacy of democratic governance, it is imperative to comprehend how previous research has addressed legitimacy and why it is essential to democratic consolidation. One of the most succinct definitions of the term regards democracy as a political system that promotes open competition and inclusiveness (Dahl, 1971). Similarly, others define democracy as a system of governance where rulers are held accountable for their actions by citizens through open competition for office (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). Although there are many ways to define this elusive concept (Coppedge et al., 2011), a simple measure works for this study and keeps it from getting bogged down in complexities that are outside the scope of the article. Similarly, the study narrowly defines democratic consolidation as the point at which democratic norms are so entrenched in society and respected by political elites that there is no danger of the regime backsliding to illiberalism or autocracy (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Schedler, 1998). Given these definitions, the CEE countries in this study could certainly be regarded as democracies, although probably not consolidated ones due to potential backsliding and the rise of populism in several countries. Indeed, a Freedom House report rates each of the countries as free (Puddington & Roylance, 2017), but democracy is far from being seen as "the only game in town" (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 5). As such, these countries offer a useful laboratory for understanding the effects of online news on countries that are past the initial transition to democracy but are not yet consolidated.

In addition to the discussion of democracy and democratic consolidation, the concept of regime legitimacy is relevant to this study. Classically, legitimacy is conceptualized as containing two separate forms of support for the regime. The first of these, specific support, is characterized by direct support for

government action and is extremely important in new democracies. Newly formed democratic regimes rely on this type of support more than diffuse support, which is a broader version of system support built from years of competent government outputs (Easton, 1975). In this conceptualization, specific support can be fleeting and quickly erodes when citizens lose faith in the government. Diffuse support is more stable and sustains regime stability in times when the government is not efficacious. More recent research has noted that legitimacy may be more complex than two categories. Booth and Seligson (2009) find that citizen support for democratic regimes relies on six categories. Studying new democracies in Latin America, the authors find that support for regime institutions, political actors, local government, and regime principles, along with the formation of political community and evaluations of regime performance, are all correlated and have an effect on regime stability. Although these findings in no way nullify the classical distinctions, they do add a level of specificity and nuance to our understanding of how citizens view their regimes.

### The Internet and Democratization

Research devoted to investigating whether the Internet leads to support for democracy and democratization can be divided into notions of cyberoptimism and cyberpessimism. Research focusing on cyberoptimism demonstrates that the Internet can have several positive influences on transitions to democracy. Most notably, research has revealed that Internet use and penetration can lead to higher demand for democracy (Nisbet et al., 2012; Stoycheff, Nisbet, & Epstein 2016) and even increase protest against autocrats (Breuer et al., 2015; Ruijgrok, 2017). Further, it can lead to greater political awareness in these regimes (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015) and increase awareness of electoral fraud (Gainous, Wagner, & Ziegler, 2018). In advanced democracies, information seeking online has been shown to increase civic awareness and engagement (Boulianne, 2009) and even trust in government (Norris, 2001). Other studies have noted the Internet's ability to provide a digital public sphere that can increase passive learning (Bode, 2016), facilitate political action (Vaccari et al., 2015) and interest (Kahne, Middaugh, Lee, & Feezell, 2012), and increase consensus building for policy (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, 2015).

Despite these potential benefits, the Internet does contain some elements that could lead to a pessimistic view of its effects on democratization and consolidation. To begin, some of the positive aspects that occur during democratic transitions can dissipate after initial liberalization (Nisbet et al., 2012). Therefore, it is unclear whether the Internet and, by association, online news can produce long-term support for democracy. Other studies have shown that Internet penetration may, in fact, produce a limited effect on increasing democratization (Groshek, 2010; Groshek & Mays, 2017; although see Howard, 2010), thus calling into question whether the medium has any prodemocratic qualities to begin with. Studies in advanced democracies note that increased media fragmentation can lead to apathy and disengagement (Prior, 2007), which leads to increased political polarization (Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2008). Indeed, studies of citizens' online behavior often find that people tend to self-select into news that reinforces their ideological beliefs (Barbera, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Feller, Kuhnert, Sprenger, & Welpe, 2011; Garrett, 2009). Despite these concerns, some studies find that these effects can be mediated by inadvertent exposure to news and viewpoints that people usually would not consider (Anspach, 2017; Kahne et al., 2012; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

While creating an open sphere online offers many opportunities to aid democratization and create an informed and engaged prodemocratic citizenry, it also creates a space for nondemocratic extremist groups to organize (Simpson & Druxes, 2015). Indeed, this is the case in Hungary, where the nationalist Jobbik Party has used the Internet to organize (Matay & Kaposi, 2008) and become a significant player in Hungarian politics. Furthermore, misinformation can easily spread online (Bode & Vraga, 2015; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Southwell & Thorson, 2015). Such issues are problematic for democratization if we consider that democracy requires a democratically oriented and informed citizenry (Almond & Verba, 1963; Lipset, 1959, 1994). Since misinformation can spread quickly and the Internet lowers costs to organization (Breuer et al., 2015), nondemocratic politicians can use these tools to gain support and undermine democracy. This possibility becomes even more problematic in new democracies that lack diffuse support, because citizens could succumb to messaging that creates dissatisfaction with democracy.

In addition to previous studies that examine the Internet's political effects in new democracies, it is important to consider how online news might alter citizens' perceptions of government in new democracies. Institutionalist theories of democracy propose that attitudes toward democracy are malleable and based on the efficacy of government outputs (Booth & Seligson, 2009; Easton, 1975). Perhaps the most fundamental theory for this study notes that both culture and institutions matter (Mishler & Rose, 1997, 2001). In these studies, cultural norms are socialized early in life and then can be altered or reinforced based on new information (Mishler & Rose, 1997). Such a model allows for mass media and other information sources to thus alter citizen attitudes and opinions of government in new democracies as they provide updated information on the working of democracy (Loveless, 2010; Placek, 2017; Voltmer, 2013; Voltmer & Schmitt-Beck, 2006). This is especially true when we consider that traditional news outlets tend to slant their coverage to produce support for the political mainstream and democratic system (Ceron & Memoli, 2015; Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012)—a process that has been shown to increase trust in government (Ceron, 2015). Further, it is possible that online news can increase support for democracy by connecting the public to its elected leaders. Because online news comes in more forms than traditional media and offers direct feedback loops to media, online news might allow for more direct political deliberation and increase closeness to elected leaders (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Combining these possibilities, online news might not only increase political knowledge, which has been shown to increase support for government, but also increase the responsiveness of political elites to the mass public, which can strengthen support for policy (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Seligson, 2005).

Given these theories of media and learning in new democracies, online news might impact attitudes toward government and the regime in consolidating democracies. I therefor propose the following hypothesis:

H1:     *Individuals who consume news online will more strongly support democratic governance than people who do not consume news online.*

### News and Democracy in CEE: Is the Internet Unique?

Because the literature on Internet use and democratization provides mixed findings, this study considers several nuances when predicting the effects of online news on the attitudes of CEE citizens. The study

focuses on a particular use of the Internet (news consumption) and one region of the world, so understanding regional news production, journalism, and the media habits of the citizenry is meaningful for the contextualization of the empirical findings presented later.

Despite early difficulties in fulfilling the normative role of media in democracy (Gross, 2002; Sükösd & Bajomi-Lázár, 2003), the mass media in Central and Eastern Europe has been able to serve as a critical component of the democratization process. The mass media has been a useful aid to democratization mainly because of its ability to serve as an open public sphere (Gross, 2002). In doing so, it has supported the formation of national and civic identity (Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008). Furthermore, empirical research finds that news consumers in the region display higher levels of efficacy (Loveless, 2010) and are somewhat more likely to be mobilized by news consumption (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012).

The political uses of mass media have shifted over the last decade or so, but some elements of the early-1990s media system have persisted in the new media environment. First, the emphasis on tabloid-style presentation has continued as political elites seek to reach larger audiences (Bajomi-Lázár, 2012; Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012). Second, politicians in some countries still put political pressure on journalists and often use public service broadcasting for political gain (Bajomi-Lázár, 2012; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008). Another potentially troubling development is the new trend of local business tycoons buying many news outlets in the region. Although this seems unproblematic on the surface, the issue lies with exactly how these changes affect journalistic freedoms. The individuals making these purchases are often well connected politically, and this process can lead to an oligarchization of the media (Stetka, 2012). Corporate owners also may have vague rules about who and what their media outlet can cover, leading to confusion and hesitance among journalists and editors to publish articles that are critical of incumbent politicians (Bajomi-Lázár, 2015; Stetka, 2012). However, these processes are not static from one country to the next. Some countries in the region enjoy a free and pluralistic media, and others have succumbed to processes of media capture or outright censorship (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2012).[2]

While traditional media have been the focus of much of the research on this topic, far less research in general has examined the effects of the Internet in these societies. Most previous research is devoted to describing the intersection of the transition to democracy with the increased prevalence of Internet technology in the region. In doing so, some have described the cultural change in countries based on the ability to communicate with others around the globe (Parrish-Sprowl, 2012). Others look at the structure of the online news media and provide comparisons with news media on other outlets (Salovaara-Moring, 2012). These studies find the most popular news sites are commercial news outlets, where the content varies widely from hard news to tabloid-style journalism or entertainment (Salovaara-Moring, 2012). These characteristics are components of an online sphere that, although more interactive, looks much like the traditional media in CEE. Indeed, research notes that most CEE media outlets, regardless of status or medium, rely on business logic and are heavily dependent on advertising (Salovaara, 2015). The same issues facing traditional media also constrain the most popular news online. Journalism is influenced by the political leanings of the owners (Salovaara, 2015) and is

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[2] Bajomi-Lázár (2013) describes media capture as "media's influence on public opinion and voting behaviour, that is, capturers' ability to articulate their views and to assert their ideologies, whether it is political parties or related business interest groups that exert pressure on the media" (p. 72).

shaped by the intersection of global and local trends (Stetka, 2015). Furthermore, investigative journalism that is critical of political elites is lacking due to these structural constraints (Salovaara, 2015). Considering these structural characteristics, it is unlikely that the Internet will produce significant differences in support for governance than other mediums.

### Data and Methods

The data for this study are from three Eurobarometer surveys implemented in November 2014 through 2016 (European Commission, 2015, 2016, 2017). These surveys of 11 postcommunist CEE countries contain questions about online news consumption and support for governance over the three-year time span. Table 1 displays the cases used in the analysis along with their Freedom House aggregate scores and the percentage of individuals using the Internet according to the International Telecommunications Union.

*Table 1. Democracy and Internet Use in Central and Eastern Europe.*

| Country | Freedom House aggregate score | | | | Percent of public using Internet | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **Average** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **Average** |
| Bulgaria | 78 | 79 | 80 | 79.0 | 55.49 | 56.66 | 59.83 | 57.3 |
| Croatia | 86 | 86 | 87 | 86.3 | 68.57 | 69.80 | 72.70 | 70.4 |
| Czech Republic | 94 | 95 | 95 | 94.7 | 74.23 | 75.67 | 76.48 | 75.5 |
| Estonia | 95 | 95 | 94 | 94.7 | 84.24 | 88.41 | 87.24 | 86.6 |
| Hungary | 88 | 82 | 79 | 83.0 | 75.65 | 72.83 | 79.26 | 75.9 |
| Latvia | 84 | 85 | 86 | 85.0 | 75.83 | 79.20 | 79.84 | 78.3 |
| Lithuania | 90 | 91 | 91 | 90.7 | 72.13 | 71.38 | 74.38 | 72.6 |
| Poland | 93 | 93 | 93 | 93.0 | 66.60 | 68.00 | 73.30 | 69.3 |
| Romania | 84 | 83 | 83 | 83.3 | 54.08 | 55.76 | 59.50 | 56.4 |
| Slovakia | 91 | 90 | 89 | 90.0 | 79.98 | 77.63 | 80.48 | 79.4 |
| Slovenia | 91 | 91 | 92 | 91.3 | 71.59 | 73.10 | 75.50 | 73.4 |
| Regional averages | 88.5 | 88.2 | 88.1 | 88.3 | 70.8 | 71.7 | 74.4 | 72.3 |

In addition to allowing for a breadth of cases in the analysis, the data are unique in that they enable researchers to evaluate the effect of Internet news on many different citizen values that relate to regime stability. Having several measures of regime support is significant because support for governance and democracy has often been conceptualized too narrowly (Booth & Seligson, 2009). Relying on one or two measures of support for governance might cause researchers to miss potential effects of online news on regime stability. The data also contain questions about information seeking on other mediums, which allows comparison of the effects of new and traditional media in the region. Although the data set contains many benefits for researchers of political communication and regime stability, it also contains methodological challenges that are inherent to survey research. Specifically, using survey data to test the effect of online news consumption on support for democracy can be problematic because several socioeconomic variables often predict both regime support and Internet use (Bonfadelli, 2002). This and the possibility that engaged citizens might be more likely to seek news online

introduce problems of endogeneity and multicollinearity, which can skew empirical findings. Thus, it is imperative to take advantage of statistical techniques such as matching processes that can reduce some of the bias inherent in survey data (Sekhon, 2009). This study uses entropy balancing, which is a matching technique that employs a maximum entropy reweighting scheme (Hainmueller, 2012). Entropy balancing creates a control and treatment group and balances the mean, variance, and skewness of researcher-specified variables for each group. This reweighting reduces bias that is inherent to surveys and provides an efficient way to deal with outliers by giving them little to no weight in empirical estimation. This process allows the data to fit the Rubin (1979) causal model, allowing for more robustness and confidence in results. This study uses Internet use as the treatment variable and reweights a person's gender, age, social class, educational attainment, and place of residence—urban or rural—so that treatment and control groups have similar means, variance, and skewness for each socioeconomic variable.

Although entropy balancing is performed before the ordered logistic and logistic regressions that test the effects of online news on support for governance, it is not done for the models testing other mediums. Entropy balancing cannot be performed for these mediums because consuming television news, radio news, and reading the newspaper are far more universal practices, making it difficult to match users and nonusers based on social characteristics. Therefore, the models for these independent variables are completed without any reweighting of the data.

After performing entropy balancing, the study employs fixed-effects logistic and ordered logistic regressions. Because the study relies on survey data from multiple countries across a three-year span, the empirical models need to effectively control for country- and year-specific nuances that could skew results. Thus, using fixed-effect models will appropriately control for country and year differences in the data even though this is a pooled cross-section analysis.

### *Dependent Variables*

The analysis presented in this article uses 15 dependent variables from the Eurobarometer surveys associated with five of Booth and Seligson's (2009) indicators of public support for the regime and government. The study uses several variables for each concept to evaluate the effects of online news on several indicative measures of regime support. The first concept evaluated is regime institutions. The study relies on six variables that dichotomously measure a person's trust in the justice system, the police, the military, political parties, national government, and national legislature. Each variable is coded 1 when a person trusts the institution and 0 when he or she does not. Support for local governance, the second concept, relies on a similarly coded dichotomous variable that asks whether a person trusts the local or regional authorities.

The third concept—support for regime performance—is operationalized using four variables that measure a person's current and prospective evaluations of both the government and economy. The variables that measure citizen support for governmental outputs are a group of ordinal variables derived from questions that ask about how people feel about the development of democracy in their country, their country's economic situation, and prospective evaluations of the country's direction and economy. Support for the development of democracy ranges from 0 to 3, where 0 indicates a person is extremely dissatisfied and 3 indicates a person is extremely satisfied. Evaluation of the economy also ranges from 0 to 3, where 0 indicates that a person believes

the economy is "very bad" and 3 indicates that a person believes the economy is "very good." Both prospective evaluations of the country's direction and economy range from 0 to 2, where 0 indicates a negative assessment and 2 indicates a positive one.

The fourth concept analyzed is political community. This concept is operationalized using two variables that ask a respondent to rate his or her attachment to the local community and country. Both variables range from 0 to 3, where 0 means that a person is not at all attached to the community, and 3 indicates that he or she is very attached.

The fifth and final concept that this study examines is support for regime principles. Because the Eurobarometer surveys do not contain the exact questions that Booth and Seligson (2009) used in their study, the current research operationalizes the concept with two variables related to citizen engagement since this is seen as a precondition for regime legitimacy (Almond & Verba, 1963; Dahl, 1989). The study operationalizes civic engagement using two variables that ask respondents how often they discuss local and national politics with others. Both variables range from 0 to 2, where 0 indicates they never discuss politics and 2 indicates they discuss politics frequently. Although it would be optimal to include other variables that specify support for democratic norms, the current data allow no such affordances. Despite these limitations, the 15 variables used allow for a comprehensive study of citizen support for government in CEE.

### Independent Variables

The primary independent variable in this study is a person's use of online news. This variable comes from a survey question that asks people whether they use the Internet to gather information on national political matters. This variable is dichotomous and is coded 1 if a person uses the Internet to gather information and 0 if he or she does not.[3] The study relies on similar independent variables to compare Internet news with other mediums. Survey respondents were asked whether they used the radio, newspaper, or television to gather news as well as whether they did not seek information from any source of mass media (see Table 2).

#### Table 2. Media Usage Statistics in Central and Eastern Europe.

|            | Use medium | Do not use medium | Use medium to gather information | Do not use medium to gather information |
|------------|------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Internet   | 22,344     | 10,511            | 13,047                           | 20,013                                   |
|            | **68%**    | **32%**           | **39.5%**                        | **60.5%**                                |
| Newspaper  | 27,176     | 5,779             | 11,819                           | 21,241                                   |
|            | **82.5%**  | **17.5%**         | **35.75%**                       | **65.25%**                               |
| Television | 32,416     | 613               | 27,906                           | 5,154                                    |
|            | **98.1%**  | **1.9%**          | **84.4%**                        | **15.6%**                                |
| Radio      | 28,985     | 4,004             | 14,616                           | 18,444                                   |
|            | **87.9%**  | **12.1%**         | **44.2%**                        | **55.8%**                                |

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[3] It would be optimal to have a variable that provides information about how often someone consumes online news, but no such variable exists in the Eurobarometer data set.

All the mass media variables are coded 1 if a person uses the medium to find information on national political matters and 0 if not. The variable for individuals who do not look for political information through mass media is coded 1 if they do not consume news via mass media and 0 if they consume news from any form of mass media.

In addition to the independent variables of interest, this study controls for a host of demographics that could influence a person's support for democracy.[4] The first group of control variables denotes an individual's relationship with politics. The variable for political knowledge is a scale constructed from three true-or-false questions that asked respondents about their general knowledge of the European Union. The variable for political ideology ranges from 0 to 10. Numbers closer to 0 indicate that a person's views lean to the political left, and numbers closer to 10 indicate views that lean to the political right.

The second group of control variables controls for general demographics. The original variable for education asks respondents to list the age that they completed their education. There are several outliers in the data and a significant portion of the sample that claims to be in the process of completing their education, To fix these issues, I recoded people who are currently studying at their current age[5] and then recoded the variable to an ordinal variable where each group generally matches the age a person would reach a new level of educational attainment.[6] The variable for gender is coded 0 for men and 1 for women. Age is an interval variable that measures a person's age. Social class is an ordinal variable and measures a respondent's perceived standing in society. A person's place of residence is measured through a series of dummy variables that note whether a person lives in a rural area, a small to medium-size town, and a large city.[7] Finally, the study controls for but does not report country and year effects through a series of dummy variables.

**Results**

Table 3 displays the effects of consuming online news on a person's support for regime institutions and local government.

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[4] All control variables used have been shown to impact legitimacy in new democracies. See Booth and Seligson (2009), Waldron-Moore (1999), and Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer (1998) for a detailed discussion.

[5] For example, if a person is 19 years old and is listed as currently studying, his or her age of attainment is recoded to 19.

[6] The four categories for this study are no formal education, ceasing formal education at age 15 or younger, 16 to 19, and 20 and older.

[7] Small to medium-size town is the reference group in the following empirical models.

***Table 3. Effect of Online News on Support for Democracy:***
***Regime Institutions and Local Government.***

| Trust in: | Justice system | Police | Military | Political parties | Local government | National government | National legislature |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Online news | 0.135*** | 0.113*** | 0.444*** | 0.282*** | −0.071** | 0.067* | −0.002 |
| | (0.034) | (0.033) | (0.036) | (0.038) | (0.027) | (0.029) | (0.031) |
| Political knowledge | 0.074*** | 0.107*** | 0.197*** | −0.080*** | 0.161*** | 0.152*** | 0.075*** |
| | (0.018) | (0.017) | (0.019) | (0.019) | (0.015) | (0.016) | (0.017) |
| Political ideology | −0.002 | 0.013* | 0.057*** | 0.009 | 0.014** | 0.032*** | 0.038*** |
| | (0.007) | (0.006) | (0.007) | (0.007) | (0.005) | (0.005) | (0.006) |
| Education | −0.070** | −0.011 | 0.003 | −0.056* | −0.002 | 0.043[†] | 0.007 |
| | (0.026) | (0.025) | (0.027) | (0.028) | (0.021) | (0.022) | (0.024) |
| Gender | −0.217*** | 0.013 | −0.107*** | −0.111** | −0.037 | −0.323*** | −0.369*** |
| | (0.031) | (0.030) | (0.032) | (0.034) | (0.025) | (0.027) | (0.029) |
| Age | −0.010*** | 0.007*** | 0.013*** | −0.001 | 0.005*** | 0.008*** | 0.001 |
| | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) |
| Social class | 0.045** | 0.071*** | −0.123*** | 0.162*** | −0.006 | 0.026[†] | 0.094*** |
| | (0.017) | (0.016) | (0.018) | (0.019) | (0.014) | (0.014) | (0.016) |
| City | −0.125*** | −0.178*** | −0.320*** | −0.021 | −0.380*** | −0.257*** | −0.132*** |
| | (0.038) | (0.036) | (0.039) | (0.041) | (0.030) | (0.032) | (0.035) |
| Rural | −0.062 | −0.008 | −0.165*** | 0.110** | 0.253*** | 0.116*** | 0.090** |
| | (0.038) | (0.036) | (0.039) | (0.041) | (0.031) | (0.032) | (0.035) |
| Constant | −0.811*** | −0.643*** | −1.057*** | −1.178*** | −1.226*** | −1.985*** | −1.544*** |
| | (0.131) | (0.121) | (0.131) | (0.133) | (0.103) | (0.109) | (0.117) |
| *N* | 15,324 | 15,697 | 14,999 | 22,906 | 22,678 | 22,804 | 22,777 |

*Note.* Standard errors are in parentheses.
[†] *p* < .10. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

As shown, online news consumption leads to stronger support for most national institutions, with political parties being the outlier. News consumption does not affect a person's support for the national legislature. Although the results are somewhat mixed, they do show that citizens who consume online news tend to trust state institutions more so than nonusers. Given these findings, even though online news leads to more distrust of the one linkage institution listed here, the increased support for other institutions may signal broader support for democracy rather than for the people who are involved in governing (Mishler & Rose, 1997). Also, although consuming online news does not lead to more support for the national legislature, it is possible that this finding arises from political polarization. Given that electoral losers tend to be more critical of government (Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, & Listhaug, 2005), online news consumption may lead to higher evaluations of the legislature among people who support electoral winners but lower evaluations among those who support minority parties and electoral losers. The data analysis here cannot determine whether this is true, but it certainly is a plausible explanation.

Table 4 shows the impact of online news consumption on regime performance, political community, and regime principles.

As shown, people who consume online news are more satisfied with the development of democracy in their country and have higher evaluations of both current and prospective elements of governance and prospective evaluations of economic development. However, online news consumption does not have a statistically significant effect on current evaluations of the economy. Aside from this, individuals who consume news online tend to be more attached to other citizens and are more engaged politically. Overall, these findings indicate that online news produces more support for governance and citizen engagement. When combining the results from the above findings, it appears that, overall, online news is good for democratic consolidation in CEE. Although online news consumption produces no support for local government and decreases support for political parties, the increased support for institutions and regime performance seem to signal broader regime support. Further, since online news increases citizen engagement, it seems likely that consumers would be more able and encouraged to hold political elites accountable. These findings generally support Hypothesis 1: online news aids democratic consolidation in CEE.

***Table 4. Effect of Online News on Support for Democracy: Regime***
***Performance, Political Community, and Regime Principles.***

| | Satisfaction with democracy | Direction of the country | National economy | Economic expectation | Attachment to local community | Attachment to country | Discuss national politics | Discuss local politics |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Online news | 0.053* (0.024) | 0.152*** (0.024) | 0.029 (0.024) | 0.130*** (0.024) | 0.085*** (0.025) | 0.118*** (0.026) | 0.270*** (0.026) | 0.257*** (0.025) |
| Political knowledge | 0.143*** (0.012) | 0.147*** (0.013) | 0.016 (0.013) | 0.161*** (0.013) | 0.188*** (0.013) | 0.225*** (0.013) | 0.178*** (0.014) | 0.146*** (0.014) |
| Political ideology | 0.072*** (0.005) | 0.079*** (0.005) | 0.019*** (0.005) | 0.044*** (0.005) | −0.004 (0.005) | 0.031*** (0.005) | 0.024*** (0.005) | −0.010* (0.005) |
| Education | −0.044* (0.018) | 0.119*** (0.019) | −0.070*** (0.019) | −0.040* (0.019) | −0.019 (0.019) | 0.021 (0.020) | 0.085*** (0.020) | 0.064** (0.020) |
| Gender | 0.085*** (0.022) | −0.141*** (0.022) | 0.039[†] (0.022) | 0.009 (0.022) | 0.049* (0.023) | −0.092*** (0.024) | 0.214*** (0.023) | 0.127*** (0.023) |
| Age | −0.002** (0.001) | 0.001 (0.001) | −0.002** (0.001) | −0.006*** (0.001) | 0.020*** (0.001) | 0.027*** (0.001) | 0.023*** (0.001) | 0.022*** (0.001) |
| Social class | 0.178*** (0.012) | 0.168*** (0.012) | 0.358*** (0.012) | 0.135*** (0.012) | −0.159*** (0.013) | −0.103*** (0.013) | 0.147*** (0.013) | 0.128*** (0.013) |
| City | −0.044[†] (0.026) | 0.094*** (0.026) | −0.008 (0.026) | 0.121*** (0.026) | 0.221*** (0.028) | 0.204*** (0.029) | 0.208*** (0.028) | −0.233*** (0.028) |
| Rural | 0.302*** (0.027) | 0.125*** (0.028) | 0.055* (0.027) | 0.291*** (0.028) | 0.017 (0.028) | 0.194*** (0.029) | 0.080** (0.029) | −0.038 (0.029) |
| Constant cut1 | −0.135 (0.089) | 2.015*** (0.093) | −0.326*** (0.091) | −0.591*** (0.092) | −4.139*** (0.106) | −3.831*** (0.112) | 0.524*** (0.096) | −0.428*** (0.095) |
| Constant cut2 | 1.713*** (0.089) | 3.003*** (0.094) | 2.081*** (0.091) | 1.730*** (0.093) | −2.250*** (0.099) | −1.581*** (0.100) | 3.741*** (0.099) | 2.664*** (0.097) |
| Constant cut3 | 4.701*** (0.094) | | 5.577*** (0.101) | | −0.212* (0.098) | 0.617*** (0.099) | | |
| N | 23,837 | 23,323 | 23,791 | 23,344 | 24,233 | 24,237 | 24,226 | 24,171 |

*Note.* Standard errors are in parentheses.
[†] *p* < .10. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

Tables 5 and 6 show the effects of consuming news from traditional media and not consuming news on a person's support for governance in CEE.

**Table 5. Effect of News Consumption on Support for Democracy:**
**Regime Institutions and Local Government.**

| Trust in: | Justice system | Police | Military | Political parties | Local government | National government | National legislature |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Newspaper | 0.045 | 0.100** | 0.078† | 0.088* | 0.216*** | 0.169*** | 0.157*** |
| | (0.037) | (0.036) | (0.041) | (0.040) | (0.029) | (0.031) | (0.034) |
| TV news | 0.178*** | 0.264*** | 0.358*** | 0.180** | 0.330*** | 0.325*** | 0.222*** |
| | (0.051) | (0.050) | (0.054) | (0.061) | (0.043) | (0.046) | (0.049) |
| Radio | 0.056 | 0.105** | 0.205*** | 0.044 | 0.150*** | 0.175*** | 0.160*** |
| News | (0.036) | (0.035) | (0.039) | (0.040) | (0.029) | (0.030) | (0.033) |
| No news | −0.283** | −0.470*** | −0.633*** | 0.004 | −0.500*** | −0.604*** | −0.454*** |
| | (0.108) | (0.100) | (0.104) | (0.118) | (0.090) | (0.105) | (0.111) |

*Note.* Standard errors are in parentheses.
† *p* < .10. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

**Table 6. Effect of News Consumption on Support for Democracy: Regime**
**Performance, Political Community, and Regime Principles.**

| | Satisfaction with democracy | Direction of the country | National economy | Economic expectation | Attachment to local community | Attachment to country | Discuss national politics | Discuss local politics |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| News-paper | 0.111*** | 0.024 | 0.171*** | 0.063* | 0.096*** | 0.084** | 0.348*** | 0.325*** |
| | (0.026) | (0.027) | (0.027) | (0.027) | (0.028) | (0.029) | (0.028) | (0.028) |
| TV news | 0.298*** | 0.212*** | 0.243*** | 0.152*** | 0.269*** | 0.257*** | 0.210*** | 0.262*** |
| | (0.037) | (0.038) | (0.038) | (0.038) | (0.038) | (0.039) | (0.040) | (0.040) |
| Radio News | 0.109*** | 0.080** | 0.108*** | 0.072** | 0.122*** | 0.127*** | 0.117*** | 0.173*** |
| | (0.025) | (0.026) | (0.026) | (0.026) | (0.0275) | (0.0283) | (0.0273) | (0.0270) |
| No news | −0.502*** | −0.297*** | −0.487*** | −0.255*** | −0.040 | −0.274*** | −0.758*** | −0.820*** |
| | (0.077) | (0.080) | (0.079) | (0.0768) | (0.080) | (0.080) | (0.081) | (0.081) |

*Note.* Standard errors are in parentheses.
* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

From the empirical analysis, a couple of general patterns appear. First, news consumption from all media types tends to lead to broader support for governance and more engaged citizens. Second, not consuming news leads to less engaged and more critical citizens. These findings support the notion that online news has similar effects on support for governance as news consumption from other media. Further, these results mirror findings in advanced democracies that show in an era of increased media fractionalization, people who consume news tend to be more active in politics and supportive of governance (Norris, 2001; Prior, 2007). However, while these findings signal support for governance and increased engagement from news consumers, there are some potential pitfalls for democracy. Most notably, the divide between the politically engaged and nonengaged could create more polarized politics (Prior, 2007). Further, given the lack of investigative journalism in the region (Saalovara, 2015), this support could be hollow and thus not incline citizens to hold political elites accountable. Although this is certainly problematic, it is notable that the Internet and traditional media produce different effects on a person's support for political parties. These effects are noteworthy because online news may create more open criticism of political elites that could increase accountability. Although the data in their current form do not allow the testing of this idea, it is an issue that should be examined in future research.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study reveals several interesting findings about how online news shapes support for consolidating democracies. First, online news consumers are more trusting of democratic institutions than nonconsumers. The main outlier is that consuming news online lowers trust in political parties and consuming news from other mediums raises confidence in parties. Given the general patterns of party instability in CEE (Tavits, 2008) and the low party membership in Eastern Europe (Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012), online news consumers might blame democracy's woes on political elites and parties rather than on formal institutions. Indeed, this could be the case because online news tends to contain more antipolitical sentiment than other types of Internet content (Ceron, 2015). Although these effects are different than the effects of consuming news from traditional mediums, it is not unexpected. Recent trends of media ownership and publication standards of journalism in traditional media should elicit more trust and support for institutions and elites. As local oligarchs buy traditional media outlets (Stetka, 2012), journalists have softened their antipolitical rhetoric for fear of economic and, in some cases, political retribution (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013; Stetka & Örnebring, 2013). These patterns could lead to more support for the incumbent government but might weaken democracy because the trend does not allow the media to serve its watchdog role to hold elected leaders accountable. By increasing support for regime institutions and performance, but not necessarily political elites during a turbulent period, online news may increase accountability without harming democracy more broadly. Although the data cannot confirm this, it is a plausible scenario. As previous studies have shown, the Internet is a significant player in increasing the effectiveness of watchdog journalism in countries with weaker media autonomy (Stetka & Örnebring, 2013). Certainly, more research in this area is needed that accounts for government effectiveness and democratic stability to directly ensure the effects of these mediums in varying contexts.

Another interesting finding is the stark divide between how news consumers and nonconsumers support governance in Central and Eastern Europe. News consumers are more supportive of governance in CEE, and people who do not seek information tend to have less favorable views. These findings fit with

findings from advanced democracies that reveal gaps in government support and political engagement between information seekers and people who tune out of politics (Dimitrova, Shehata, Stromback, & Nord, 2014; Norris, 2001; Prior, 2007). This finding and the associated body of work provide both hope and complications for successful consolidation. On the optimistic front, citizen engagement has often been tied to successful democratization, because increased trust in democratic institutions and support for the regime leads to more stability (Booth & Seligson, 2009; Easton, 1975). On the other hand, divides between political haves and have-nots can increase polarization (Prior, 2007), and with increasing media fragmentation, polarization is seen to increase in groups who are politically engaged (Stroud, 2008, 2015). Again, more research is needed into how these divides emerge and what their consequences are in new democracies.

It is possible that some of the effects found in this study emanate from selective exposure. More politically trusting and engaged individuals may seek out information, while disaffected citizens tune out of politics. But it is also probable that engaged citizens' predispositions are reinforced by media use, thus keeping them engaged. Whether the causal arrow is that online news consumption, and also news consumption more broadly, increases support for governance or simply keeps engaged citizens more engaged and supportive, the outcome for democratic stability is the same. In either case, online news leads to more engaged and democratically supportive citizens and as such is normatively good for democratic consolidation. Furthermore, since all of these countries' media systems are rated either free or partly free, it is unlikely that individuals who support democracy would have to use the Internet to find news that is prodemocracy since they could also consume the same news on other media. As such, it is unlikely that people who support democracy would self-select into online news over other mediums. It is difficult for any study that relies on survey data to tease out endogeneity, but the current study does lay the groundwork for future research to examine these issues.

Despite this study's limitations, it does offer some insight into how the Internet can aid democratic consolidation. Previous research has focused on traditional mediums in Central and Eastern Europe or what effect the Internet has early on in democratic transitions; this study pushes the ball forward in understanding the political effects of new media in new democracies. Better surveys and even experimental research could provide even more insight into these processes and the overall effects of the Internet on democratization, but with the current study, researchers can better form predictions and expectations for future research. Future studies should also consider how polarization and the success of democratization could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the political effects of online news in CEE. Overall, this study points more toward cyberoptimism, because it seems likely that online news can serve as a normative good for democratic consolidation in CEE. By increasing trust and support for governing institutions, online news, along with other news outlets, seems to create engaged citizens—or at the very least, keeps them engaged. In new democracies, this is particularly important as engaged citizens hold elected leaders accountable and prevent them from subverting democracy (Svolik, 2013). These actions are increasingly important since contemporary democracies tend to revert to authoritarianism through the slow rolling back of open competition and civil liberties rather than quickly falling to coups or revolutions (Levitsky & Way, 2010). It is significant that online news might aid citizens in creating pressure on would-be autocrats and securing democracy.

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