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POLITICAL INFORMING
THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA ACROSS EUROPE
– FACTORS AND EFFECTS[3]

Upotreba socijalnih medija za političko informisanje u Evropi – faktori i posledice

ABSTRACT: *Social media play a significant role in political informing across Europe and the rest of the world. That is why the political consequences of social media use have become one of the prominent issues in contemporary social research. In line with that, this paper investigates how the use of social media for political informing is associated with the state of democracy in European countries and how individual satisfaction with the level of democracy and the political activism of citizens are affected by social media use. We have used data from the latest European Value Survey, conducted in 2017–2018. Our data sample included 30 countries with the referent number of more than 56000 respondents involved in the survey.*

The main finding of our research is that a deficit of democracy leads people to use social media as a part of their political informing repertoires. This finding applies to both, those who live in undemocratic circumstances and those who live in developed democracies but have a negative personal perception of democratic procedures in their country. It seems that once citizens are "forced" to use social media for political informing, they, in turn, become influenced by media content displayed there and by other peoples' ideas. In other words, the very use of social media makes them even more critical of democracy and consequently more politically active, which brings them back to social media.

KEY WORDS: internet, social media, political informing, media trust, activism

APSTRAKT: *Društveni mediji igraju važnu ulogu u snabdevanju političkim informacijama kako u Evropi tako i u svetu. Zbog toga su političke posledice upotrebe društvenih medija postale jedno od najdiskutovanijih pitanja u savremenim društvenim istraživanjima. U skladu sa tim, namera ovog rada je da se istraži u kojoj meri je upotreba društvenih medija povezana sa stepenom demokratičnosti evropskih zemalja, te kako društveni mediji utiču na individualno zadovljstvo demokratijom i na politički aktivizam građana. U te svrhe, koristili smo podatke iz poslednje Evropskog istraživanja vrednosti, koje je bilo sprovedeno tokom 2017–2018. Uzorak na koji se oslanjamo uključuje 30 zemalja sa više od 56 000 ispitanika uključenih u istraživanje.*

Najvažniji nalaz našeg istraživanja je da što je demokratija u lošijem stanju to će ljudi više oslanjati na društvene medije kao deo svojih repertoara za političko informisanje. Ovo važi ne samo za one ljude koji žive u nedemokratskim političkim sistemima, već i za one koji žive u razvijenim demokratijama ali koji kao pojedinci imaju negativnu percepciju demokratskih procedura u svojoj zemlji. Čini se da, jednom kada su građani "primorani" da koriste društvene medije za političko informisanje, oni dolaze pod uticaj medijskog sadržaja i ljudi koje pronalaze uz pomoć ovih medija. Ovo ih čini još kritičnijima spram demokratije i još više podstiče njihov politički aktivizam što ih opet okreće društvenim medijima.

KLJUČNE REČI: internet, društveni mediji, političko informisanje, poverenje u medije, aktivizam

Introduction

In many countries social media[4] have become, if not the most important or most trusted source of political information, then an inevitable factor which participates in the shaping of the public sphere. That is why the political consequences of social media use have become one of the prominent issues in contemporary social research. Fake news, post-truth, and the rise of extremism and populism are just a few of the many manifestations of the worrying consequences of internet and social media use for the purpose of political informing. However, whatever concerns we might have, it seems that there is a positive relationship between social media use and different types of politics-related behaviours, such as offline and online activism, producing and consuming political content or criticism of liberal democracy. Furthermore, several studies found that this positive relationship not only existed, but has also gradually intensified over time (Boulianne, 2017, 2018). One of the possible reasons for this trend is growing distrust of mainstream media, the delegitimization of liberal democracy, technological innovations (Web 2.0 and

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4   Social media may be defined in three parts, consisting of (a) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content; (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, and cultural products; and (c) the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume digital content (Howard and Parks, 2012). The most influential social media are Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, and so on.

3.0), to note just a few. Nevertheless, whatever reasons might be involved, which will be further elaborated in our paper, contemporary political life can no longer be imagined without the involvement of social media. We can argue the same both for different types of countries and for different types of socio-political systems. In authoritarian regimes, the internet and social media, provided they are not banned, may be the only way for people to obtain uncensored political information and organize political and civic activities (Petrović, 2018; Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). On the other hand, in more democratic political systems, social media may foster individual political engagement in a highly commercialized and media-saturated world by giving a more proactive role to individuals, once excluded from political life (Strömbäck et al., 2018).

In line with that, this paper aims to investigate how the use of social media for political informing is associated with the state of democracy in European countries and how individual satisfaction with democracy and the political activism of citizens are affected by social media use. For the empirical part of our research, we have used data from the latest European Value Survey (EVS) conducted in 2017–2018. Our sample includes 30 countries with the referent number of more than 56, 000 respondents involved in the survey.

The paper is organized as follows. The following section is about the delegitimization of liberal democracy focusing on the diminished role of the media. Section three is devoted to understanding how people obtain political information in a new digital context, which is the main consideration of our theoretical framework. In section four, we summarize the findings of previous studies on the consumption of political information through social media and propose our main hypothesis. Sections five and six are dedicated to the empirical part of our paper and include methodology and testing the hypotheses using European Value Survey data. In section seven, we present our discussion and the main conclusions drawn from our research as well as possible future research steps.

Delegitimation of democracy and dysfunctional media

Today it is more than evident that the basic institutions of the democratic political system are in a state of deep crisis. Manuel Castells (2018) describes this crisis as a rupture of liberal democracy. At the very core of this rupture is the delegitimation of liberal democracy, i.e., the lack of trust in its main institutions (Bešić, 2015) and the failure of political representation, but it is not just that. Democratic political systems have failed to give citizens a real chance to participate in politics, to express their opinions, and influence political decisions, and have also failed to ensure that the interests of citizens are acknowledged. That is why the majority of citizens, even in the most developed countries, do not believe that they are properly represented, which directly jeopardises the very idea and concept of democracy as a political system.

This crisis of liberal democracy (Öniş, 2017; Bonanno, 2000) is a result of several parallel processes that have been reinforcing one another. Some of the most important are the globalisation of economy, which led to the economic

crisis, distancing governments from the nations they represent, an identity crisis on the individual level as a direct reaction to the weakening of the nation-state (Castells, 2018). However, this crisis is probably most visible in the transformed role of the media. The once independent media are believed to be the pillars of liberal democracy (McChesney, 2016; Mughan & Gunther, 2000). Only when media are open for unlimited information sharing from different political actors and have the freedom to perform their watchdog role, they can be said to fulfil their democratic purpose (Vladisavljević, 2019).

However, today we are witnessing the constant undermining of the informative and corrective function of media. On the one hand, governments tend to impose more or less visible control over media (Pudar et al., 2019) and this is especially evident in autocratic regimes (Heinrich & Pleines, 2018). On the other hand, media are left alone and struggling to survive in a ruthless market economy of neoliberal capitalism, which imposes commercialisation as the main overreaching principle. As a result of this process, negative effects regarding the political positions and trust of media consumers become evident (Aarts et al., 2010). That is why the democratic role of media is endangered not only in undemocratic societies, but also in developed democracies as well. Bennett and Livingston (2018) believe that many democratic societies are facing profound challenges related to the legitimacy of media. They suggest that public spheres have become divided and disrupted as growing challenges confront the democratic centring principles of (a) authoritative information, (b) emanating from social and political institutions that (c) engage trusting and credulous publics. Van Aelst et al. (2017) also noticed several negative trends that are all closely linked to the processes of the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge about politics and current affairs: (1) declining supply of political information, (2) declining quality of news, (3) increasing media concentration and declining diversity of news, (4) increasing fragmentation and polarization, (5) increasing relativism and (6) increasing inequality in political knowledge.

Today, there is a contradictory situation where the amount of political information is increasing, but its share in the total media supply is decreasing. As a result, media environments are becoming more fragmented and polarized, and people tend to prefer attitude-consistent information, but at the same time most people still turn to major news providers and also consume discrepant information (Van Aelst et al. 2017).

Furthermore, there is another process that undermines the legitimacy of democracy and media, and it is related to the malicious integration of media and politics, i.e. mediatized politics. Mazzoloni and Schulc (1999) describe mediatized politics as politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent on its central functions on mass media, and is continuously being shaped by interactions with mass media. By being immersed in the media universe, our reality became a media-constructed reality, and that goes for politics too. Hence, the politics that citizens are facing is mediatized politics, and it is mainly built around scandals, corruption, demagogy, unjustness, amorality or in Castells' words, the politics of scandal (Castells, 2013). The mediatization of politics has

led citizens to not just lose their faith in politicians and politics as a whole, which is itself a devastating consequence of this process, but also to the general notion that mainstream media, a once expected source of fair and objective information, are now corrupted.

Consuming political news in the media-saturated world

It is believed that the consumption of political news is beneficial for democracy because it has a positive effect on the degree of responsiveness of the political system perceived by the citizens and on their level of satisfaction (Ceron & Memoli, 2016). However, in the second half of the twentieth century, when the number of media and the quantity of available information were limited and trust in media was significantly higher, it was much easier to find reliable news. However, today, the situation is opposite, and is characterized by information overload and disrupted trust in media; hence it has become almost impossible to make any meaningful selection of information. As a result, we have a vicious circle where low trust in media creates a demand for new sources of information, which in turn brings more contradictory information, further undermining trust in media. That is why one of the biggest challenges today is how to find credible political information. The lack of credibility and distrust in traditional media brought many people to the internet and social media as a new and unlimited source of information. Hence, this is just the beginning of a search for "objectivity" because it takes a lot of persistence, patience and media literacy to find reliable information with the help of the internet.

To understand how people obtain political information, we have combined the concepts of *political information repertoires* and *political information environment*. Early understandings of political informing emphasised the importance of mainstream media, in particular television (Esser et al. 2012). Nevertheless, today we have to broaden our understanding of political informing because, with the rapid emergence of digital technologies, the media environment was significantly transformed in the last twenty years. In order to improve the comprehension of the process of media informing, Reagan (1996) developed the concept of the *information repertoire* referring to the set of media sources that a person can select to obtain information. Each individual has a unique repertoire of information sources, which is also adapted to a specific topic. With the growing interest in some topic, information repertoires are becoming more heterogeneous and including more and more information sources, both media and non-media. Following Reagans' idea, several researchers adapted this concept to the area of political informing referring *to (socio) political information repertoires*. Wolfsfeld et al. (2016) see political information repertoires as the particular combination of sources people use to learn about political issues. Political information repertoires are considered richer when citizens combine both traditional and social media to stay in touch with political issues and improve their political skills. Building on this concept Moody (2011) finds a fundamental difference in developing socio-political information repertoires

based on someone's informing motives and media scepticism. Those who seek accurate information to orient themselves to the world, who enjoy thinking and prefer deep as opposed to shallow content, as well as those who find mainstream media to be lacking in credibility, build their information repertoires on non-news media sources of information (social media, search engines such as Google, direct communication with political actors, books, documentaries and so on). Conversely, those who just want to be distracted from reality compile their information repertories using fewer non-news media sources.

It is important to understand that sometimes trust in media is not directly associated with the decision to use or not to use a particular media outlet, because individuals do use media outlets they do not trust to find out about politics. Moody thinks that this is the result of convenience, which is prioritized over credibility in information selection. However, in our opinion, this can also be a result of people's desire to find accurate information in a situation of low trust in any media. They may take different information from multiple sources to construct their own pictures and/or narratives in a media-saturated environment.

When it comes to informing online, it is also important to stress that one should not analyze online sources of information as a uniform phenomenon. There is a difference in obtaining information through mainstream media which have their online versions (e.g. websites) or through online-only digital media or social media. Even though we can say that digital media represent an alternative source of information, they are still mass media, while only social media are built on the new logic of mass self-communication (Castells, 2013). Thus, what seems to matter is not whether media are digital or not but the characteristics of different digital media (Strömbäck et al., 2018). For example, Ceron's (2015) research revealed the differences between websites and social media, showing that the consumption of news from information/news websites is positively associated with higher trust, while access to information available on social media is linked with lower trust in political institutions.

This brings us to the concept of the political information environment as a mediated public space through which political information flows. In line with that, Esser et al. (2012) define political information environment as the extensive supply of news and public affairs content provided to a national audience by routinely available sources. The shared understanding is that if there is more political information available more people will be in a position to be exposed to it and consequently influenced by it (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Van Aelst et al. studied the political information environment from the aspect of both supply and demand for political information. They found that the quantity, quality and opportunities to access political information are the key elements of the supply-side.

Furthermore, the behaviour of political actors as key producers of political information is also an important part of the supply-side. On the other hand, it is very important to pay attention to the demand side of the media environment, i.e. the quantity and quality of information that people are interested in and skills

that will allow them to comprehend and retain this information. The supply and the demand side are mutually interdependent and should be only understood in that context.

Political informing through social media

Some of the earliest research interests about the internet were related to political views and behaviour through the prism of internet use (Bimber, 2001). It is believed that the very use of the internet was some sort of political attitude and reaction to real-life politics. In the following years, this picture of the internet was not changed much, maybe just transformed. With the invention of Web 2.0 platforms, social media became the number one choice for many who wanted to be, to a certain extent, informed or involved in political life. But then again, in parallel with the technological transformation, growing distrust in mainstream media also led people to include social media in their political information repertoires. Numerous research studies have shown that citizens' trust in media has never been on such a low level both in the US (Gallup & Knight, 2018) and in Europe (EBU, 2018) and in general (Newman et al., 2018). Consequently, the mistrust of mainstream media opened room for alternative sources of information, primarily social media (Ceron, 2015; Ardèvol-Abreu, Hooker & Zúñiga, 2018, EBU 2018). For example, Fletcher & Park (2017) conducted a cross-national study in 11 countries on 21,524 respondents and found that those who had a lower level of trust in mainstream media tended to rely more on alternative media, such as social media, in their search for news reports. Another finding was that those who were searching for alternative news sources were more willing to engage in online political participation through sharing or commenting on information.

Distrust in mainstream media is especially strong in undemocratic countries where the media are subjected to more or less obvious control and censorship (Rød & Weidmann, 2015, EBU 2018.). That is why many citizens from these countries turn to the internet and social media as sources of political information (Karakaya & Glazier 2019). Broadening access to the internet and social media allowed citizens to approach uncensored news more easily and made government control of media narratives more difficult. A bulk of research has shown that social media have played an essential role in breaking through governmental control of media in Arab countries (Howard et al., 2011), Russia (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015), China (Qin et al., 2017), Turkey (Haciyakupoglu & Zhang, 2015) Azerbaijan (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012), Serbia (Petrovic, 2018).

Based on the above, we propose our first hypothesis (**H1**): Those who live in undemocratic political conditions consume political information from social media more often compared to those who live in democratic political conditions.

Another important question is related to the effect of being exposed to political information through social media. In other words, does social media use for informing purposes also influence views on politics in general? It is

believed that the plurality of political information, which is not filtered through the gatekeepers of mainstream media or government-related censors, can foster the development of critical thought (Ceron & Memoli, 2016). On the one hand, the unmediated nature of social media increases the likelihood of news being filtered and interpreted by users, according to the pre-existing ideological bias. On the other hand, the co-existence of pluralistic and polarized views in the interactive Web 2.0 favours public discussion and debate, but such debates can take the form of a 'flame' rather than compromise.

Several studies conducted in Europe have shown that the consumption of news from mainstream media is associated with higher confidence in political institutions and higher satisfaction with democracy, while access to information available on social media is linked with a lower level of trust in the political institutions. For example, Ceron and Memoli (2016) found that the mere usage of the internet or social media seems to be unrelated to the level of democratic support, but what makes a difference is the consumption of news. The consumption of online news can make a difference, even though this effect is positive when users consume news from online traditional media while social media has a negative effect, which is mediated by the level of online disagreement and the potential emergence of 'flaming'. This association is even stronger when the content broadcasted by traditional media is aimed at supporting the political *status quo* (Ceron 2015, Aarts et al., 2011.).

Chang (2018) used data drawn from the 2014 International Social Survey Program (34 countries with a total number of 49,807 respondents) and found that reading a newspaper, listening to the radio, and using the internet for political information is negatively related to the level of satisfaction with democracy, while watching political news on television is not associated with the level of satisfaction with democracy. In other words, people who obtain political information through a newspaper, radio, and the internet tend to be less satisfied with democracy.

However, there are studies with different, i.e. less conclusive findings. Based on the data related to Central European Countries (CEE) drawn from three Eurobarometer surveys (conducted between 2012 and 2014) Placek (2017) finds that gathering news from social media has a positive and statistically significant effect on trust in the military, national government, and legislature, a significant negative effect on trust in the police and judicial system, and no effect on trust in local government and political parties. Still, Placek concluded that social media use conforms to expectations regarding the pro-democratic role of social media and is associated with higher personal support for democratic regimes.

This brings us to our second hypothesis **(H2):** Those who perceive their country as less democratic consume political news from social media more often compared to those who perceive their country as more democratic.

The literature on social media also indicates that those who use this channel of communication are more likely to be politically active. However, not every use of social media is related to political activism. Those who use it for political informing are more likely to have a defined view on political issues and tend to be politically active compared to those who use this type of media

for other purposes (Karakaya & Glazier 2019). Being exposed to news on the internet and social media has been found to predict both traditional (offline) and online political participation (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011).[5] There is some evidence that even accidental exposure to political information on social media can be positively and significantly correlated to online participation (Valeriani & Vaccari 2016).

From 2009 to 2018 Shelley Boulianne conducted several meta-studies, encompassing 20 to 300 researches, in order to investigate the relationship between digital media use and engagement in civic and political life. These studies covered a period of over 20 years, including more than 50 countries and data from more than 300,000 respondents. In each of the meta-studies, Boulianne found a positive relationship between digital media use and participation in civic and political life. The trend data have shown a pattern of small and positive average coefficients turning into substantial and positive coefficients which confirmed the existence of a relationship between digital media use and political engagement. Boulianne believes that these larger coefficients could be explained by the diffusion of digital technology among people and across the globe, with changes in the types of use, particularly the rise of social media. Skoric et al. (2016), in their meta-study that reviews 22 empirical research studies published from 2007 to 2013 on the relationship between social media use and citizen engagement, also suggested that social media use has generally had a positive relationship with civic and political engagement. The most robust finding in this study concerns the relationship between informational uses of social media and participation, which was found to be positive and significant across all studies and which yielded a moderate average correlation size ($r = .37$).

In line with this, we define our third hypothesis (**H3**): those who consume political information from social media are more politically active compared to those who rarely or never use social media for political informing. In the following sections, we test the three hypotheses proposed above.

Data method and measurement

We use the latest European Value Survey data conducted in 2017 –2018. In this data file, there are 30 countries presented in graph 1 with the referent number of respondents included in the research.

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5   Digital participation in this study was divided into passive participation (visited websites of the municipality, of the government and public administration, and sites with political content) and active participation (online reaction to a message or article on the internet, signed online petitions, and participation in online polls). Similarly, traditional participation was divided into passive participation (retrieved books or information about political or social issues, signed petitions, and followed newspapers and television channels in election times to learn about politics and political parties) and active participation (letters sent to newspapers or magazines to comment on articles, protests and complaints by mail or telephone about decisions taken by the government or public administration, participation in demonstrations, and active engagement in discussions during debates or lectures.)

Fig. 1. List of countries with the referent number
of respondents[6]
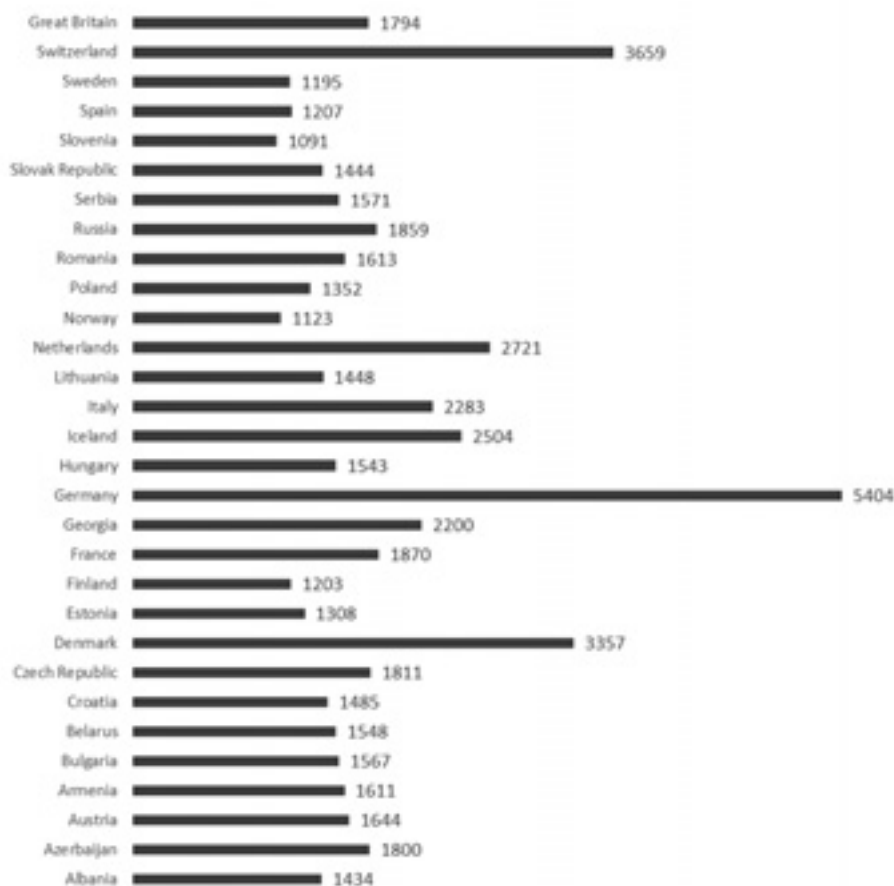
We used three dependent variables. The first is the main one, and it is the usage of social media as a source for political information. The other two are the usage of TV and daily press for political information. Each dependent is set as a dummy, where 1 is coded for those who use these media outlets as a source of information at least once o weak, while 0 is for those who use them less often or never. In Table 1, we present the distribution of the dependents in each country.

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6   Number of respondents is corrected with demographic calibration post-stratification sampling
    weights.

Table 1. Using media for political information

Country	Social media	TV	Newspapers	Country	Social media	TV	Newspapers
Albania	21,8%	67,5%	16,7%	Iceland	64,8%	72,8%	62,9%
Azerbaijan	48,5%	72,9%	7,8%	Italy	28,5%	60,5%	34,1%
Austria	41,9%	76,0%	69,1%	Lithuania	53,9%	80,7%	42,5%
Armenia	54,7%	58,2%	14,5%	Netherlands	34,9%	57,8%	47,0%
Bulgaria	32,6%	82,9%	29,7%	Norway	49,7%	65,1%	69,7%
Belarus	57,6%	80,2%	46,4%	Poland	38,8%	72,9%	27,7%
Croatia	30,3%	57,3%	27,5%	Romania	31,0%	69,0%	16,9%
Czech Republic	33,6%	60,4%	30,2%	Russia	43,2%	78,2%	28,8%
Denmark	50,1%	72,5%	49,8%	Serbia	26,8%	68,7%	39,6%
Estonia	50,9%	75,5%	52,4%	Slovak Republic	29,8%	66,4%	39,8%
Finland	41,9%	63,5%	61,9%	Slovenia	24,6%	53,1%	24,6%
France	22,0%	57,7%	28,1%	Spain	37,2%	76,6%	43,0%
Georgia	33,0%	68,6%	12,5%	Sweden	45,7%	61,9%	59,9%
Germany	46,8%	79,9%	58,1%	Switzerland	43,6%	62,0%	66,5%
Hungary	32,1%	62,5%	25,4%	United Kingdom	32,3%	51,4%	31,6%

As independent controls, we use individual-level demographic controls. Gender is coded as a dummy variable (1 for male, and 0 for female). For education ISCED nine-level coding scheme is used, while for individual income ten-level scale based on 'deciles' is used. Age is used as a quantitative variable. In addition, we used second (country) level predictors in order to control the effect of the main predictors. First, it is GDP *per capita*, transformed in standardized z scores. Additionally, we used an aggregate level variable percentage of internet usage per country, as well as the percentage of social media use (from Eurostat). Both of them are also transformed into standardized z scores.

When it comes to our predictors, first, we used the Freedom House Index of Democracy[7] (FHI). This variable is first converted, since the authentic score signifies smaller value for a higher level of democracy, and then, it is also transformed into a standardized z score. The second predictor is political activism (can be referred to as political participation). This variable is constructed as a factor regression score based on four types of political action, and these are: signing a petition, joining boycotts, attending lawful demonstrations and joining unofficial strikes. Then we used a single variable indicating the perception of TV reporting in favour of the ruling party. The variable is used as a dummy variable, i.e. 1 is coded for those who think that TV gives preferential treatment to the ruling party very often and often, while as 0 are coded for those who think that this happens less often or never. Finally, we constructed a variable score named 'democratic election'. The variables for the score are:

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7   https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2018-table-country-scores. The FHI score is converted in order to provide more intuitive interpretations of the logit coefficients since the original scale assigns a lower score for a higher level of democracy.

– how often in a country's elections: opposition candidates are prevented from running
– how often in a country's elections: TV news favours the ruling party
– how often in a country's elections: voters are bribed
– how often in country's elections: journalists provide fair coverage of elections
– how often in a country's elections: election officials are fair
– how often in a country's elections: rich people buy elections
– how often in a country's elections: voters are threatened with violence at polling stations

Each variable is based on a four-point Likert scale. This variable is constructed as a regression factor score of the number variable claiming that elections in the country are democratic. Higher values on variable indicate a perception of democratic elections and *vice versa*.

Results

We tested our hypotheses in a number of multilevel binary logistic regression models. This approach was necessary since we have a nested data structure, i.e. our observation is clustered within countries. We used a fixed-effect estimate for controls and random effect estimates in the main predictors. We used AIC and BIC as model fit criteria. In Models 1 to 7, the dependent variable is the use of social media for political information at least once a week. In Model 8 it is the use of TV for political information at least once a week as dependent. In Model 9 the use of daily newspapers for political information at least once a week is the dependent variable. Model 1, Model 2 and Model 3 are only fixed effect estimates. Model 4 is the random effect for political activism estimate. Model 5 is the random effect for TV coverage that favours the governing party. Model 6, Model 7, Model 8 and Model 9 are random effects for democratic elections. These models are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Multilevel binary logistic regression analysis.
Fixed and Random effect estimates

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Intercept	-.450**	.219	.243	.389**	.268	.382*	.475**	-1.523**	-2.588**
	(.086)	(.155)	(.139)	(.133)	(.151)	(.157)	(.150)	(.124)	(.169)
Male		.176**	.176**	.121**	.169**	.165**	.105*	.306**	.244**
		(.046)**	(.046)	(.043)	(.039)	(.043)	(.043)	(.031)	(.043)
Age		-.030**	-.030**	-.030**	-.031**	-.029**	-.028**	.041**	.029**
		(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.002)	(.002)
Education		.128**	.128**	.095**	.125**	.119**	.090**	.055**	.127**
		(.019)	(.019)	(.018)	(.016)	(.017)	(.017)	(.018)	(.013)
Income		.046**	.045**	.035**	.046**	.043**	.037**	.049**	.054**
		(.009)	(.009)	(.008)	(.010)	(.007)	(.007)	(.010)	(.011)
GDP			.125	-.050	.098	.180	.109	-.233	.412**
			(.118)	(.127)	(.119)	(.126)	(.141)	(.133)	(.158)
FHI			-.279**	-.321**	-.241**	-.224**	-.311**	-.182*	-.040
			(.075)	(.083)	(.077)	(.084)	(.086)	(.091)	(.172)
Internet use			.143	.123	.167	.112	.118	-.048	.078
			(.105)	(.123)	(.104)	(.128)	(.142)	(.135)	(.189)
Social media use			.131	.187*	.168**	.111	.120	-.010	.039
			(.089)	(.093)	(.064)	(.087)	(.092)	(.100)	(.133)
Political activism				.392**			.352**	.223**	.256**
				(.023)			(.026)	(.037)	(.024)
TV news favours the governing party					.114**				
					(.044)				
Democratic elections						-.097*	-.104*	.271**	.165**
						(.046)	(.046)	(.027)	(.043)
Random intercept by countries	.224**	.204**	.162**	.195**	.243**	.220**	.244**	.231	.360**
	(.060)	(.055)	(.047)	(.058)	(.070)	(.065)	(.073)	(.068)	(.105)
Random Intercept by slope				-.018	-.077**	.031	.031	.004*	-.017
				(.016)	(.029)	(.026)	(.028)	(.019)	(.032)
Random slope by countries				.017**	.049**	.060**	.060**	.014**	.046**
				(.006)	(.049)	(.018)	(.018)	(.006)	(.015)
AIC	232147,9	204798,1	204816,3	187112,0	179383,8	143047,8	135715,3	142485,9	139769,5
BIC	232156,8	204806,8	204825,1	187137,9	179409,7	143072,9	135740,3	142510,9	139794,5

Standard error reported parenthesis.   **p<.01   *p<.05

Table 2 presents nine models. The first model is an 'empty model' representing logit intercept, as well as random intercept by countries. In Model 2 we introduced individual level controls. It can be seen that men use social media for political information more than women as well as that the older someone is, the tendency for using social media for information decreases. In addition, we noticed a positive association between individual education and income and

the usage of social media for political information. In Model 3 we introduce four second-level variables, transformed into z scores. It can be seen that GDP per capita, internet use, and social media use are not a significant predictor of social media usage for political information. The last one (social media usage as predictor) claims that the sole fact of social media usage is not a predictor of obtaining political information via social media, and this finding is in accordance to the theoretical elaboration presented above.

However, the main finding for our hypothesis is that the Freedom House Index of Democracy (FHI) is negatively associated with the usage of social media for political information. This means that the probability of using social media for political information at the individual level decreases by 32.2% for each standard deviation of increasement of FHI. In other words, the more democratic a country is, according to FHI, there is less need to use social media for political information, or *vice versa*, the less democracy is developed in the country, it is more probable that individuals would use social media to be politically informed. This is in accordance with our H1.

In model 4 we introduced political activism as an additional predictor to show that, in general, the higher the level of individual political activism, the higher the level of usage of social media for political information, as we claimed in H3. In addition, we used this variable as the control for models 7 to 9. Model 4 allows the main predictor (political activism) to vary across the countries, and we can see significant variation in both parameters, random slope, and random intercept.

In model 5 we introduced as the predictor a dummy variable that measures the view that 'TV coverage favours the governing party'. The variable is coded as 1 for those who think that TV coverage favours the ruling party very often and often, and as 0 for those who claim that this this does not happen often or not at all. In other words, we use this variable as a proxy for the perception of media democratic deficiencies. This variable is also allowed to vary across countries, and we can see significant differences in random intercept and slope. However, intercept and slope co-vary, so we have the same pattern of variation of slope and intercept across the countries. Results show that for the main predictor (preferential TV coverage) in this model is Exp B=1.12, which is to say that there is 12% more probability for those who think that TV coverage favours the ruling party to use social media as a source of information.

Model 6 introduces the perception of democratic elections in the country at the individual level. This variable is also set as a random variable, and we found significant differences between the countries for both parameters, slope and intercept, and no co-variation between them. The very coefficient suggests that those who perceive elections in the country as undemocratic are 10.2% more likely to use social media as a source for information, and this is in accordance with H2.

Model 7 is the same as model 6, but the effect of perception of democratic elections is additionally controlled with the level of political activism. We

found that with this additional control the negative effect of the perception of democratic elections on social media use for political information is even stronger.

Model 8 and Model 9 are introduced to strengthen our main argument, and this is that democratic deficits intensify the usage of social media for political information. In order to provide additional evidence, it is to be assumed that the effects of the perception that elections are democratic are supposed to be positive if we use TV and daily newspapers as dependent variables. This is precisely what we found in these models. It can be seen that the more the elections are perceived as democratic, the more one tends to use TV and daily newspapers as a source of information. Hence, we have exactly the opposite finding for social media usage *versus* TV and press, as far as the perception of democracy in the country is concerned, which provides additional evidence. More precisely, democratic deficits bring people to use social media more as a source of political information, while it is the opposite for using TV and daily newspapers. Therefore, to conclude, if individuals perceive that a country is democratic, they tend to use TV and newspapers as a source of political information. If this is not the case, they will use social media to be politically informed.

Discussion and conclusion

Findings presented above portray how using social media matters for democracy. First of all, social media use for political informing is in a direct relationship with the state of democracy in a country, which provides evidence for our first hypothesis. In other words, in less democratic countries, citizens will use social media for political informing more often than those who live in more democratic countries. Furthermore, those who on an individual level perceive democratic procedures in their country as deficient are those who include social media in their information repertoires more than those who do not have this perception. This finding is in line with our second hypothesis. In other words, even if a country is rated as democratic, citizens with a different opinion will turn more to social media as a source of information. On the other hand, those who are more satisfied with the country's democratic procedures rely more on mainstream media. This finding is in line with the results published in Cerone & Memoli (2016), a study conducted in 2012 in EU countries. They also found that the consumption of news from traditional media is associated with a higher level of confidence in political institutions and of satisfaction with democracy, while access to information available on social media is linked with a lower level of trust in political institutions (Cerone & Memoli, 2016). Consequently, people redefine their political information repertoires, giving more room to social media and non-media sources, which, in their opinion, escape governmental control and censorship. This does not mean that they will completely exclude media they trust less, as shown by Moody (2011), but they will certainly actively seek information through uncensored sources.

The reasons behind this rationale are quite obvious and elaborated in many different studies (Petrović & Petrović, 2017; Castells, 2015; Howard et al., 2011). As we have discussed in the first section of this paper, governmental control of mainstream media is one of the main characteristics of undemocratic regimes (Castels 2013). It seems that in more democratic countries, where traditional media are more open to different views and opinions, social media are less needed as a source of political information. We confirmed this thesis both at the individual and country level. The main argument, which is consistent with our research, is that the very perception of democracy in the referent country led politically active individuals to use social media to obtain reliable information. In other words, there is an important correlation between critical thinking and a critical standpoint toward traditional media, which directs citizens to use social media as a source of political information. This means that for a number of individuals there is a clear view that traditional media present biased political information, which led them to turn to social media. We clearly confirmed these findings by providing evidence that if individuals perceive their country as democratic they tend to use traditional media as a source of information more often than social media, and *vice versa*. Therefore, we can conclude that the use of social media as a source of political information is a clear critical reflection of the undemocratic role of traditional media.

Again, this is the state of 'the day', that is to say, it is the case at this very moment. Nevertheless, recent trends are rather worrying. In the last decade, the erosion of liberal democracy has been present more than ever. New authoritarianism, populism and anti-democratic tendencies are noted not only in democratic newcomers but in old Western democracies as well (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The new/old power structures have recognized the role of social media, which could potentially jeopardize their positions. This is why we found these structures so active in the social media space through using fake profiles, fake news and social media bots to pollute the space of political information in social media (Petrović, 2018). Bearing in mind that they have almost unlimited financial, institutional and other resources at their disposal, it is easy to assume that they will do everything in their power to get their hands on social media as they have already done on traditional media. In fact, they have already done so, as noted in political practice (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Petrović, 2018). Consequently, it will become more and more difficult to find reliable political information on social media, which puts critical citizens again in the position of searching for new media and sources of information. This is not just a prediction of a negative scenario, but rather a scenario based on existing practices and relations between power structures and media in general.

The third important finding of our study is that those who use social media for political informing are also more politically active in everyday life i.e., our third hypothesis stands. This fits well with previous studies, which found that political informing effects of social media can foster political activism, as discussed in the first part of the paper. However, one of the limitations of our data is the lack of evidence regarding the direction of the causal mechanism linking

political informing through social media and political activism. Therefore, we cannot explicitly say whether political informing through social media fosters political activism, or it is the other way around. On the one hand, as Boulianne (2015) observed, using social media and other news sources could build a citizen's awareness about what is happening in the world. Expanded access to diverse political information might strengthen citizen participation by improving political knowledge and stimulating political discussion. The more citizens know about the world, the more likely they are to find something that interests them enough to become engaged in the political process. On the other hand, it is also possible that those who are more aware of various political issues and have a stronger interest in community and political affairs tend to more actively seek new sources of political information. However, based on our theoretical discussion about the importance of free political informing in the preservation of representative democracy and based on the results of our research which have confirmed H1 and H2, we are closer to the conclusion that citizens' political interest and activism are what brings them to social media and not the other way around. Once citizens switch to social media for political informing, they become more influenced by their content and other people's ideas, making them even more critical towards democracy and consequently more politically active.

A better understanding of this relationship entails depicting deterministic mechanisms between social media use for political informing and satisfaction with democracy, as well as with political activism, and will be the subject of our future research. In addition, trust in governmental institutions and media should also be included in the investigation of this causal mechanism as well as the level of political knowledge and involvement.

Furthermore, future research should consider different actor activities that might diminish the role of social media in political informing. This is especially visible in authoritarian regimes where, dominantly, governments take actions to dissuade citizens from using social media for political informing or activism (Pearce & Kendzior 2012). In the last decade, authoritarian regimes developed different mechanisms of computational propaganda which are becoming more and more successful in polluting the social media environment and making any constructive discussion meaningless (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Petrović, 2018). Developed democracies are not immune to the pollution of the social media environment either (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The Cambridge Analytica scandal, Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections, spreading of fake news, the rise of online populism and extremism are just a few among many things that have hurt social media in developed democracies.

As a result of these developments, new insights related to social media use for political informing show that trust in social media has been eroding over the past few years (Shearer and Grieco, 2019, Newman et al., 2018). That is why our findings have to be understood as only temporary. At this moment we cannot predict whether social media will continue to lose their credibility and consequently their place in political information repertoires, or some new socio-political or technological developments will prevent this from happening.

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