

Introduction

Social media, politics and democracy in post-transition Central and Eastern Europe

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I mean, who the fuck are you? You hate bloggers, you mock Twitter, you don't even have a Facebook page. You are the one that does not exist!

(Birdman, 2014)

If there ever was an ideological choice, this is it: the message – the new cyber-democracy in which millions can directly communicate and organise themselves, by-passing centralised state control – covers up a series of disturbing gaps and tensions. The first point of irony is that everyone who looks at the Time cover doesn't see others with whom they are supposed to be in direct exchange – what they see is a mirror-image of themselves.

(Žižek, 2006)

Marking the new territories: social media and Central and Eastern Europe

The above citations, the morphogenesis of which comes from global and local popular culture representations of social media, encapsulate some of the qualities of the theme of this book: the relevance of social media in various realms of politics, and the consequence of their adaptation for citizen-users as well as for democracies. The aim of this edited volume is to provide insights to the emerging trends in political communication engendered by social media among democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In recent years, the analysis of social media has been a burgeoning area of inquiry in media and communication studies. Whilst social media have emerged in non-political settings, it is predominantly the democratising potential of Web 2.0 that enthused scholarly interest in their analysis, gradually leading to the advancement of multi-disciplinary analytical approaches. Importantly, social media became a significant area of interest in political communication because of the democratic deficit that Western democracies have been undergoing (see Norris, 2011), and their potential to break this trend by enhancing political participation. Whilst the research on social media and the politics of Western democracies is being carried out and reported by an overwhelming amount of excellent scholarship, the story of the Eastern part of the continent's engagement with social media is yet to

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be told. This book aims to contribute to this story, by advancing the discussion on trends in political communication, and indeed by opening a debate on a post-transitional approach to analysis of media in CEE.

The growing body of research on social media in politics points to the broad consensus of the academic community concerning the increased dynamic of changes in contemporary political communication. As the recent events of the ‘Arab Spring’, often instigated or facilitated by social media, have revealed (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013), multiple manifestations of those changes have occurred in transition democracies as well as among Western democracies. While still in its germinal stages, and far from producing unanimous results regarding either the impact of social media on political mobilisation or the extent and character of citizen participation in the political processes, inquiry into links between social media and politics has been defining trends in the domains of political communication and beyond. Our volume responds to the call for research on the uses of social media by a diverse set of political actors (Papacharissi, 2012). To that end, this book accounts for different types of actors using social media in political struggles: politicians and political parties, campaigning groups, interest and professional groups, all engaged in the construction of political news in CEE.

CEE is a fertile ground for exploring links between social media and politics, first and foremost because the region provides us with fascinating examples of how political actors use social media, and how citizens of the region struggle to adapt to new, digitalised political environments. As observed elsewhere in the world, the best examples of the increasing symbiosis between politics and the world of social media often come from the highest ranked politicians in the country. Estonian president Toomas Hendrik Ilves @IlvesToomas and the former Russian president and the current prime minister, Dimitrii Medvedev @MedvedevRussia and @MedvedevRussiaE have achieved Twitter stardom. Both politicians tweet in English as well as in Estonian or Russian, respectively (Medvedev has gone as far as to have separate accounts for each language). Yet, more importantly, they both tweet themselves, in an attempt to personalise their engagement with citizens and beyond. Other examples concern various unique forms of the application of social media in political life; for example, ‘digital office hours’ on Twitter, during which politicians personally respond to citizens’ inquiries. This practice was taken up by Valdis Zatlers, Latvian president from 2007 to 2011, and a former Polish prime minister, Donald Tusk (2007–2014), who increased the number of his followers by adopting a similar approach (Köker, 2013). What is also interesting is that the CEE region provides examples of different contexts in which social media reshape political settings: these vary from social movements (e.g. the Committee for Defence of Democracy in Poland @Kom_Obr_Dem, or #PussyRiots managed by Pussy Riots in Russia) to traditional world politics players (e.g. @RadioFreeEurop – Radio Free Europe in the Czech Republic or @RussianEmbassy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ London Embassy), further blurring the

boundaries of what we understand by political communication among the contemporary, fragmented media ecologies.

Whilst traditional divisions between ‘high politics’ and ‘low politics’ seem to have faded a long time ago, nowadays foreign policy ministers and diplomats engage in ‘twiplomacy’ or ‘hashtag diplomacy’, the practice embodied by one of the most recognisable diplomats of the region, Radek Sikorski, Poland’s former minister of foreign affairs (2007–2014).¹ The crossovers between social media and world politics, however fascinating, also have the potential to hinder democracy, as currently observed with the rise of ‘post-truth politics’² (Suiter, 2016) and hyper-fragmented forms of mediation of politics. The 2016 US elections brought about several journalistic investigations into so-called ‘fake news stories’, the production of which was in a few cases traced back to the CEE region, and revealed the social media-enabled production and circulation of such stories (Channel 4 News, 2016). In some instances, fake news media stories were reported as Moscow’s propaganda-intended intervention in the 2016 US presidential election (Timberg, 2016). Finally, among other examples of the use of social media in the realm of Russian politics, is the information hybrid-warfare, whereby state institutions governing soft power are the prominent users of social media and use it in an attempt to advance Russia’s global interests and influence (Simons, 2014).

When mapping the arrival of new digital technologies in CEE and the way they have facilitated a reshaping of media landscapes in the region, it is crucial to emphasise that, in many states, the attempted dominance of the world’s biggest brands has met with stiff competition from local social networking platforms. Among the most popular are V Kontakte (VK), a Russian social networking site (80 million users) with similar interface and functionalities to that of Facebook; Odnoklassniki, a Russian social networking site (65 million users) designed to help users reconnect with school friends; and Nasza Klasa (NK), a Polish social network (11 million users) which has a similar purpose, to name just a few. While following the same networking logic and often design, they provide a local alternative to global social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, and rapidly became spaces for political debate (Wirtualne Media, 2014; Emoderation, 2016). To that end, the contemporary 2.0 Internet-based social media platforms provide an interesting subject of analysis, not only because of the numbers of actors using them, but also because of the growing amount of emerging digital spaces in which politics is enacted.

Despite data (Emoderation, 2016) suggesting that in 2017 there will be 223 million users of social media, constituting an overall total of 52 per cent of Internet users in the region (Russia included), specific academic studies of social media in CEE politics are still relatively limited (for exceptions see, Koc-Michalska et al., 2014; Onuch, 2015). Henceforth, the role of social media in CEE politics raises questions about changes to political communication in this part of the world. In addition to locating CEE politics among the literature on social media and participatory democracies, we consider changes to

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political communication processes in ten states which share similarities in terms of their political past and the ways in which they present opportunities to analyse forms of democratic consolidation. All of the democracies included in this volume shared the past experience of political experiments with Sovietism (Berendt, 2009). Their political communication traditions were formerly classified as part of the ‘Sovietised’ media model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) and, with the exception of Russia and Ukraine, they became member states of the European Union (although Russia and Ukraine provide insights to democratisation through social media when considering grassroots political participation and the ‘Europeanisation impulse’). Yet, the inclusion of Russia and Ukraine in this volume is not accidental – it allows us to account for the different patterns of the application of social media in politics and explicitly illustrates regional diversities.

We argue that this much needed approach to the media studies analysis of CEE enables us to unpack the complexities of relationships between social media and changes in political communication. In that respect, we report state-of-the-art research on social media in the region. In the search for common themes, we also discuss tensions between conceptual models of political communication and empirical realities studied by the authors. To problematise the role of social media in the politics of CEE states, we ask and answer the following research questions: What are the implications of the appropriation of social media by politics for the CEE democracies? What are the global lessons that can be learnt by an analysis of social media in CEE? What are the links between traditional media and social media in the region? Should we discuss political communication in the states of CEE through the prism of the legacy of their media systems, or can we make a case for the post-transitional approach to studies of political communication in the region? And finally, what kind of challenges does the increasing use of social media as an alternative to traditional media represent in terms of the established models of political communication (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Hallin and Mancini, 2012)?

Having pointed to a pluralism of actors using social media in political communication, that is ‘the process by which language and symbols, employed by leaders media, or citizens, exert intended or unintended effects on political cognitions, attitudes, or behaviours of individuals or on outcomes that bear on the policy of a nation, state, or community’ (Perloff, 2014, p. 30), at this stage it is also crucial for us to define three key concepts useful in navigating the reader through this volume: political participation, political mobilisation, and, finally, social media. For *political participation*, we adopt the definition by Verba et al. (1995, p. 38) who refer to

activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies.

Political mobilisation, on the other hand, is about shifting power relations and is frequently used in studies of politics and technology to refer to actors' struggle for political action. For example, Schier (2000) defines mobilisation as

catalysing any of an array of actions within and across relatively large, heterogeneous groups (such as political parties)

and, in the context of Web 2.0 campaigns, it is the practice aimed at

using the Web to persuade and equip campaign supporters to promote the candidate to others, both online and off-line.

(Foot and Schneider, 2006, p. 132)

Mobilisation is a prerequisite to political participation, and *social media* have the technological potential to enable this process. Both popular culture representations as well as academic definitions capture those dynamic sensibilities of social media. For example, Mandiberg (2012, p. 2) provides a summary of the associations that have been attributed to the concept of social media and captured peoples' imagination by entering into popular culture (e.g. 'user-generated contents'; 'convergence culture'; 'participatory media'; 'computer-programming-oriented Web 2.0'). By now, scholars have developed multiple definitions of social media, but in this volume we broadly define social media as techno-social platforms

that increase our ability to share, to co-operate, with one another, and to take collective action, all outside of the framework of traditional institutions and organizations.

(Shirky, 2008, p. 20)

In recent years, scholarship at the crossroads of political participation and social media has become one of the most dynamic research areas in studies on politics. So far, media studies scholarship on CEE has mainly revealed struggles for media independence, and for the institutional independence of media from politics. Whereas our volume explores, among other themes, whether social media have challenged the established patterns and changed the balance of power in the contested field of political communication in CEE. This volume makes a contribution to the field of media and communication studies by arguing for a dynamic rather than static approach to the analysis of the adoption of social media by political actors and citizens alike in the context of the evolution of political communication in the post-transition era. In this regard, our volume emphasises the role of social media in *changing* political communication among CEE democracies by unpacking the complexities of this relationship in nine, empirical chapters, covering the following states: the Czech Republic, Romania, Croatia and Hungary, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania.

Media democracies, hybridity and fragmentation: breaking up the ‘bloc’ logic

If there were one region in the world where the struggle to build or, to be more precise, to rebuild democracies on a regional scale was most successful, the CEE has no equal in the speed of change (Jakubowicz, 2007; Downey and Mihelj, 2012). The CEE’s regional experience in consolidating democratic regimes has frequently been seen by commentators as an example to follow, and this assumption was mirrored during the latest regional wave of democratisation manifested by the Arab Spring (2011 onwards). Despite the advances made in building democratic institutions, striving to shape media ecologies in the region to the tune of pluralist virtues, freedom of speech and individual civil liberties, the region still has a long way to go in terms of building participatory democracies. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (2016), none of the democracies covered within this volume are actually classified as ‘full democracies’ (see Table 0.1). Its analysis provides the following interpretation of the state of democracies in the region:

‘Flawed democracies’ are concentrated in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia. Eastern Europe does not have a single ‘full democracy’, as some of the region’s most politically developed nations, such as Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia, have suffered bouts of political instability and popular support for democracy is surprisingly low. Despite progress in Latin American democratisation in recent decades, many countries in the region have fragile democracies. Levels of political

Table 0.1 Levels of democratisation among states discussed in this volume

	Rank	Overall score	Electoral process	Quality of government	Political participation	Political culture	Civil liberties
Czech Republic	25	7.94	9.58	7.14	6.67	6.88	9.14
Romania	59	6.68	9.17	5.71	5.00	5.00	8.53
Croatia	52	6.93	9.17	6.07	5.56	5.63	8.24
Hungary	54	6.84	9.17	6.07	4.44	6.88	7.65
Slovenia	36	7.57	9.58	7.14	6.67	5.63	8.82
Bulgaria	46	7.14	9.17	6.07	7.22	5.00	8.24
Russia	132	3.32	2.67	2.86	5.00	2.50	3.53
Ukraine	88	5.70	5.83	3.93	6.67	5.00	7.06
Poland	48	7.09	9.58	5.71	6.67	4.38	9.12
Lithuania	38	7.54	9.58	6.07	6.11	6.25	9.71

Source: The authors, adapted from the Economist Intelligence Unit (2016).

participation are generally low and democratic cultures are weak. Asia has been catching up with Latin America and eastern Europe when it comes to the number of ‘flawed democracies’ (and has overtaken eastern Europe in terms of its average regional score), adding three more to give it a total of 13 in 2015, compared with 15 in both Latin America and eastern Europe.

(Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016, p. 2)

A departure point for our analysis of the significance of social media in politics in CEE is the recognition that their analysis requires a different set of common denominators than those traditionally used in the analysis of the relationship of media and politics in the region. Whilst the region shares political experiences of democratisation in terms of timing and direction of political transition (e.g. from Sovietism to democracies), we argue that each democracy in CEE has developed a unique political culture and is defined by different political traditions. Because of that, the role of media and political communication in public life among those states has to be addressed by accounting for particular trajectories of change. The 1989 transition of political economies, which has been the dominant *explananda* in the analysis of media and political communication on the region (e.g. Dobek-Ostrowska and Głowacki, 2016), from today’s perspective reads as outdated because of more recent, and we argue, nuanced and evolutionary diversifications in media ecologies in CEE.

By reproducing the notion of ‘political transformation’ with reference to the 1989 revolutions (in a metaphorical sense), media and communication researchers examining the region might run a risk of it having an ideological bearing on scholarship rather than being an analytical reflection of the relationship between media and democracies in the CEE region. In hindsight, it is apparent that since 1989 all democracies in the region took different paths, and that collective memories of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes might lead to nothing but a reflection on what those states had in common in the first place. For the sake of clarity, like media ecologies elsewhere, we agree that the media in CEE are in the process of transformation. However, we argue for a careful analytical consideration of particularities of media, which are in a state of flux, and ways in which this state of media ecologies translates into qualities of political communication. This nuanced approach to analysis also includes the adoption of social media, further contributing to the advancement of hybridisation of media in the region.

To reiterate our argument, we consider each democracy in the region as a separate polity and therefore in itself worthy of scholarly inquiry. What bounds the regional approach in this volume are shifting trends in media and political communication practices, which are gradually being reported in the emerging political communication scholarship on the region (see Koc-Michalska et al., 2014; Tworzecki and Semetko, 2012; Vochocova et al., 2015; Lilleker et al.,

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2015). In essence, in addition to revolutionary changes to media and their significance for political communication marked by the political events of 1989, we argue for evolutionary modes of analysis of media and political communication which, in our view, help to make a case for a post-transitional stage of analysis of Central and Eastern Europe. To encourage and facilitate this process, we built a framework that pulls together all the chapters in this volume, as well as encouraging researchers of the media in the region to look at media and politics differently: not only through the prism of legacies of 1989, but also with regard to other trajectories of change that diverse media ecologies in CEE are undergoing.

First, our analysis of social media and democracy is bounded by this evolutionary media logic. If there is one political condition that the democracies of the CEE region share – with the exception of Russia (media autocracy) – it is that they are all media democracies (Meyer, 2002). This implies that the logic of media shapes the rules of the democratic game and, to a certain extent, determines the qualities of its functions. After all, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, media management has become an inherent feature of politics and governance. Critics of media not only emphasise the weakening of democracy by the mercantilist priorities of the corporate media organisations (Curran and Seaton, 2009), but they have also advanced a compelling critique of the relationship between media and democracy based on the premise of the colonisation of democratic politics by the imperatives of media spectacle (Kellner, 2005). The logic is simple, but powerful: politics is packaged, publics are manipulated, and traditional broadcast media and press are not always up to the job of performing civic tasks. The colonisation of democratic regimes by the media is one of the common denominators bringing this analysis together and, as will be illustrated later, social media are pervasive among political actors shaping political life in the CEE.

Second, we embed our analysis in the notion of a hybrid media system, the co-creation of which social media facilitate. Our approach is inspired by Chadwick (2013), who discusses the notion of hybrid media systems in the settings of Britain and the US. More to the point, Chadwick provides evidence for the hybridisation of media systems in both democracies. In this volume, we strive to provide evidence for the advancing hybridisation of media systems in the CEE region: this book is a collection of data-laden essays, which aims to demonstrate that social media have made significant inroads into the politics and media of CEE democracies, and whilst some scholars (e.g. Mancini, 2013) strive to make a case for this hybridisation in CEE, because of post-1989 political volatility, we argue that they miss a point about the characteristics of hybrid media systems, which are predominantly about power relations and ever evolving relationships between actors within. As Chadwick (2013, p. 4) eloquently put it:

The key to understanding the hybrid media system is a conceptual understanding of power, but one that can be illustrated empirically. The

hybrid media system is built upon interactions among older and newer media logics – where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organizational forms – in the reflexivity, connected to the fields of media and politics. Actors in the system are articulated by complex and ever-evolving relationships based upon adaptation and interdependence and simultaneous concentration and diffusion of power.

To rest the case for the hybridisation of media systems in CEE on the basis of not matching any of the three models of media systems developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), by arguing for the consideration of a mixture of features derived from liberal, democratic-corporatist and polarised pluralist models in analysis of the contemporary media in CEE, we argue, is an oversimplification of the conditions of the media system in CEE. After all, the hybridisation as a process runs much deeper than just tracing elements of the media models developed in the context of Western Europe at the beginning of the new millennium, and making them stick to the context of media in the CEE region. This logic limits analytical scope of media dynamics and does not allow accounting for change as a feature defining media ecologies in CEE.

For Chadwick (2013), all media systems have been hybrid systems, and indeed traces of the hybridisation processes exist in CEE. In that regard, the logic of hybridisation is not only limited to interactions between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media such as social media platforms, but this process is detectable in historical settings that reveal ‘interactions among older and newer media logics’ (ibid., p. 4). Let us illustrate this point with an example from the CEE region. In his analysis of Poland’s media landscape during the Soviet era, Jakubowicz (1990) spoke about the co-existence of three public spheres – ‘official public sphere’ (state-run), ‘alternative public sphere’ (dominated by the Catholic Church) and ‘oppositional public sphere’ (dominated by social movements and clandestine networks, e.g. the Solidarity movement). With the alternative and oppositional public spheres developing ‘new’ media, actors within those spheres advanced what we would describe today as a hybridisation, one displaying the following features: development of clandestine media in opposition to state-run media; evolving new forms of media such as *samizdat* publicity literature or self-made TV and radio broadcasts, an evolving power relationship between authorities and citizens underpinned by the logic of media access, and ‘new’ media-enabled forms of political agency (Voltmer, 2013). Thus even in the midst of the Cold War, way before the 1989 political revolutions, media ecologies in Poland displayed features of hybridisation.

The above interpretation illustrates one particular example of the hybridisation that goes back to pre-1989 Central and Eastern Europe, but we are fairly certain that there are more – however, they need to be brought to light by research. So hybridisation in CEE is far from being a new media phenomenon, but within this volume we argue that the adoption of social media

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by political actors has accelerated its advancement. In that respect, social media platforms gradually redefine the relationships between political actors, between political parties and politicians and institutions, on the one hand, and citizens, on the other hand. Their adaptation for campaigning purposes by political parties and individual politicians in the region, their adoption by citizens and social movements for purposes other than election campaigning, including the production of political news and the circulation of ideas, reshapes the power relationships in political communication and demonstrates the emergence of new forms of media modalities in CEE; it demonstrates blurring boundaries between political and marketing communication as well as presenting a clear indication of how global social media such as Twitter or Facebook are being adopted by local media ecologies. To that end, social media are colonising various strands of politics in the CEE region. In doing so, they turn the logic of the relationship between political actors on its head, and, at least in theory, politically empower citizen-users.

Third, our analysis of social media in politics in the CEE region also requires consideration of media fragmentation as another significant process underpinning media analysis nowadays. This global process, recognised by scholars as largely driven by the commercial imperatives of media organisations, manifests itself in at least two dominant forms: (a) the fragmentation of publics of entertainment and political news consumption (and associated with it notions of ‘hard news’ and ‘soft news’); and (b) the form of fragmentation whereby citizens who are interested in political news content consume the type of news that coheres to their political value system – a behaviour described as ‘selective exposure’ (Stroud, 2015, p. 170). The decreasing cohesion of democratic regimes translates into the increased segmentation of media audiences that was observed by Katz (1996). The process described by Katz has been brought to an extreme by the Internet, and more specifically by digital media technologies. With the 2.0 Web, the number of possible political news sources significantly increases, as does the increasing number of media audiences spread across a greater number of digital media spaces online. Of course, this environment creates its own version of media fragmentation and behaviours in which social media users might run a risk of operating in ‘echo chambers’ rather than engaging in any democratic debate within ‘public spheres’ (Colleoni et al., 2014).

With the development of digital media technology, and social media in particular, citizens have more market options when choosing entertainment and political news consumption. Fenton (2010) has characterised this new media ecology as defined by *multiplicity* and *polycentrality*. Within this environment, new patterns of consumption emerge, and either give life to a new type of citizen-consumer or move traditional consumers from old to new media such as Facebook or Twitter. Put simply, the logic of media fragmentation breeds greater media segmentation, with some scholars already warning of the end of the ‘mass audience’ as a consequence of the ever greater fragmentation of media and audiences (Mancini, 2013).

Table 0.2 News source consumption

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland
TV	81%	72%	80%
Radio	35%	25%	42%
Print	32%	27%	32%
Digital	91%	88%	82%

Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2016).

The media fragmentation is tactile in multiple contexts of media analysis. For example, digitalisation of television broadcasting brought about an unprecedented growth of new TV channels across the world, including Central and Eastern Europe. According to the Statista Portal, in 2015 there were 770 television channels available in Poland, 767 in Hungary, 628 in Romania, and an astonishing 2,410 channels in Russia, by far the most in Europe (Statista 2015).³ With the rise of the Internet, the plethora of information channels has further multiplied, with online platforms becoming ever more important sources of news for citizens of CEE. As Reuters' 2016 *Digital News Report* has revealed, in countries like the Czech Republic, Poland or Hungary, consumption of news via online channels is the most widespread type of news consumption for Internet users, ahead of television and other traditional media (see Table 0.2). While not including the responses of those who are offline, and thereby not representative of the population as a whole, these data are illustrative of the quickly changing information environment where online platforms are increasingly assuming a dominant role.

In spite of the strong media fragmentation of audiences, in his study of social media and democratisation, Placek (2016, p. 13) finds that among CEE democracies, the usage of social media is associated

with higher personal support for the democratic regimes. This shows that the interactive capabilities of the internet are one of the most important factors that differentiate it from traditional media. Through simply using SNS, people have more support for democracy in CEE.

Therefore, within this volume, we recognise the *transformative* potential of social media for politics. By providing a conceptual framework, this Introduction interrogates the transformational power that social media offer among the CEE democracies. Its central argument is that social media are driving changes towards a post-transitional analysis of political communication in CEE – the logics of which this book aspires to set the tone for.

Setting the scene and overcoming the modelling approaches

Interestingly, and this is another crucial underpinning of this volume, CEE had already been a playground for the emergence of social media – however,

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one defined by different affordances and socialities than the social media of Web 2.0. In his discussion of the power of social media and political change, Shirky (2011) recalls Charter 77 and the Solidarity movement, and by doing so he makes a case for accounting for transformational features of social media insofar as media, ranging from the Voice of America to *samizdat*, played its role in the peaceful revolutions of CEE from 1989 onwards. He asserts this in the following way:

The ability of these groups to create and disseminate literature and political documents, even with simple photocopiers, provided a visible alternative to the communist regimes. For large groups of citizens in these countries, the political and, even more important, economic bankruptcy of the government was no longer an open secret but a public fact. This made it difficult and then impossible for the regimes to order their troops to take on such large groups.

(Ibid., p. 32)

This parallel between *samizdat* and social media is certainly telling, and from the limited historical insights that we know of, we suggest that the clandestine media that evolved in Central and Eastern Europe in the run up to 1989 displayed features of 'social media'. For example, the *samizdat* publications of Solidarity or Charter 77 were 'social' but displayed a different type of 'sociality' than do present-day social media based on digital media platforms (Voltmer, 2013). There are, however, some similarities between *samizdat* and contemporary social media: both types of medium run parallel to official news sources and often to political regimes, their functionalities are based on collaborative mechanisms, they are based on the notion of self-presentation, they tend to rely on voluntary labour, they are based on informal networks of participants, they unify large groups of followers, and they frequently facilitate political agency beyond their own networks.

Central and Eastern Europe's Sovietised political past, reinforced by the legacies of the geo-political myth of the Cold War associated with being a part of the 'propaganda systems of the East', became one of the chief means of understanding the dynamics of the relationship between media and politics. From a research point of view, this regionalist analysis of media and politics is both compelling and problematic. Each time one looks at the the social science shelves of the library, the CEE region seems to be classified as a single entity, and to date media and political communication studies focusing on the region appear to be dominated by the narrative of transition, particularly the political-economic transitions which have occurred there (Voltmer, 2013). The compelling regional aspects of media analysis typically include regional similarities, encompassing the ways in which the political past shaped media systems and the ongoing development of media systems post-1989. For example, one of the biggest projects on media and democracy in the region, hosted by the University of Oxford, defined its aim in the following way:

Existing studies tend to focus on whether media are good or bad for democracy. Western media models assume that democratic institutions pre-date the rise of media, and that core qualities of democratic governance exist (including the rule of law, political pluralism, freedom of speech and information). But such assumptions do not necessarily apply in Central and Eastern Europe, where democratic institutions and media institutions emerged simultaneously and interdependently in a period of rapid and often chaotic reform.

(The Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe project, 2016)

Indeed, similarities in the regional media ecologies bring scholars together and encourage the analytical *foci* onto the region as one epistemic entity from which transitional experiences can be learnt or perhaps even adopted elsewhere (Zielonka, 2015). This volume aspires to break with this trend in the analysis of media and politics. We argue that the contemporary media ecologies in the region are far too complex to be painted or repainted with one brush – that of its Soviet legacy and post-1989 transition. Whilst certain trends in media analysis, for example, media capture, political volatility, and the ongoing quest for building public broadcast media seem to be a common denominator in the region (Poland and Hungary being in the spotlight in 2015 and 2016 with the new regulatory public broadcast media regimes introduced by their respective right-wing governments), the rise of social media has changed the relationship dynamics between democracies and citizens and, by the virtue of its technological and cultural features, it encourages thinking beyond regional boundaries. It begs thinking beyond the traditional print and broadcast media and their regulatory regimes, it reshapes the dynamics of the relationship between what is global and local in terms of media analysis, and most importantly to us, it reshapes practices in political communication.

From the ‘Obama effect’ to the ‘Arab Spring’, social media have been reshaping ways in which political actors think about engaging citizens in politics and public affairs. Shifting the focus from the Western-centric approach which has so far dominated comparative scholarship in the area of studies on social media, this book turns the spotlight of studies on the changing power of social media onto Central and Eastern Europe. In doing so, our volume offers a first-ever collection of critical research exploring social media in the region. Apart from mapping and analysing political events in which social media have played a vital role, this volume raises fundamental questions about the political, economic, and cultural implications of the use of social media in politics, by citizens as well as politicians. This book is also a scholarly analytical commentary on the dynamics of political communication and the quality of democracy among new European Union (EU) member states, the EU’s affiliated member (Ukraine), and Russia as a regional power, aspiring once more to the status of a player in world politics.

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Having outlined the framework that weaves together all the chapters of this volume, below we map out the existing trends in research on social media in politics, which have been emerging in political communication scholarship. Importantly to this volume, scholars of political communication recognise the global–local dynamics of the usage of social media in politics, and classify it as a global trend in political communication (Zittel, 2004). This volume is a case in point: it contributes to the discussion of social media’s global outreach, yet reveals their local appropriation by political actors in CEE. Further, the adoption of social media for campaigning purposes has been another prolific theme in crossover studies of social media and politics in various national contexts of the Western world (e.g. Lilleker and Jackson, 2010; Xenos et al., 2014). Among other themes is the strand of research analysing the professionalisation impetus that political communication has received (Negrine and Lilleker, 2002) thanks to Web. 2.0. More recently, Bennett (2012) has explored the personalisation of political participation due to social media-enabled features. Overall, the rise of social media among political actors has triggered a wave of analysis of political participation (Skoric and Poor, 2013; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013; Wolfsfeld et al., 2016; Theocharis and Lowe, 2016).

Among other approaches are those analysing how social media have been managed: hyper-campaigning, embracing multi-media modalities (Lilleker et al., 2015), which are reported by political campaign managers across Europe and beyond. Other developments in the field of media and politics include the impact of social media on political news construction, and the generally decreasing significance of political news. For example, Paulussen and Harder (2014) provide insights to how social media are being used as a sources of political news in Belgium. Social media have also not escaped the attention of scholars who discuss it in the context of radicalisation in political communication. The research by Klausen (2015) shows that in conflicts, such as wars in Syria and Iraq, social media add to civic vulnerabilities (e.g. Facebook; Instagram) and are being used in operational strategies as well as ideological transmitters and facilitators in the recruitment for warfare. Finally, social media have recently gained attention as the force in the advancement of ‘post-truth politics’ (Suiter, 2016). It is apparent that the analysis of social media is growing in terms of themes and scope, but this volume advances the debate on post-transitional political communication in CEE.

The organisation and structure of this book

The structure of *Social Media and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe* mirrors practices accompanying the adoption of social media into political communication in the CEE region and, in part, reflects the main avenues of research in this sub-field of media studies. The volume contains eleven chapters, including this Introduction and the final Conclusions, plus a Foreword. The Foreword by Darren Lilleker sets the tone for the volume. The Introduction

by Paweł Surowiec and Václav Štětka conceptualises social media in the CEE region by making a case for ‘post-transition political communication’ within the context of its respective democracies; and by arguing for research and analysis of political communication within the region on a national case basis rather than a homogenising approach to their analysis as the former communist bloc.

We present to readers a volume that has been co-authored by colleagues who specialise in political communication and scrutinise the CEE region using different theoretical and methodological approaches. The chapters have been written by researchers who are at different stages of their academic and professional life. In this way, we are hoping to bring a ‘fresh perspective’ on the discussion on political communication in the region. Within this volume we account for the diversity of national settings and variety of actors adopting social media into political communication in the CEE region. Part I, entitled ‘Political parties, actors and social media’ presents chapters with a ‘national focus’ on social media and political parties, and discusses implications of the rise of social media for party and electoral politics in the region. It commences with Chapter 1 by Alena Macková, Jan Zápotocký, Václav Štětka and Radim Hladík, who discuss the adoption of social media platforms by politicians in the Czech Republic. The authors identify two dominant – partly overlapping – discourses accompanying this process. The former unravels how new media (and social media in particular) are seen by politicians as platforms for a democratic connection between citizens and politicians, whereas the latter discourse unpacks the logic behind social media being perceived as tools for political campaigning. Chapter 2 focuses on Romania’s 2014 presidential election. In it, Monica Pătruț focuses her overview on political campaigning and demonstrates how social media became a powerful tool for the mobilisation of Romanian citizens, particularly its diasporic community, to participate in elections in the wake of changes to electoral law and election practices. By focusing on a particular political event, the chapter demonstrates the global and local dynamics of social media. Chapter 3 by Norbert Merkovity focuses on Hungary and Croatia, and presents findings from an analysis of the adoption of Twitter and Facebook by MPs in both democracies. He problematises ‘mediatisation’ and ‘self-mediatisation’ as concepts underpinning this process. Chapter 4 moves the discussion of yet another theme of studies on social media and politics, namely that of the personalisation of political communication. Focusing on the 2014 parliamentary elections in Slovenia, Jernej Prodnik, Tomaž Deželan and Alem Maksuti examine the social media dimension of the election campaign and critically discuss the significance of personalisation strategies for parties’ election strategies, as well as for voters. Similarly, in Chapter 5, Ognyan Seizov uses the 2015 Bulgarian local elections as a background to explore a move towards professionalisation of web-based political communication, which is also detectable in its social media form.

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Part II of this volume, entitled ‘Social movements, interest and professional groups and social media’, shifts the analytical focus beyond party and electoral politics and presents chapters in which social media are explored in the process of political communication by social movements, interest groups and media professionals, all of which co-create political news production in the CEE region. Chapter 6 by Alina Ryabovolova examines how dissent against Putin’s politics was converted into a social movement and how rhetorical devices on social media were used to mobilise the first mass protest movement in Russia since the early 1990s. In Chapter 7, Dmytro Hubenko and Melissa Wall explore how journalists in Ukraine use Facebook in their professional practices. In very different settings of political communication, Chapter 8 by Paweł Surowiec and Magdalena Kania-Lundholm explores how social media contribute to blurring boundaries between political and marketing communication; they do so by exploring how nation branding consultants struggle to form a working relationship with the Polish state institutions governing soft power resources and Polish citizens alike. Chapter 9 by Galina Miazhevich explores the use of social media by the LGBT movement in Lithuania and discusses the significance of the social movement for sex and gender minorities in this particular democracy. The Conclusions chapter, written by the editors, Surowiec and Štětka, summarises issues in studies on social media in CEE politics and sets the agenda for future critical inquiry in this scholarly area.

Contribution of the volume

As aforementioned, the significance of social media for politics has sparked a growing body of academic literature in the field of political communication but, thus far, the role of social media in CEE politics is under-explored. Given its multi-disciplinary scope, this volume makes a *primary* contribution to the following fields: political studies, particularly political communication; media studies; and regional (area) studies on CEE. With regard to the types of actors using social media that are discussed in the individual chapters, this volume makes a *secondary* contribution to: leadership studies; electoral studies; social movement studies; organisational studies; and journalism studies. The key contribution of this volume lies, however, at the crossroads of media and politics in CEE: it captures how and why social media have shifted the dynamics of political communication in ten national settings in the region.

Notes

- 1 Radek Sikorski, at @sikorskiradel, has developed a reputation for being a particularly active user of social media, including the micro-blogging platform Twitter. Not only has he been a keen user of social media but has also published articles on the role of social media in politics and diplomacy, for example in *Die Welt*.
- 2 The phrase ‘post-truth politics’ was selected as a ‘Word of the Year’ in Germany, and has been added to Britain’s Oxford English Dictionary.

- 3 See more at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/436806/ranking-of-european-countries-by-channels-available/>

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