Politicized Institutional Trust in East Central Europe

Zsolt Boda and Gergő Medve-Bálint

Abstract

Thirty years after their democratic transition, several countries of East Central Europe (ECE) are exhibiting signs of democratic instability: the rise of populist politicians in power, accompanied by democratic backsliding and illiberal tendencies. The essay investigates the state-of-the-art of democracy in the region from the perspective of political trust. Political trust is an essential element as well as an indicator of the legitimacy of the political system. Low trust may lead to political cynicism, a decline of political participation, or, conversely, to the rise of anti-establishment populism. Empirical research shows that political trust is lower in ECE than in older Western European democracies. Equally important is that its volatility is higher and its distribution among the population is more polarized. In this essay, we seek to shed light on some potential reasons for this volatility by arguing that institutional trust in ECE is heavily exposed to politicization. We demonstrate this by relying on data from the European Social Survey. Our models reveal that, all else being equal, voting for the incumbent governing parties has a stronger positive association with institutional trust in Eastern than in Western Europe. We interpret our results according to Easton’s concept of diffuse and specific support. While the generally low level of institutional trust in ECE is a sign of the low diffuse public support for the political system, politicization, which appears as a dominant aspect of specific support, is responsible for the fluctuations in trust in the East.

Keywords: Democracy, diffuse and specific support, East Central Europe, Easton, European Social Survey, institutional trust, politicization.

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Trust in institutions is believed to be a measure of support that citizens give to the government, and support is a precious resource for the effective use of power. Low trust signals legitimacy problems and makes it difficult for a government to initiate politically risky, although otherwise perhaps needed or useful, policy changes. Trust is also believed to make policy implementation easier, as people who have trust in institutions are more willing to obey the law, pay taxes, or, in general, take part in collective action.

There seems to be a broad consensus over the many “good things” that trust brings about, therefore, the literature on trust is concerned about the lack or decline of trust. This concern is even more pronounced in the case of the new (“newer”) democracies, such as those in East Central Europe (ECE), where low trust levels toward the political system and public institutions are usually associated with their alleged problems of legitimacy and governance effectiveness.

After the change of regime, the German sociologist, Claus Offe, cautioned about the potential pitfalls of transition. He argued that the burdensome transition process and the accompanying economic difficulties could potentially undermine trust in the transition process and even erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Some recent developments in the region, like the rise of illiberal politics and populist leaders in countries such as Russia, Macedonia,

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8 Ibid., 15.
Hungary, and Poland seem to illustrate the point made by Offe. In this respect, concerns may arise about the low levels of institutional trust in ECE that could undermine these recently established democratic systems. To better understand the origins and patterns of trust in a comparative perspective is therefore an important academic endeavor.

However, with some notable exceptions, research on institutional trust has focused mostly on the most developed nations, and, more particularly, on Anglo-Saxon countries. While trust research has grown into a major industry, comparative studies do not abound. Consequently, we do not know enough about the roots and the consequences of trust in different political cultures or political regimes.

One potential reason for the relatively limited number of comparative studies is that previous research did not necessarily find systematic differences between old and new democracies in terms of institutional trust, apart from the well-established fact that the level of trust is generally lower in ECE than in Western Europe. However, asking new questions may yield more interesting results. While the general patterns of institutional trust might not show systematic differences in ECE countries compared to other regions of Europe, some peculiarities indeed exist. In our previous research, we demonstrated that trust levels not only are lower in the East, but also more volatile, and that income and inequality do not have the same effect on trust in ECE as in Western Europe. Furthermore, at the level of specific institutions, cultural patterns may determine which norm violations undermine trust.

Our essay seeks to contribute to the field of research by arguing that institutional trust in ECE is more influenced by politics than in the established democracies of Western Europe. ECE citizens differentiate less among institutions and, instead, view them through a general evaluative pattern that is closely linked to politics. While they have a somewhat skeptical attitude toward politics, the politicization of institutions does not involve that trust in them is constantly low: in fact, trust is more volatile in ECE than in Western Europe. An equally important feature of ECE is the higher polarization of the trusting attitudes in society: the average trust value hides the degree of unequal distribution of trust, which is higher in ECE than in Western Europe. We argue

that the relatively low levels of trust, the polarized distribution of trust, and the volatility of trust are associated with politicization. We discuss our results in light of David Easton’s concepts\textsuperscript{13} on diffuse and specific support.

**Institutional Trust: The Concept of Specific and Diffuse Support**

The notions of specific support and diffuse support were developed by Easton.\textsuperscript{14} Diffuse support is the acceptance or general legitimacy of the system as such, while specific support is related to the people’s satisfaction with the performance of the government. The general support of the system might be high, even if people are dissatisfied with the government’s performance. However, we can turn the argument the other way around: the legitimacy of the system might be low, while some politicians or public institutions may enjoy widespread popularity and support. Concerning the debate on the link between trust and either diffuse or specific support, Easton himself associated public trust with the notion of diffuse support, although he also thought that elements of specific and diffuse support were difficult to distinguish empirically.\textsuperscript{15} We subscribe to the empirically rooted argument of Marc Hetherington that trust actually affects both specific and diffuse support, while being affected by them.\textsuperscript{16}

Citizens’ trust in institutions is regarded as a measure of support for or the legitimacy of the political sphere.\textsuperscript{17} However, an old debate revolves around the kind of support that trusting attitudes express. Several scholars argue that public trust measured by survey questions is about the specific support given to the incumbent government and has nothing to do with the general legitimacy of the political system.\textsuperscript{18} Trust levels may fluctuate and even a long-term decline of public confidence (which has been the case in the United States over the past decades) should not be considered worrisome because it does not threaten to undermine the legitimacy of the democratic polity. However, others have found empirical evidence that trust is related to both specific and diffuse support.\textsuperscript{19} Hetherington argues that the case for trust

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*.  
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{16} Hetherington, “The Political Relevance of Political Trust,” 798-799.  
\textsuperscript{19} Arthur H. Miller, “Rejoinder to ‘Comment’ by Jack Citrin: Political Discontent or Ritualism?” *American Political Science Review* 68, no. 3 (1974): 989-1001, and Arthur H. Miller and
\end{flushleft}
and diffuse support is more straightforward, because low specific support to the incumbent makes governing more difficult and less effective, which, in turn, creates dissatisfaction and distrust among the electorate.\textsuperscript{20} Trust has been shown to be a dynamic phenomenon,\textsuperscript{21} thus a vicious circle may develop in which low trust and poor governmental performance mutually reinforce each other, leading to permanent dissatisfaction with the political system.

The stakes of the debate are clear. It is not just whether one should worry about declining trust levels, but also about what factors contribute to changes in trust. Assuming that trust is, indeed, beneficial for society, it is important to know what makes trust grow or decline.

An influential stream of the literature argues that trust in a government\textsuperscript{22} or specific institutions such as judicial authorities,\textsuperscript{23} tax authorities,\textsuperscript{24} or municipalities\textsuperscript{25} is to a large extent shaped by the perceptions regarding both the fairness and the performance of those institutions. This has important policy implications: to increase trust and legitimacy, both the performance and procedural fairness of state institutions must improve. In Easton’s terms, specific support is at stake, here, which is related to the particular features of those institutions.

Empirical evidence suggests, however, that trust is not exclusively a product of legitimizing beliefs that are linked to institutional behavior. Trust is influenced by individual-level factors such as income, education, religiosity, or personal characters—wealthier, more educated, religious, and optimistic people tend to have higher levels of trust.\textsuperscript{26}

Trust is also largely determined by macro-level factors, such as income (GDP) or social inequality—higher-income countries with lower levels of income inequality tend to enjoy higher public confidence in institutions than other countries.\textsuperscript{27} This does not necessarily question more dynamic

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\textsuperscript{20} Hetherington, “The Political Relevance of Political Trust.”
\textsuperscript{21} Hetherington, \textit{Why Trust Matters}.
\textsuperscript{25} Tyler, \textit{Why People Cooperate}.
\textsuperscript{27} Christopher J. Anderson and Matthew M. Singer, “The Sensitive Left and the Impervious Right: Multilevel Models and the Politics of Inequality, Ideology, and Legitimacy in Europe,”
explanations of trust—quite the contrary. Assuming the possibility of either vicious or virtuous circles between trust and government performance, one may argue that the high levels of public confidence in the most developed countries are the product of such self-reinforcing mechanisms in which several social factors interact with each other, creating a positive feedback loop.

Trust is also influenced by a general culture of trust. Francis Fukuyama argued that societies can be characterized either as high-trust or low-trust cultures and that this feature is somehow rooted in history. Those approaches that emphasize the role of political culture argue “that institutional trust is exogenous to the political sphere, originating in long-standing and deeply seeded cultural norms and is an emergent property of interpersonal trust which is projected onto political institutions.” These approaches hold that institutional trust is part of a larger belief-system that influences how and how much people trust each other or impersonal organizations. To put it simply, the level of institutional trust is higher in societies where—because of specific historical and cultural factors—general social trust is higher. Indeed, earlier we found that there is a remarkably strong association between interpersonal trust and institutional trust at the country level. As their roots are at least partially different, their strong association suggests that a common cultural background variable may determine both social and institutional trust. At the same time, William Mishler and Richard Rose argue that institutional explanations of public trust prevail over cultural ones, especially at the individual level. However, this should not mean that cultural influences at the macro-level are to be entirely disregarded.

We assume that those macro-level factors, such as income or political culture, may affect the patterns of both diffuse and specific support, although diffuse support, as a more stable phenomenon, might be more directly linked to them.

Comparative Political Studies 41, nos. 4-5 (2008): 564-599, and Medve-Bálint and Boda, “The Poorer You Are, the More You Trust?”


Boda and Medve-Bálint, “Does Institutional Trust in East Central Europe Differ from Western Europe?”

See Zmerli and Newton, “Winners, Losers and Three Types of Trust.”

Trust in ECE Countries: Comparative Perspectives

If institutional trust is influenced by general cultural features of particular societies, differences in political culture should be reflected in the patterns of public confidence across countries. So far, few researchers have addressed this problem, particularly in the ECE context.

Mishler and Rose argue that people in ECE evaluate political institutions according to a general frame, which is strongly determined by the economic situation of the country in which they live.\(^{34}\) They also maintain that people in new democracies are not capable of distinguishing among specific institutions, as they do not make judgments about them on the basis of their individual performance or properties. Previously, we found that the strength of association among different institutional trust indicators (parliament, police, legal system, political parties) were slightly higher in ECE than in Western Europe,\(^{35}\) which seems to illustrate the point made by Mishler and Rose.

However, there is mixed empirical evidence concerning the claims about income. We demonstrated that macro-level income as well as sociotropic evaluations of the domestic economic situation have an unanimous positive effect on trust, whereas individual-level income, while being positively associated with trust in Western Europe, has no relationship with it in ECE.\(^{36}\) We also found that while income inequality is negatively related to trust in Western Europe, it has no effect in the ECE region. These differences may be rooted in political culture and specific institutional arrangements: the strongly egalitarian attitudes of ECE citizens, which are even more pronounced among those who live in the poorest households and who are presumably the most dependent on social transfers, may explain why the relatively poor are more trustful of state institutions than the rich, if all other conditions are the same. This is why in ECE countries, where social inequality is low, we do not find proportionally higher institutional trust: a common feature of their political economies, the generous social welfare systems, combined with the citizens’ strong egalitarian attitudes and their substantial misperception of the actual level of social inequality are responsible for this unexpected phenomenon.\(^{37}\)

Evidence therefore suggests that the patterns and roots of institutional trust in ECE are at least partly determined by cultural factors. Sofie Marien puts forward the idea that the lack of distinction among institutions may not be attributed to the low levels of institutional trust in ECE but rather to the citizens’


\(^{35}\) Boda and Medve-Bálint, “Does Institutional Trust in East Central Europe Differ from Western Europe?”

\(^{36}\) Medve-Bálint and Boda, “The Poorer You Are, the More You Trust?”

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 445.
general distrust toward all institutions in this region, as they tend to perceive them to be politically influenced. The politicized nature of institutional trust could explain the observation of Mishler and Rose as well the inability of ECE citizens to distinguish their trust judgments among individual public institutions: if institutions are under political influence, citizens will evaluate them according to their general views about politics or the actual incumbent. Moreover, if people in ECE view their domestic institutions as heavily politicized, the aggregate levels of institutional trust may swing with political changes. The “politicization” thesis, however, has not been tested empirically.

Based on such considerations, in our essay we seek to explore the hypothesis on the politicized nature of institutional trust in ECE—a claim, which has been raised but, so far, has not been assessed empirically. We assume that a feature of the political culture of new democracies is that people view institutions through political lenses.

Research Question Data and Method

Our research question is whether institutional trust in ECE is more politicized than in Western Europe. We pose our hypothesis following the assumption that if institutional trust is politicized, the individuals’ political position (partisanship) affects trusting attitudes. We suppose that this influence is stronger in ECE than in Western Europe in that supporters of the governing parties trust state institutions more in ECE than in Western Europe:

Hypothesis: Voting for the ruling government in ECE has a stronger positive effect on institutional trust than in Western Europe.

We therefore expect that voters for the incumbent government are more inclined to report higher levels of trust in state institutions in ECE than their fellow voters in Western Europe.

To test our assumptions, we relied on the 2012 European Social Survey (ESS). This data round consists of twenty-nine country samples, from which we selected twenty-six for the analysis, including fifteen Western and eleven ECE countries. The main advantage of using ESS data is that they are

39 Mishler and Rose, “Trust, Distrust and Skepticism.”
40 We excluded Israel because it is neither a Western nor an Eastern European country; the Netherlands, because the 2012 early elections were held during the ESS survey interviews, thus the data do not allow for distinguishing between incumbent and opposition voters; and Russia, because our scope conditions apply to democratic countries, whereas Russia already was widely considered as semi-authoritarian in 2012. Western European states: Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark,
derived from one of the most reliable, high-quality, cross-national surveys in the world and cover both ECE and Western European countries.

As for our analytical approach, we performed hierarchical linear regressions because our data show a hierarchical structure: respondents (Level 1) to the ESS survey are “nested” in countries (Level 2) that can be classified into two distinct country groups, ECE and Western Europe (Level 3). In other words, individuals are grouped into higher units, countries, and country-groups. Consequently, variation in institutional trust, which is our dependent variable, appears not only at individual but also at higher levels. Given that trust varies systematically not just across individuals but also across countries, we need to account for both individual and country-level effects as well as for potential cross-level interactions. Multilevel (or hierarchical) linear regressions meet these criteria and this is the reason why we apply this method to our data. In addition, our hypothesis refers to an interaction effect between a country-level and an individual factor, therefore, we need to model this association, too.

To measure institutional trust, we calculated an index by taking the mean value of the valid responses to trust in the national parliament, the legal system, and the police. Trust in these institutions is expected to be less politicized than trust in parties and politicians, which are the remaining indicators of trust in domestic institutions in the ESS survey. We decided not to include trust in parties or politicians in the trust index because our goal is to show that politicization affects trust even in such state institutions in ECE that can be expected to be less politicized. The use of such indexes, especially similar proxies for general institutional trust, has been criticized, for instance, by Fisher et al., who claim that citizens develop different forms of trust judgements whose application and significance vary depending on the given institution. According to this view, trust levels in different institutions are not comparable to each other.

However, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba showed that citizens are likely to develop a single comprehensive attitude toward trust in institutions. A recent study has contributed further empirical support for the claim that “institutional trust can be conceptualised as a one-dimensional attitude.”

United Kingdom, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Germany, Norway, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, and Sweden. Eastern European countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Kosovo, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine.

result of the Cronbach alpha test (\( \alpha = .845 \)) on the three components of our trust index also reinforce that these indicators reliably measure the same concept, thus, it is legitimate to use them for calculating an index of institutional trust.

The so-called intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), which shows the proportion of the total variation in the dependent variable appearing at the level of the grouping variables, provides further justification for using hierarchical linear models. In our case, the ICC reveals how homogenous the observations are within each country and within each country group. The coefficient equals to 29.9 at the country-level, which means that the country-level accounts for nearly 30 percent of the total variation in institutional trust, while the ICC is 13.7 at the country-group level (ECE vs. Western Europe). Both figures are high enough to justify the use of multilevel methods.

The main individual-level explanatory variable in our models is a binary indicator, showing whether at the last parliamentary elections the respondents voted for a party that subsequently joined the governing coalition.\(^{46}\) The reference group consists of those individuals who claimed to have voted for the opposition parties or have unrevealed party preference.

In line with previous research on institutional trust, we included several further independent variables that may influence trust levels. These reveal whether the respondent voted at the previous election, his or her interest for politics, the reported level of social trust,\(^ {47}\) happiness and satisfaction with life, sociability, satisfaction with the economic situation, religiosity, subjective evaluation of the respondent’s income situation, whether the respondent belongs to a group that suffers from discrimination, and his or her self-placement within society (perceived low- or high-status). Finally, we included control variables that measure the socio-economic status of the respondents (age, gender, level of education, and place of residence).\(^ {48}\)

We added three variables beyond the individual controls. First, we created a binary indicator showing whether a state belongs to ECE. Second, we added GDP per capita as a proxy for the level of development. Third, we also introduced a control for government effectiveness, which we expected to be positively associated with institutional trust. The former two variables (GDP and government effectiveness) show a strong positive correlation with each other and a strong negative one with ECE countries. Although this runs the risk of multicollinearity, we entered the ECE dummy together with either GDP or government effectiveness into the models. If we had introduced all of them separately, it might not have been possible to establish whether the

\(^{46}\) We are grateful to Veronika Patkós, who coded this variable for us.

\(^{47}\) Similar to our dependent variable, we created an index for social trust by taking the mean values of the valid responses to the questions on how much people trust each other, how fair people consider their fellow citizens, and how helpful they perceive others. The Cronbach alpha score of these three indicators (\( \alpha = .778 \)) suggests that they are reliable measures of social trust.

\(^{48}\) For a comprehensive description of all the variables, please consult the appendix.
ECE dummy really captures a distinct Eastern European effect on institutional trust or merely substitutes for some other unobserved country-effect.\textsuperscript{49} With this decision, we risked that these variables would falsely turn out statistically insignificant, but as the results reported in table 1 reveal, this was unnecessary.

Table 1 reports the regression results. Models 1 and 2 were estimated on the trust index; the only difference between them is that in model 1 the GDP variable was included, whereas in model 2 the variable of government effectiveness was included. Model 3 through model 5 were run separately on each component of the index (trust in parliament, police, and the legal system) both as a robustness check and to reveal whether the explanatory variables have similar or a different relationship with them than on the index.

The significant positive coefficient of government voter in each model reveals that institutional trust is politicized across the whole country sample. All else being equal, those who claim to have voted for the ruling parties tend to report somewhat higher trust than those who are opposition voters or did not reveal their party preference. This result is in line with previous research that has established that political preferences toward the government are positively associated with trust in institutions. In addition, those respondents who show moderate to great interest for politics seem to trust institutions more than those who are disinterested in political affairs, all else being equal.

The coefficients of the other independent variables show some further significant and positive relationships with trust, which also correspond to findings of earlier works. People who, in general, are more successful in life, tend to be more trustful toward institutions. Specifically, those who are happier and more satisfied with their lives, who are more religious, who demonstrate greater levels of social (or, in other words, interpersonal) trust, who are more content with the economic situation of the country, and who place themselves higher in society are also likely to report higher trust in institutions. Conversely, trust declines with age; unsurprisingly, those who believe that there is discrimination against them demonstrate lower institutional trust, as well.

The country-level and country-group variables are significant and show the expected signs. Both GDP per capita and government effectiveness demonstrate a positive, significant relationship with institutional trust, while the ECE dummy reveals that, \textit{ceteris paribus}, East European respondents trust institutions less than their Western fellows. The interaction effect between government voters and the ECE dummy, which is the key test of our hypothesis, is significant: if all else is constant, on average, Eastern Europeans who voted for the incumbent government trust institutions more than their Western European peers. This result remains consistent in each model, thus, the above

\textsuperscript{49} We have logarithmically transformed the indicator of GDP per capita along with the indicator of age in order to approximate normal distribution. In addition, we centered both of the transformed indicators on their mean so that their zero value becomes interpretable.
association applies to each component of the trust index. This suggests that trust is, indeed, more politicized in ECE than in Western Europe. Figure 1, which is based on the interaction effect estimated in models 2 through 5, offers a visual illustration of this relationship. While the average level of institutional trust and trust in parliament, police, and the legal system is higher in Western than in Eastern Europe, in both parts of the continent government voters tend to report higher levels of institutional trust than opposition voters, all else being equal. However, as the charts demonstrate, this effect is stronger in ECE than in Western Europe.50

It is important to note that because we rely on cross-sectional data, we cannot establish a causal relationship between our independent variables and institutional trust. Our results have simply revealed that there is a robust, yet not necessarily causal, relationship between the examined indicators.

Discussion

Our results provide strong evidence for the claim that institutional trust is more politicized in ECE than in Western Europe. Nationwide elections seem to affect people’s level of trust more in the East than in the West. We also demonstrated that in the East individual preferences for the governing coalition have a stronger positive effect on institutional trust than in Western Europe.

The above findings are in line with previous results of ours. In an earlier study, we demonstrated that the volatility of institutional trust is significantly higher in ECE than in Western Europe.51 That is, the level of trust in institutions changes faster—which is not the case for interpersonal (or social) trust. The latter is quite stable both in ECE and Western Europe, which suggests that such trust has a cultural root, unlike the case of institutional trust, which is much more exposed to political attitudes. The current results imply that the higher volatility is at least partly caused by the more politicized nature of institutional trust in ECE countries. For instance, the dynamic of Hungarian monthly trust data shows an almost regular sine function: trust level goes up around elections and gradually decreases over the years of a given governmental cycle, before increasing again around the next election time. We believe that this pattern may have implications for the quality of democracy that we will discuss later.

Previously, we also have shown that correlations between trust indicators of political institutions (such as the parliament) and those of nonpolitical ones (such as the police) are stronger in ECE than in Western Europe.52 In light of our current results, these previous findings may be explained by the politicization phenomenon.

50 If the government and opposition voters in the East and the West showed the same degree of politicization in trust toward institutions, the lines connecting the markers in figure 1 would run parallel to each other and the interaction effect would not be significant.

51 Boda and Medve-Bálint, “Does Institutional Trust in East Central Europe Differ from Western Europe?”

52 Ibid.
# Table 1. Results of the Three-Level Hierarchical Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Model 1 trust index</th>
<th>Model 2 trust index</th>
<th>Model 3 Trust in parliament</th>
<th>Model 4 Trust in police</th>
<th>Model 5 Trust in legal system</th>
</tr>
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<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.306</td>
<td>.942***</td>
<td>.267</td>
<td>-1.08</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>.001</td>
<td>.217***</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.336***</td>
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<td>Interested in politics</td>
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<td>.083</td>
<td>.365***</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.589***</td>
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<td>.235***</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>.223***</td>
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<td>.014</td>
<td>.077***</td>
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<td>.042***</td>
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<td>.040***</td>
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<td>-0.022***</td>
<td>.005</td>
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<td>Satisfaction with the economy</td>
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<td>.279***</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.371***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hard to cope with present income</td>
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<td>.011</td>
<td>.006</td>
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<td>Member of discriminated group</td>
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<td>.052</td>
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<td>.001</td>
<td>-.004***</td>
<td>.005</td>
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<td>Model 3</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>Interaction effects</td>
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Unstandardized coefficients, robust standard errors; *** * p < .001; ** * p < .01; * p < .05; p < .10
Figure 1. Marginal Effect of Government Voter with ECE Dummy on Different Trust Indicators
Finally, empirical evidence also suggests that the distribution of trust is more unequal in ECE than in Western European countries. If we calculate the share of the population whose level of institutional trust is lower than 60 percent of the median value, the countries of the ECE region fall into the higher end of the scale (see figure 2). Using the Gini-index as a generally accepted way of measuring inequalities, the results are unsurprisingly similar.

Figure 2. Percentage of Those with Overall Institutional Trust Lower Than 60% of Median

The relatively polarized distribution of trusting attitudes in a society signals that average trust cannot be taken at a face value: the same average value may have different implications if the distribution of trust is strongly polarized in a specific context. We suggest that the politicized nature of institutional trust in ECE might be the driver of polarization of trusting attitudes, too. Those who are in favor of the incumbent government have a positive—maybe even an exaggerated—view of the institutions as well, while those who feel being part of the opposition have a critical attitude toward the general institutions of the state. This insight is supported by Veronika Patkós, who studied the


54 Boda et al., Societal Change and Trust in Institutions, 36.

polarization of political attitudes in Hungary. First, she found that polarization (calculated as the level of satisfaction with the incumbent government) is the highest in Hungary among the European countries and that it is relatively high in ECE countries, as well. Second, her results also revealed that polarization has been increasing over time during the past two decades, which is in line with the pattern of institutional trust dynamic referred to above.

If we combine the three described features of institutional trust in ECE, we obtain a rather dire picture: societies with volatile, polarized, and politicized trusting attitudes. We suggest that Easton’s idea on differentiating diffuse and specific support offers a useful conceptual framework for interpreting these results. The low general level of institutional trust in ECE is a sign of the low diffuse support of the citizens for the political system. In line with empirical evidence about the macro-level factors influencing trust (such as the level of development or inequality), we hypothesize that diffuse support is at least partly a function of those macro-factors and therefore is subject to incremental change only.

The high volatility of institutional trust in ECE suggests, however, that another element of public confidence changes rapidly. Since this is strongly linked to political events, we refer to this as the politicization of trust, which we believe is responsible for fluctuations in the levels of specific support.

To be sure, it is hardly surprising that elections and new incumbents offer hope and confidence, especially for their supporters. Our results suggest, though, that this effect is stronger in the East than in the West. While generally skeptical about the political system, ECE citizens—at least those who vote for the governing parties—express surprisingly high levels of confidence toward elections and the newly elected leaders. Skepticism about politics is not general and endemic: there is hope and confidence, too.

An interesting question arises about the possible implications of the above phenomenon for the prospects of democracy. If Hetherington is right about the dynamics of specific and diffuse support, we suspect that specific support, which reveals itself in the fluctuation of the trust indicators, may pull the diffuse support along—the only question is in which direction. If development takes off and people’s well-being increases, they may become more satisfied with the quality of governance and their diffuse support for the political system may also rise. But if new incumbents fail to deliver the expected outcomes, hope and confidence may vanish and skepticism will prevail.

From another perspective, we may argue that such a huge difference between diffuse and specific support signals the essential weakness of democratic culture and a popular demand for strong leadership. For instance, while institutional trust was low in Russia, confidence in the president already

56 See Levi and Stoker, “Political Trust and Trustworthiness.”
57 Hetherington, “The Political Relevance of Political Trust.”
was relatively high before the sharp decline of democratic quality. In this respect, high specific support for incumbents may reflect the deep legitimacy problems of new democracies—this approach does not share the cautious optimism of the previous paragraph and would forecast a bleak future for democracy in East Central Europe.

In fact, following the arguments of Patkós, we suggest that volatile, polarized, and politicized trust predicts the weakening of accountability mechanisms in a democracy. In such a situation, each political side relies on its supporters, who uncritically uphold this side anyway, and there are poor chances that members of the other political camp would consider voting for opposition candidates.

Thus, the patterns of institutional trust may have an effect on democratic accountability. But trust has a positive association with political participation, and looking at the share of the population with a low level of institutional trust and with no political activities, we found that, again, ECE countries led the way. Figure 3 shows the percentage of those who did not trust political institutions and did not participate in politics in 2011 and 2016 in the EU member states. There is a huge cross-country variation in the percentage of people who are characterized by low trust and do not participate in politics. In the South-Eastern European countries, their share is above 50 percent, while in the Northern European countries, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg their proportion is below 10 percent.

The good news is that the percentage of those with low levels of trust and no political participation declined in an overwhelming majority of the countries (twenty-two of twenty-eight countries) between 2011 and 2016. The most important exceptions are France, Spain, and Croatia. Increasing political trust during this period has contributed to the improved participation figures; however, in a smaller number of countries, participation among those with low trust also increased. In Austria, Belgium, Finland, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom, political participation actually increased among those with low levels of political trust. In another group of countries, however, political participation declined among those with low levels of political trust. This group of countries is composed of Greece, Cyprus, Spain, the Czech Republic, Croatia, and Romania—again, mostly Eastern and Southern European countries.


59 Patkós, Szekértáborharc—Eredmények a Politikai Megosztottság Okairól És Következményeiről [On the causes and consequences of political polarization].

60 Boda et al., Societal Change and Trust in Institutions.

61 In the analysis, political participation was defined on the basis of four items that are present in both EQLS 2011 and 2016: (1) attended a meeting of a trade union, political party or political action group; (2) attended a protest or demonstration; (3) contacted a politician or public official; and (4) signed a petition, including online petition. If the respondent had participated in any of these activities, he or she was coded as politically active, otherwise as politically inactive.
Conclusion

Our essay sought to contribute to the field of comparative studies on institutional trust. We wanted to test the hypothesis about the politicized nature of institutional trust in ECE, which has been raised but never tested in the literature. The idea is that people in ECE tend to form evaluative attitudes toward institutions according to their general political opinion, and their trusting attitudes shift with political events. Our previous research established that this is indeed the case: the volatility of institutional trust in ECE is high, while different indicators of institutional trust show a stronger association with each other than in Western European countries.

In order to test the politicization hypothesis, relying on data from the 2012 ESS round, we demonstrated that, all else being equal, voting for the incumbent governing parties has a stronger positive relationship with institutional trust in ECE than in Western Europe.

Politics seems to heavily influence trusting attitudes in newer democracies. We interpret our results in light of David Easton’s concept on diffuse and specific support. We argue that the generally low institutional trust in ECE demonstrates the weakness of diffuse support for the political system, while the volatile trust levels (in the generally low-trust environment) reveal the politicized nature of trust and show the changing patterns of specific support. Further research may evaluate the practical implications as well as the significance of our findings from the perspective of a normative democratic theory.
Description of the Variables

_Institutional trust:_ Mean of the valid responses to the questions concerning trust in the national parliament, legal system, and the police (0-10).

_Government voter:_ Voted for one of the governing parties that won the previous elections (0: no — 1: yes)

_Interested in politics:_ The respondent is “quite interested” or “very interested” in politics (0: no — 1: yes). Recoded responses to the question, “How interested are you in politics?”

_Social trust:_ Mean of the valid responses to the questions, “How much do you trust other people?”; “How fair do you think others are?”; and “How helpful do you find others?” (0-10).

_Happiness-satisfaction:_ Mean of the valid responses to the questions, “How happy are you?” and “How satisfied are you with life as a whole?” (0-10).

_Religiosity:_ How religious are you? (0: not at all; 10: very much).

_Sociability:_ How often do you meet socially with friends, relatives, colleagues? (0: never; 6: every day).

_Satisfaction with the economy:_ How satisfied the respondent is with the present state of the domestic economy (0: extremely dissatisfied — 10: extremely satisfied).

_Hard to cope with present income:_ The household of the respondent lives with difficulty or great difficulty on present income (0: no — 1: yes). Recoded from the responses to the question on the feeling about the household’s income nowadays.

_Member of a group that experiences discrimination:_ The respondent reported to be a member of a group that experiences discrimination (0: no — 1: yes).

_Place in society:_ Self-reported place in the society (0: bottom of society — 10: top of society).

_Age:_ Natural logarithm of the respondent’s age.

_Male:_ Male respondent (0: no — 1: yes).

_Education:_ Highest level of education according to the ES-ISCED code (0: lower than lower-secondary — 7: tertiary degree or higher).
*Urban resident*: The place in which the respondent lives is a metropolitan or urban area (0: no — 1: yes).

*ECE*: Dummy for East Central Europe (0: Western European respondent — 1: Eastern European respondent).


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*** p < .01; ** p < .05
Histogram of the Institutional Trust Index