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The origins of the youth's political trust in Southeastern Europe

Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which the perceived quality of institutional performance as an endogenous source of trust and political socialization as an exogenous source of trust determine the emergence of political trust among youth in ten Southeast European countries. It also sheds light on a relatively understudied factor in the formation of political trust: the relation towards the future of society, which is considered an exogenous source of trust. Endogenous origins, particularly satisfaction with democracy, dominate the formation of political trust, while exogenous aspects, presented as aspects of socialization, are less well represented, although still significant. This is especially true for interest in politics and, to some extent, societal optimism, which are important factors in the formation of political trust.

Keywords: youth, political trust, institutional performance, socialization, Southeast Europe

INTRODUCTION

This study delves into how the political trust of youth in Southeast Europe is shaped. Building upon the foundational research of Mishler and Rose (2001) regarding the roots of trust, we analyse two primary sources of political trust: firstly, the youth's perceptions and evaluations of institutional performance, and secondly, the role of their socialization. This dual approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the individual-level social factors contributing to the formation of youth's political trust across ten countries of Southeast Europe.

Political trust is part of a larger concept of institutional trust, which includes trust in various social institutions spanning from educational to repressive institutions. In comparisons across various types of institutional trust, political trust frequently ranks as one of the lowest in both Western and post-socialist societies (Denters et al. 2007; Khan 2016). Despite the general trend of low trust in political institutions across Europe, prevailing political distrust is particularly pronounced in post-socialist societies (Mishler and Rose 1997; Sztompka 1999; Badescu and Uslander 2003; Cattenberg and Moreno 2006; Šalaj 2007; Zmerli, Newton and Montero 2007; Kukovič 2013; Franc and Međugorac 2016; Hooghe and Kern 2015; Dyrstad and Listhaug 2017; Kolczynska 2020; Bovan and Baketa 2020). This pronounced distrust in Southeast Europe underscores the significance of studying political trust in this region, particularly among the young generation. Namely, political trust is a cornerstone of democratic development, influencing citizens' political behaviour and civic cooperation (Sztompka 1999; Torney-Purta, Richardson, and Barber 2004). It

underpins political participation and fosters social capital formation (Rothstein 2005), reinforcing democratic political culture. The examination of political trust and its roots inevitably addresses the growing scepticism among young people toward formal politics and political institutions (Dalton 2004; Kestilä-Kekkonen 2009; Norris 2011; Cammaerts et al. 2013; Sloam 2014; Pilkington, Pollock 2015; Pickard, 2019; Sloam and Henn 2019; Kitanova 2020). Growing political scepticism among young people has the potential to erode their support for the core values of democratic governance, thereby posing a risk to long-term political legitimacy.

In addition, the relevance of political trust examination is further emphasized by the region's complex socio-political and economic context, which poses challenges to the stability of democratic institutions. Moreover, some researchers whose research is focused on the Balkans and Southeast Europe have detected and highlighted the ongoing process of democratic backsliding (Bieber 2020; Čepo 2020; Kapidžić, 2020; Lavrič and Bieber 2021), a process that deepens existing democratic deficits of political institutions. Therefore, determining the extent to which political trust derives from the performance of institutions themselves versus external or exogenous influences, such as individual socialization and the internalization of distinct socio-political patterns, enables us to draw more substantiated conclusions regarding the impact of phenomena or processes concerning the quality of institutions (such as democratic backsliding) on the dynamics of political trust. Also, our research contributes to institutional trust research, specifically among young people in post-socialist societies, since empirical studies of political trust conducted to date have not paid sufficient attention to young people in Southeast Europe, creating a gap in the literature that this paper seeks to fill.ⁱ Additionally, this paper also sheds light on a relatively understudied yet potentially influential factor in shaping political trust: the individual's attitude towards the future of society, which is considered an exogenous source of trust.

The first section of this paper outlines the theoretical framework of the political trust research and seeks to explain and justify the importance of the inclusion of attitude toward societal future in research on political (and institutional) trust. The second section presents the study's methodology, whilst the third is devoted to the study's findings and the interpretation thereof. Descriptive and multivariate analysis are performed on ten databases consisting of nationally representative samples of young people with political trust as dependent variable and two main sets of factors (endogenous and exogenous) as predictors. The conclusion summarizes key findings that endogenous origins, particularly satisfaction with democracy, dominate the formation of political trust, while exogenous aspects, presented as aspects of socialization, are less well represented, although still significant.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Various widely-held theoretical approaches to institutional trust emphasize a socio-psychological perspective. This perspective focuses on the individual conferring trust, allowing us to define trust and acknowledge its dual nature. For example, Sztompka (1999) suggests three main bases on which people determine the trustworthiness of institutions: (1) a reputation that refers to the way that institution worked in the past, (2) performance implying currently obtained results and (3) appearance reflected in the demeanour of the institution's employees. Levi (1998) says that trust in political institutions is proportional to people's belief that the institutions act on behalf of their interests. Also, institutional trust goes beyond mere cognitive calculations and rational evaluations of institutional trustworthiness. It is also formed by our social expectations and rooted in the values of our civic culture (Almond and Verba 1963; Sztompka 1999). It involves a willingness to believe or to expect that society will reach to its potential or that society's trajectory is positive, even if objective social or economic indicators are not in favour of such an optimistic orientation. In this regard, trust can reflect a sense of hope in the collective well-being. In the same vein, the nature of trust is characterized by a combination of aspects that are in contradiction to one another, such as rational and emotional aspects (Nooteboom 2012), while some researchers emphasize the relevance of emotions and values for trust building (Barbalet 1996; Nooteboom 2012).

Trust is, therefore, a phenomenon that embodies the possibility of certain knowledge and the unknown about something or someone that we either choose to believe or not to believe (Lewis and Weigert 2012). It is thus determined by both the absence of information and the presence of a certain amount of information about a given subject (Nooteboom 2012). In that vein, trust can be defined as the "rational or affective belief in the benevolent motivation and performance capacity of another party" (Norris 2011: 19).

In establishing a theoretical framework for studying specifically political trust in post-socialist societies, it is essential to understand how citizens perceive institutions at a fundamental level. In both socialist and post-socialist periods, political institutions in Southeast Europe were primarily created through a top-down process, based on political ideological design, and were not built gradually and by following the social development (Šalaj 2007; Sekulić and Šporer 2010). Therefore, institutions are not perceived as a 'natural' part of society that grows out of the already established networks of citizens' cooperation for solving common problems. Institutions are seen as separate entities that should be avoided, and their imposed norms are ignored - from which the instability of the system follows as well as low institutional trust (Sekulić and Šporer 2010).

Mishler and Rose (2001) offer a distinctive perspective when it comes to understanding political trust and its determining factors within post-communist societies. Mishler and Rose's approach focuses on institutions, their performance, and the cultural context in which they function, by differentiating between endogenous and exogenous factors that shape political trust. The endogenous origins of political trust are rooted in institutional theories, which propose that trust emerges from an evaluation of institutional performance. Cultural theories look at the origins of political trust as exogenous factors outside of the realm of politics, such as cultural norms and socialization processes.

The endogenous origin of political trust: The perception of the performance of social and political institutions

The evaluation of the institutional performance shapes the level of institutional trust. This evaluation is based on direct or indirect experiences, impressions and encounters with institutions, and available information about and reputation of institutions. In short, institutional trust is endogenous and stems from the performance of the institution itself (Mishler and Rose 1997; Mishler and Rose 2001).

Perceptions of institutional performance are shaped by the economic, political, and socio-cultural aspects of society. In that sense, we can say that the phenomenon of ‘borrowed trust’, the transfer of trust from one social sphere to another (Sztompka 1999), means that political trust is not founded solely on the socioeconomic state of the society (Uslaner 2002) but also on well-performing economic institutions (Mishler and Rose 2001; Mishler and Rose 2005; Torcal 2017). Additionally, the results produced by economic institutions in terms of generating political trust are indirect and dependent on the individual values and priorities attached to the economic life of the country (Mishler and Rose 2005). Although certain economic indicators, such as the rate of unemployment, have a potent ability to forecast political trust, others, such as economic growth, are somewhat weaker predictors. The overall impact of economic circumstances on the formation of political trust is more evident among respondents with lower educational attainment (van Erkel and van der Meer 2016). Researches by Goubin (2021) and Goubin and Hooghe (2020) point to the importance of social inequality and its impact on levels of political trust across different social strata. Their findings suggest that societies with greater inequalities in terms of income level, education, and employment status exhibit smaller differences in levels of trust between social strata. In contrast, in ‘equal countries’ where wealthier social strata express higher degrees of trust than their less affluent counterparts, authors attribute this tendency and pattern to the moral and political expectations individuals have regarding the political system. In wealthier societies with smaller economic differences between social classes, people have higher expectations of politics, which leads to a more pronounced difference in trust levels between social classes. Vallier (2020) discusses a similar perspective regarding the relationship between economic well-being and political expectations. According to Vallier, as societies experience increasing economic well-being, people's demands from political institutions extend beyond mere economic success. In such contexts, individuals prioritize factors such as respect for democratic procedures and the absence of corruption, indicating a broader set of expectations from political systems. On the other hand, in less prosperous societies, economic development becomes the primary concern, often overshadowing the importance placed on democratic processes and the issue of corruption. This perspective emphasizes the shifting priorities and demands of individuals in relation to political institutions, influenced by the level of economic well-being within a society.

Studies consistently suggest that political trust is shaped by perceptions of corruption in society (Porta 2000; Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Bowler and Karp 2004; Melios 2020). Even when perceptions of the economy and the level of democracy are positive, attitudes toward corruption

play a dominant role in determining levels of political trust, largely because of the sense of inequality that corruption fosters (Uslaner 2002; Uslaner 2013; Uslaner 2014). Many post-socialist societies have high levels of corruption, widespread perceptions of corruption, and comparatively lower levels of democratic development compared to other European countries (The Economist 2021). In the Western Balkans, despite formal institutions and written rules, the functioning of these institutions is often hindered in practice by clientelism, party patronage, and other informal mechanisms for the exchange of services at all levels and in almost all spheres of life (Stanojević and Petrović 2018; Cvetičanin, Popovikj, and Jovanović 2019; Kotarski and Radman 2020; Bliznakovski 2021). Corruption and informal practices that span virtually all sectors of society and circumvent institutional rules for personal gain often go unpunished, both legally and morally. The lack of formal and informal sanctions for unethical behavior reinforces the perception of pervasive informality, which in turn negatively affects perceptions of the trustworthiness and responsiveness of political institutions (Cvetičanin, Popovikj, and Jovanović 2019).

Based on Levi's (1998) assertion that trust in institutions is proportional to people's belief that institutions act in their interest, it can be assumed that the political distrust expressed by young people reflects the neglect of their issues and interests by decision-makers. Given the social heterogeneity of young people and the ideological nature of political decisions and policies, it is important to include elements of external efficacy and assess young people's perceptions of their own political influence on decision-making processes before examining political trust. Given their overall marginalized social and political position, it is not surprising that the majority of young people across Europe perceive their political voice as barely heard and insufficiently respected in the political sphere. As a result, many young people distance themselves from formal politics (Benedicto and Blasco 2008; Cammaerts et al. 2014; Grimm and Pilkington 2015; Lavrič, Tomanović, and Jusić 2019; Pickard 2019; European Parliament 2021).

These dynamics are thought to affect the formation of trust in political institutions. Similarly, although for the general population, research has found that people living in European regions characterized by 'large power distance,' that is, fewer opportunities to influence government structures, strict hierarchies, and inequality in decision-making processes-express significantly lower levels of institutional trust than people living in regions with more responsive institutions (Kaasa and Andriani 2022). In this sense, it can be assumed that institutional distrust is even more pronounced among young people in regions where institutions are largely unresponsive. Overall, a sense of dissatisfaction with the political system, mainstream political discourse, and its direction is prevalent among young people in the European Union (Cammaerts et al. 2014; Foa, Klassen, and Wenger et al. 2020). Prevailing negative perceptions of politics can have an unfavourable impact on young people's increasing disengagement from formal political processes, leading to a decline in their engagement and participation (Kestilä-Kekkonen 2009; Cammaerts et al. 2014; Sloam 2014; Pickard 2019; Sloam and Henn 2019; Kitanova 2020).

In this regard, it is precisely the evaluation of how democracy functions and the level of satisfaction with the state of democracy in a society that are considered important and as significant factors in shaping political trust (Zmerli, Newton, and Montero 2007). Satisfaction with democracyⁱⁱ reflects the out-put side of political systems, referring to the quality of government founded on impartiality and efficiency (Dahlberg and Holmberg 2012). A consistent gap has been observed regarding perceptions of democratic functioning, where Southeast Europeans generally express significantly lower levels of satisfaction with democratic practices in their countries compared to citizens living in old European democracies (Aarts and Thomassen 2008; Dahlberg and Holmberg 2012; van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2016; Foa, Klassen, Slade et al. 2020). While levels of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy remain relatively low among young people from post-socialist countries, a positive trend has been identified: younger generations exhibit increasing levels of satisfaction with democracy (Foa, Klassen, Wenger et al. 2020).

This overview of the main elements of the perception and evaluation of the performance of social and political institutions allows us to formulate the following hypothesis:

H₁: The perceived state of the economy, satisfaction with democracy, and external efficacy are expected to be significantly and positively correlated with political trust, while the perception of informality is negatively correlated with political trust.

The exogenous origin of political trust: the socialization dimension

We have already mentioned the cultural perspective, which emphasizes the exogenous origins of political trust rooted in the sociocultural realm, independent of the perception of the functioning of political institutions (Mishler and Rose 2001). Cultural origins of trust arise from individuals' socialization (Mishler and Rose 2001), their relationships with others, their communities, and society at large. The development of an individual's relationship with social and political institutions is based on the sociocultural process of political socialization, which includes both formal and informal learning about political institutions.

One of the most important elements of political socialization is one's interest in politics. More specifically, an interest in politics and political events represents a form of civic engagement that involves paying attention to, acquiring knowledge about, and forming opinions about political issues (Zani and Barrett 2012). One's interest in politics plays a crucial role in political socialization, as it leads to a more comprehensive understanding of politics and, thus, to a more sophisticated evaluation of the performance of political institutions. Numerous studies have shown that interest in politics is a significant and positive predictor of both political trust (Cattenberg and Moreno 2006; Claes, Hooghe, and Marien 2012; Melios 2020) and political behaviour (Prior 2010).

The socialization process also shapes and develops an individual's future orientation (Trommsdorff 1983, 402). The future orientation or temporal dimension of trust is often neglected in political trust research (Barbalet 1996; 2019). Barbalet (1996) defines trust as a future-oriented

social emotion because the object of trust is in the future. Barbalet cites Luhmann (1979,10), for whom expressions of trust are an anticipation of the future and a kind of ‘advance’ made by the one who shows trust, overcoming the problem of time (Luhmann 1979). Future orientation involves the expectation and anticipation that the outcome of a particular relationship that we have begun with trust and in which we participate will not be to our detriment. Studies of political trust among adolescents neglect precisely this temporality as a feature of trust, which is introduced here as a determinant. Future orientation in the sense of individual optimism as an integral component of trust is studied by Uslaner (2002) and Sztompka (1999), whose work in this vein focuses primarily on analysing the characteristics of social or generalized trust (trust toward strangers). This paper is essentially about institutional trust, and since political institutions are part of society, the focus must be on social optimism as a positive determinant of political trust.

Inglehart and Welzel (2005) also point to the importance of cultural factors for the rather low level of political trust (compared to other forms of institutional trust). They link the decline in political trust in Western countries around the world to both an increase in the value placed on self-expression and a decrease in the value placed on social conformity (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). At the core of the value system of self-expression lie post-materialist values that include the importance of political and personal freedoms, tolerance, life satisfaction, civic engagement, and social trust. These values are closely related to a committed and critical attitude toward institutions and especially toward political elites, which in itself implies a lower level of political trust. However, the prevalence of post-materialist value orientations in a society is due to a high level of existential security, as is common in economically developed Western societies (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). In other words, the satisfaction of material and security needs leads to a shift in priorities and a shift in focus from the achievement of individual material goals to intangible or subjective concerns such as the promotion of democratic principles (Pickard, 2019). Political trust, particularly trust in national political institutions, is usually at the bottom of the list of institutional trust, not only in European Union (EU) countries with a long democratic legacy but also in post-socialist countries in Southeast Europe (Eurofound 2018). However, the lower level of political trust in post-socialist societies is not attributed to an increase in the values of self-expression and critical vigilance against hierarchical authorities. Rather, the determinants of low political trust in this region are likely attributed to robust cultural factors such as values reflecting a socialist legacy and religion (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), as well as the disappearance of illusions about democracy and disenchantment with the democratic order (Cattenberg and Moreno 2006). Nevertheless, in light of findings showing that young people are more likely than their older counterparts to be bearers of new emancipatory or postmaterialist values (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), such as support for the protection of human rights, social justice, and natural environment, we believe it is necessary to examine post-materialist orientation in the context of political trust formation.ⁱⁱⁱ

This overview of the main elements of the socialization dimension as a relevant factor for political trust allows us to formulate the following hypothesis:

H₂: Societal optimism and an interest in politics are expected to be significantly and positively correlated with political trust, while post-materialistic value orientation is negatively correlated with the dependent variable.

METHODOLOGY

Conceptually, the foundations of young people's political trust are: (1) the (perceived) quality of institutional performance (Levi 1998; Mishler and Rose 2001; Sztomka 1999) and (2) the socialization dimension (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Kestilä-Kekkonen and Söderlund 2016; Sztompka 1999). These two sets of factors were, along with sociodemographic variables, used as independent variables in the models. The factor of perceived institutional performance consists of young people's perception of the state of the economy, their satisfaction with democracy, external efficacy, and perceptions of informality. The socialization dimension consists of young people's interest in politics, their post-materialist value orientation, and societal optimism.

The comparative analysis is based on the data from an international youth research project, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Youth Studies Southeast Europe 2018/2019, which was carried out in 2018. National surveys were conducted simultaneously in ten countries: Albania (N=1210), Bosnia and Herzegovina (N=1000), Bulgaria (N=1016), Croatia (N=1500), Kosovo (N=1200), North Macedonia (N=1038), Montenegro (N=711), Romania (N=1048), Serbia (N=1168) and Slovenia (N=1015). All ten samples are nationally representative and consist of young respondents aged 14-29. In total 10,902 respondents participated in the surveys.^{iv}

In this study, descriptive and multivariate statistics are used. Before being included in a multiple regression analysis, the unidimensionality of each factor was verified by a principal component analysis and then items of each factor were transformed into additive scales. Before that, the scales' reliabilities were assessed by a standardized Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The scales were then included in multiple regression analysis to examine the extent to which variation of a dependent variable can be explained by its correlation with independent variables or predictors. We employed eleven regression models to evaluate the associations between political trust and the performance of social and political institutions, as well as the dimension of socialization. Ten models were created for each individual country, while the final model encompasses all countries, considering the region as an entity and adjusting for differences between countries using a set of dummy variables^v. The dependent variable and the independent variables have been provided below.

Dependent variable: political trust is measured by an additive scale of trust towards *political parties, local authorities, national government, and national parliament* (a five-degree scale 1 = complete mistrust to 5 = complete trust)

Independent Variables:

(I) Institutional Performance Dimension

- 1) *Assessment of society's economy* was measured by respondents' assessment of the status of the economic welfare of its citizens and employment in their country on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = very bad to 5 = very good) and these two variables were transformed into an additive scale.
- 2) *Satisfaction with democracy* – respondents expressed the level of their satisfaction with the state of democracy in each country on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = completely dissatisfied to 5 = completely satisfied).
- 3) *Perception of informality* – this was measured in the context of an instrument that was aimed at examining respondents' estimation of the importance of different factors when it comes to finding a job for a young person in their country on a five-degree scale (1 = not important at all to 5 = very important). The additive scale included two items: *acquaintances (friends, relatives)* and *connections with people in power*.
- 4) *External efficacy* – how well respondents think young people's interests are represented in national politics on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = not at all to 5 = very well)

(II) The Socialization Dimension

- 1) *Interest in politics* was measured by the level of interest in politics on a five-degree scale: (1 = completely uninterested to 5 = completely interested).
- 2) *Societal optimism* refers to how respondents see the future of their society in general on a scale from 1 to 3 (1 = worse than now, 2 = same as now, 3 = better than now)
- 3) *Postmaterialist orientation* was measured in the context of an instrument aimed at examining young people's estimation of how much the national government should focus on various political goals on a five-degree scale (1 = not at all to 5 = very much). The additive scale included three items: *preservation of the natural environment, securing human rights and freedom, and securing justice and social security*.

(III) Socio-demographic variables were used as controls in multiple regression analysis: *age, gender, respondents' level of education, and level of their father's education*.^{vi}

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics (arithmetic mean and standard deviation) of the main predictor variables and the dependent variable across the entire sample of youth are presented in Table 1, while Table 2 represents descriptive statistics of the main predictor variables and the dependent variable within individual country samples.

Table 1: Average values and standard deviations of independent variable and dependent variables (M).

	Political trust (1-5)	Assessment of society's economy (1-5)	Satisfaction with democracy (1-5)	Perception of informality (1-5)	External efficacy (1-5)	Interest in politics (1-5)	Societal optimism (1-3)	Postmaterialist values (1-5)
Mean	2.1	3.1	2.7	4.1	2.5	1.9	2.3	4.5
St.Deviation	1.02	.82	1.13	.95	1.5	1.1	.78	.75

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and reliability of scales used in multiple regression analysis by country (M- arithmetic mean, SD – standard deviation, C.α – Cronbach's alpha)

	Perception of institutional performance														Socialization dimension							
	Political trust			Assessment of country's economy			Perception of informality			Satisfaction with democracy		External efficacy		Political interest		Post-material orientation			Societal optimism			
COUNTRY	M	SD	C.α	M	SD	C.α	M	SD	C.α	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	C.α	M	SD		
Albania	1.9	0.9	0.85	3.2	0.7	0.82	4.3	0.9	0.53	2.4	1.1	2.3	1.2	1.7	1.1	4.7	0.7	0.91	2.4	0.8		
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2	1.	0.94	3.1	0.8	0.85	4.4	0.8	0.74	2.7	1.1	2.2	1.	1.8	1.2	4.4	0.8	0.91	2.2	0.8		
Bulgaria	2.4	1.1	0.89	3.	0.8	0.71	4	0.9	0.48	2.8	1.2	2.3	1.1	1.9	1.1	4.7	0.6	0.83	2.5	0.6		
Croatia	2.2	0.9	0.88	3.2	0.8	0.77	4.2	0.8	0.77	3	1.1	2.4	1	2.1	1.1	4.3	0.8	0.85	2.4	0.7		
Kosovo	2	0.9	0.86	3.3	0.7	0.70	4.2	1	0.66	2.5	1.1	2.3	1.1	1.8	1.2	4.6	0.6	0.87	2.6	0.7		
N.Macedonia	2.2	1.2	0.92	3.1	0.9	0.80	4.3	1	0.57	2.5	1.2	2.6	1.2	2.2	1.4	4.6	0.6	0.81	2.1	0.8		
Montenegro	2.2	1.3	0.93	2.9	1.2	0.88	4.2	1.1	0.73	2.9	1.3	4.5	2.6	1.9	1.3	4.6	0.9	0.92	2.4	0.8		
Romania	1.9	0.9	0.87	3.	0.9	0.80	3.9	1	0.62	2.6	1.2	2	1.2	1.7	1.1	4.5	0.8	0.88	2.2	0.8		
Serbia	1.9	1	0.91	2.8	0.9	0.83	4.2	0.9	0.56	2.4	1.1	3.7	2.2	1.9	1.2	4.6	0.7	0.89	2.2	0.8		
Slovenia	2.2	0.9	0.93	3	0.8	0.77	3.9	1	0.76	2.8	1	2.3	0.9	2	1.2	4.4	0.8	0.87	1.9	0.8		

Young people in Southeast European countries generally show low trust in political institutions; it is lowest among young people in Albania and Serbia. On average, young people tend to rate the state of the economy moderately positively, with the lowest rating in Serbia and the highest in Kosovo. At the same time, perceptions of informality are quite pronounced, as young people in all countries generally believe that corrupt and informal practices are widespread in their society. Young people in the region generally express dissatisfaction with the level of democracy, with satisfaction particularly low in Serbia and Albania. In Croatia, however, satisfaction is slightly higher than the regional average, but with no statistical significance. This suggests that young people in these countries perceive and evaluate the functioning of democracy slightly different in their respective contexts. As for political efficacy, it can be noted that most young people in the region perceive it as low and weak. The situation is different in Montenegro and Serbia, where external efficacy is perceived as relatively higher and stronger.

Youth in all countries of the region show little interest in politics. However, the acceptance of postmaterialist values is widespread in all countries and varies only slightly, and young people consider postmaterialist political issues to be quite important. In terms of societal optimism on a scale of 1 to 3, young people on average expect the future of their society to remain relatively unchanged compared to the present. Exceptions to this trend are Kosovo and Bulgaria, where respondents show slightly higher optimism compared with their peers in other Southeast European countries.

It should be noted that there are no statistically significant differences between countries regarding the average values of the analysed variables. This means that young people of this region tend to share similar political cultures and views about political and economic institutions in their respective countries.

Multiple regression analysis

As shown in Table 3 at the level of the region, the indicators of both the institutional performance dimension and socialization dimension are significantly related to political trust in the expected direction. Meaning that both sets of predictors contribute to the formation of political trust among youth in Southeast Europe. The comparative analysis further shows that not all predictors of each predictor set are significant in all countries. Satisfaction with democracy and external efficacy are consistently and positively associated with political trust in all countries. Assessments of the economy are also positively related to trust in all countries except Kosovo. Assessments of informality are negatively related to trust, suggesting that political trust declines as the importance attached to corruption and informal relations in the country increases. Contrary to the initial expectation of greater importance in the region, this relationship is significant only in two countries; Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia.

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis models with young people's political trust as a dependent variable

		Albania	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Bulgaria	Croatia	Kosovo	N. Macedonia	Montenegro	Romania	Serbia	Slovenia	All countries
Perception of institutional performance	Assessment of economy	.120**	.114**	.180**	.197**	.044	.118**	.255**	.148**	.148**	.179**	0.169**
	Satisfaction with democracy	.326**	.204**	.271**	.210**	.322**	.117**	.384**	.275**	.394**	.212**	0.239**
	External efficacy	.135**	.164**	.084	.108**	.178**	.098**	.155**	.292**	.184**	.160**	0.185**
	Assessment of informality	-.014	-.094**	.061	-.152**	-.014	-.035	.072	-.053	.033	-.007	-0.024**
Socialization dimension	Interest in politics	.252**	.279**	.250**	.179**	.227**	.455**	.213**	.186**	.080	.186**	0.233**
	Post-materialist orientation	-.021	-.150**	-.047	-.203**	-.015	-.075	-.020	-.011	.011	-.038	-0.081**
	Societal optimism	.105**	.057	.128**	.125**	.084**	.097**	.097	.059	.133**	.105**	0.113**
Sociodemographic variables	Gender (female)	.024	.016	.096**	.043	-.025	-.002	-.011	-.001	-.017	-.031	0.018
	Respondent's education	.007	-.019	-.070	.043	.004	-.015	.029	.016	.039	-.031	0.007
	Father's education	.027	.122**	-.026	.004	.087**	-.019	.014	-.003	.030	.021	0.018
	Age	.009	.018	-.027	-.085**	-.025	-.113**	.008	-.057	-.072	-.058	-0.039**
Controlled by country												
Adjusted Rsquare		.348	.324	.295	.385	.256	.378	.552	.371	.425	.257	.344
df		11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	
**p<0.01,												

As an element of the set of predictors of socialization, interest in politics is statistically significant for building political trust in all countries, except Serbia. Even though interest in politics and political trust were relatively low, small differences among young people were strongly associated with each other. A slightly higher level of interest in politics indicates a shift from complete distrust to some distrust. Societal optimism is a significant predictor in most countries and, as expected, contributes positively to political trust. Post-materialistic values decrease the level of political trust as hypothesized, but significant associations were found only in three countries; Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and North Macedonia.

If one looks at the regional sample as a whole, both hypotheses are confirmed, with institutional performance being a superior set of predictors to the socialization dimension. However, looking at regression at the level of each country sample, one can see variations in the strength of each predictor. Even at the level of each country, it can be said that the first hypothesis (H₁) regarding the positive and significant relationship between elements of institutional performance and political trust is largely confirmed, as the results show that the perceived state of the economy, satisfaction with democracy, and external efficacy contribute significantly and positively to variations in political trust. The second hypothesis (H₂) was partially confirmed when tested on separate country samples, as both the importance of interest in politics and social optimism contribute positively and significantly to variation in political trust. The variations in the statistical significance of predictors across countries do not follow a particular or consistent pattern and are probably linked to distinct national socio-cultural and political contexts.^{vii}

CONCLUSION

Young people in post-socialist countries encounter both universal challenges shared by their peers across Europe and unique difficulties stemming from the post-socialist legacy and political culture of their societies. Relatively low levels of trust and interest in politics and a pronounced focus on post-materialist issues link young people from post-socialist countries to their peers across the continent. However, contextual factors such as an undemocratic political legacy, a relatively low standard of living compared to Western Europe, and the presence of corruption and patronage can have a major impact on their attitudes toward politics.

Political trust formation in post-socialist societies is similar to that in old European democracies (van Deth et al. 2007; Kukovič 2013). Political trust among the young generation in Southeast Europe primarily stems from their evaluation of the performance of democratic institutions in their countries. In other words, even if there is an improvement in the political socialization of young people, it would only lead to a minor increase in overall political trust. In contrast, significantly enhancing the efficiency and performance of democratic institutions is likely to have a much larger positive impact on young people's political trust. However, it is important to keep in mind that even if the direction of the association is the same, the explanation must be contextual and encompass the socialist legacy and the post-socialist transformation. Another distinctive feature of

post-socialist societies in Southeast Europe is the ambivalence between trust and informality. High levels of corruption, clientelism, and the intertwining of politics and the economy lead to a culture of informality that permeates daily life. This culture does not necessarily serve as a parameter for institutional performance and, as a result, impairs trust.

Moreover, there is a strong positive correlation between satisfaction with democracy and political trust, which holds for young people in all countries of Southeast Europe. Indeed, it can be said that for young people in this region, satisfaction with democracy is a universal predictor of political trust. When they perceive their political system as democratic and open to debate about young people's interests, young people express higher levels of political trust, while perceptions of closed and unresponsive systems make them very distrustful. This is also confirmed by the fact that external efficacy is a significant positive predictor of political trust among young people in almost all countries. This finding is consistent with similar studies that point to 'power distance,' referring to the extent to which people can influence decision-making processes, as key to building political trust (Kaasa and Andriani 2022). In contexts of significant 'power distance', people may feel helpless or alienated from institutions, which can negatively affect political trust (Kaasa and Andriani 2022).

Assessment of the economy as part of this set of predictors also proves to be a significant determinant of political trust. This indicates that young people perceive the political system as responsible for economic effectiveness (Kestilä-Kekkonen and Söderlund 2016). This association aligns with the general trend observed in less affluent and developing countries where there is a greater expectation for political institutions to facilitate economic growth (Vallier 2020). The view of politics having a great impact on economic development can be attributed not only to a broader global trend (Van der Meer 2017) but also to a particular cultural context - a combination of a socialist legacy and high economic expectations of democratic transition. In other words, alongside the socialist legacy where state politics traditionally dictated economic trends, a majority of citizens in post-socialist countries expected that democratic transition, even in the context of European integrations, would bring primarily economic progress to their countries (Ilišin and Radin 2002; Ilišin 2005).

Interestingly, there appears to be a very weak link between perceptions of informality and political trust, which is particularly unusual given previous studies that have found a strong negative association between perceptions of the prevalence of informality, corrupt behaviour, and political trust (Morris and Klesner 2010; Villoria, Van Ryzin and Lavena 2013). The absence of such a strong association can be understood in two ways. The first pertains to the emphasis that is placed on the material dimension or economic performance in economically less developed countries when it comes to the formation of political trust, as compared with socio-cultural aspects of social relations, which are in that sense secondary or less important (Vallier 2020). The second approach highlights the idea that informal practices are deeply embedded in the fabric of society, to the extent that political institutions are no longer perceived as generators of informal practices. In other

words, informal or corrupt behaviour is not exclusively attributed to the political sphere but is considered an integral part of everyday culture and a ‘way of life’. Consequently, it is possible that informality does not inherently function as a criterion for evaluating institutional performance and, thus, does not constitute a part of the political trust equation.

Contrary to our expectations, the propensity for postmaterialist values does not contribute to a decrease in political trust among young people in Southeast Europe. Although widely accepted, young people do not associate this orientation with the political sphere (i.e. it is not a mobilizing factor in either a positive or a negative sense). Among young people in the majority of countries of the Southeast European region, post-materialist values do not emerge to be a solid potential for political distrust. This can be attributed to the human development theory proposed by Inglehart and Welzel (2005), which emphasizes socioeconomic development and overall material security as necessary preconditions for the increased importance of post-materialist values in shaping youth’s relationship with political institutions.

Interest in politics has been shown to be a robust and consistent predictor of political trust, which is in line with previous research (Cattenberg and Moreno 2006; Claes, Hooghe, and Marien 2012; Khan 2016; Melios 2020). The positive association of interest in politics and political trust can be interpreted by using a political socialization approach. Being an important part of political socialization, political interest proves to be the best proxy for political knowledge (Rapeli 2022). Solid political knowledge enables young people to get better insights into political goings on. Therefore, we can assume that young people with higher levels of political interest employ more sophisticated criteria when evaluating the trustworthiness of political institutions and that their refined criteria enable them to build a more nuanced perception of the political landscape where they can transcend negative stereotypes and narratives surrounding politics and politicians.^{viii}

Societal optimism proves to be a significant and positive factor in the formation of political trust, showing stability in the majority of countries. This relationship suggests that a future orientation is inherent in trust (Barbalet 1996, 2019) and that young people’s trust in political institutions is based in part on their perceived outlook on the broader social context, of which political institutions are an inseparable part. In other words, this means that their beliefs about the future of society are the basis on which they decide whether to ‘invest’ trust in political institutions. Even though studies on institutional and political trust show that reference to the future of a society is neglected as a possible determinant of political trust, especially when it comes to young people, this study has shown and confirmed that it should be considered more frequently in future research.

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ⁱ There are notable and relatively recent studies that address various social and political issues related to young people in Southeast Europe (Hurrelman and Weichert 2015; Jusić and Numanović 2017; Lavrič, Tomanović, and Jusić, 2019). However, these studies do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the complicated dynamics of how political trust emerges among young people.

ⁱⁱ The assessment of how institutions perform their functions is, to some extent, included in the measure of satisfaction with democracy, which is believed to be strongly associated with the formation of institutional trust. However, it is important to note that this measure generally reflects satisfaction with the unfolding of democratic processes, and we do not have specific insights into the practices that respondents consider when assessing the state of democracy in their country (Torcal 2017).

ⁱⁱⁱ Pickard (2019) notes that Putnam’s (2000) findings in the US, which are linked to this conclusion, are diametrically opposed – i.e. it is the younger generations that exhibit a greater propensity for materialism.

^{iv} For a comprehensive comparative study that includes data from all ten studies on various areas of young people’s lives, including attitudes toward politics, see the Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019 by Lavrič, Tomanović, and Jusić (2019).

^v Random effects modeling is not feasible with our data, which includes only 10 countries, equivalent to 10 second-level units. Statistical literature commonly recommends a minimum of 30 units at this level to avoid biased estimates. As a corrective measure, we incorporated a series of country-specific dummy variables into our model, using Albania as the baseline for comparison.

^{vi} Level of father's education is variable is regarded as a good proxy for social status of youth (Ilišin and Spajić Vrkaš 2017; Ilišin et al. 2013).

^{vii} The data is not sufficient to explore potential factors that are behind these specific differences between countries.

^{viii} The only exception in our study is Serbia where the association between political interest and political trust is positive but not statistically significant. This suggest that contextual factors that were not considered in our analysis are likely to play a significant role in shaping this particular non-linear association between political interest and trust.