



Digital platforms and the shadow of illiberal democracy: Lessons from Central and Eastern Europe

Synopsis from the invited talk for the workshop on “European Political Democracy” by Jean Monnet Network on European Media and Platform Policies, 20 November 2020

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My talk begins with a sad story of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe, which started in 2010 in Hungary, following the victory of the once-liberal-turned-populist right-wing party Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán, whose government has managed to undermine the foundations of Hungary’s democratic system within very short period of time, by changing the electoral system to disadvantage the opposition, capture the judiciary and the mass media, starting with the transformation of public service broadcasting into the mouthpiece of government’s propaganda, but gradually extending their influence over the most part of the commercial media market, mostly via ownership changes that brought these media outlets into the hands of Orbán’s supporters and cronies.

In Poland, which has long been treated as a poster-child for successful democratic transition after 1989, the process of backsliding started little later, namely in 2015 following the Presidential and then Parliamentary Elections which brought to power the right-wing populist party Law and Justice, headed by its co-founder Jarosław Kaczyński, the Law and Justice party has been enforcing a substantial political, economic, and social change over the last five years, very much following the Hungarian example – attempting to take control over the Ministry of Justice and the entire judiciary, launching attacks on minorities and other “social enemies”, particularly the refugees, “gender ideology,” and the LGBT community.

The democratic backsliding in CEE



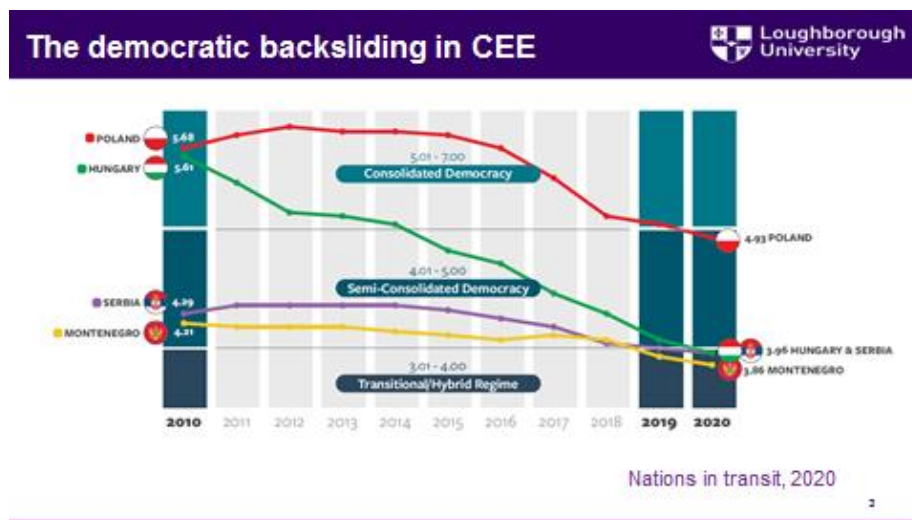
- Hungary & Poland: both countries witnessing a steep decline in the quality of democracy after 2010 (HUN) and 2015 (POL) elections; “democratic deconsolidation”, with Hungary and Poland as “trendsetters” (Agh, 2015)
- Similar pattern – politicization and capture of key democratic institutions, especially the courts and the media
 - Poland & Hungary: turning public service broadcaster into governments mouthpiece
 - Hungary: vast majority of commercial media under the government control
- Attacks on immigrants & minorities (LGBT, anti-Jewish rhetoric & conspiracy theories)



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The graph by the Freedom House illustrates the scope and depth of the democratic decline in the region, with Hungary and Poland leading this trend – Poland was downgraded in the 2020 Nations in Transit to “semi-consolidated democracy”, while Hungary now appears among those countries classified as transitional or hybrid regimes – right next to countries like Serbia and Montenegro,

where the quality of democracy has also experienced gradual deterioration in the last several years; but unlike Poland and Hungary, these countries have never made it to the stage of „consolidated democracy“ in their post-socialist history, so their decline has been far less notable.



But while the state of democracy and media freedom in Hungary and Poland are arguably capturing the biggest attention and international news headlines, the populist wave has been eroding institutional pillars of the democratic system in other countries as well, including the Czech Republic, which has elected populist leaders in the last Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, both labelled as opponents of free media and vocal critics of the independent public service television in particular, with the Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš also counting among the leading media owners in the country.



Slovenia has taken the populist turn as well, following the Parliamentary Elections in February 2020 which have brought to power the right-wing populist leader Janez Janša, a close friend of Viktor Orbán. Janša has attempted to emulate Orbán’s domestic politics, including the attacks on journalists, while adopting Donald Trump’s social media strategy. The admiration for Trump is



something these three politicians definitely share, and Andrej Babiš has even tried to copy Trump's MAGA hat style for the 2019 European Parliament election.

Alongside with the concepts of democratic backsliding, or democratic deconsolidation, commentators and scholars have increasingly been adopting the terms “illiberalism” or “illiberal democracy” to describe the populist and authoritarian tendencies in the contemporary political systems of Central and Eastern Europe and beyond, including the US. The term has been famously coined by Fareed Zakaria in Foreign Affairs in 1997, warning against the treating of liberal democracy as something like an inevitable final stage of evolution of the post-totalitarian political systems around the world. For Zakaria, illiberal democracy is democracy reduced on elections, stripped off its liberal underpinnings (rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property; i.e. “constitutional liberalism”). The concept has been revived some twenty years later and adopted by various other scholars, for example Yasha Mounk, who has argued that illiberal democracy (e.g. Poland) is a “democracy without rights”, i.e. without liberal institutions that protect individual rights. Milada Anna Vachudova (2020) has likewise emphasized that illiberalism is based on the rule of the majority without any considerations for the rights of others, and actively dismantling the system of checks and balances that is supposed to prevent from the abuse of power and the tyranny of the majority, including of course free media.

The rise of illiberal democracy in CEE



- “A specter is haunting Europe and the United States; the specter of illiberal democracy” (Jeffrey Sachs, 2017).
- “Western liberal democracy might prove to be not the final destination on the democratic road, but just one of many possible exits.” (Fareed Zakaria, 1997)
- Mounk (2018): liberalism and democracy are not coupled “naturally”; they can be decoupled
- Vachudova (2020): “illiberal” = rejecting constitutional protections for counter majoritarian institutions, for independent groups and for minorities
- “The new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom ... but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organisation, and instead includes a different, special, national, approach” (Viktor Orbán, 2014)

It is well known of course that some of the central European leaders have proudly adopted this concept as a badge of honour, making it the government's official ideological position, particularly Viktor Orbán, who has famously declared that he is trying to transform Hungary into an illiberal state; and the disdain for liberalism is more than apparent by the leaders of many other countries of the region, too.

However, while the process of democratic backsliding and the key features of the emerging illiberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe have been subject of an increasing amount of studies lately, it can be argued that substantially less systematic attention has been paid so far to the role of the media in nurturing illiberal attitudes and fostering the electoral support for populist and authoritarian parties and actors across the region. So this has been the focus of the research project that I am currently leading here at Loughborough – the ESRC-funded project titled *The Illiberal Turn?*



News consumption, polarization and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (www.illiberal-turn.eu). Right now, we are entering the final phase of the project, which means we have collected all the data that we have set out to collect, and we are busy analysing and writing papers and reports. I thought this would be a good opportunity to share selected some preliminary findings with you, particularly with regards to the relationship between consumption of both traditional as well as new media, and people's political attitudes, that can help shed some light on the subject of this workshop, the state and future of European political democracy, from the perspective of this particular region.



The Illiberal Turn? News consumption, polarization and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

- ESRC-funded project (May 2019 – November 2021)
 - Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Serbia
 - Dr Václav Štětka (PI), Prof. Sabina Mihelj (Co-I), Dr Fanni Tóth (RA) & Dr Katherine Kondor (RA), + 3 local research assistants
- Multi-method research strategy:
 - Representative population surveys + expert surveys
 - Digital tracking of cross-media consumption (CZ)
 - Media diaries
 - Semi-structured interviews with audiences
- Working with project partners & stakeholders
 - EPRA, EFJ, CMPF, EBU...



Illiberal attitudes and news consumption: selected findings

In the population survey (November 2019 – January 2020, N=4092), we asked people about their attitudes to democracy as well as to certain polarizing cultural and political issues, which are often used by populist and illiberal political actors to mobilize voters.

- With regards to **attitudes to democracy**, majority of respondents in all countries expressed agreement with the statement that representative democracy is the most suitable system of governance for their country. The expressed support seems to grow with more intense news media consumption in the Czech Republic and Serbia, but not in Poland and Hungary, where the relationship was not statistically significant. The same goes for consuming public service media¹ specifically – again, more PSM consumption in Czechia and Serbia translates into more support for democracy, but we don't see the same pattern in Poland and Hungary. In addition, consumers of PSM in these two countries expressed more support for a strong leader as an ideal type of government than in Czech Rep and Serbia.
- When it comes to **attitudes to polarizing issues**, I suppose it is no surprise that one the most contentious and polarizing ones is immigration, which has been successfully exploited by various populist parties across the region especially following the 2015 European migration

¹ For the purposes of simplicity, I am using the term “public service media” here for both the actual public service broadcasters (as they still exist in the Czech Republic) and for those that have been converted into state broadcasters (like in Hungary and Poland).

crisis and ever since then, despite the immigration wave having subsided. Aiming to explore the connections between people's **attitudes to immigration** and news consumption, the regression analysis² revealed that higher consumption of public service media (PSM) is linked with less anti-immigration attitudes in the Czech Republic, but with more anti-immigration attitudes in Poland and Hungary. In the Czech Republic, PSM exposure had a positive effect on attitudes towards immigrants (while exposure to commercial TV worsened them). Messenger app use was associated with higher anti-immigration attitudes in the Czech Republic and Serbia (the direction of the correlation was similar in Hungary and Poland, though not statistically significant).

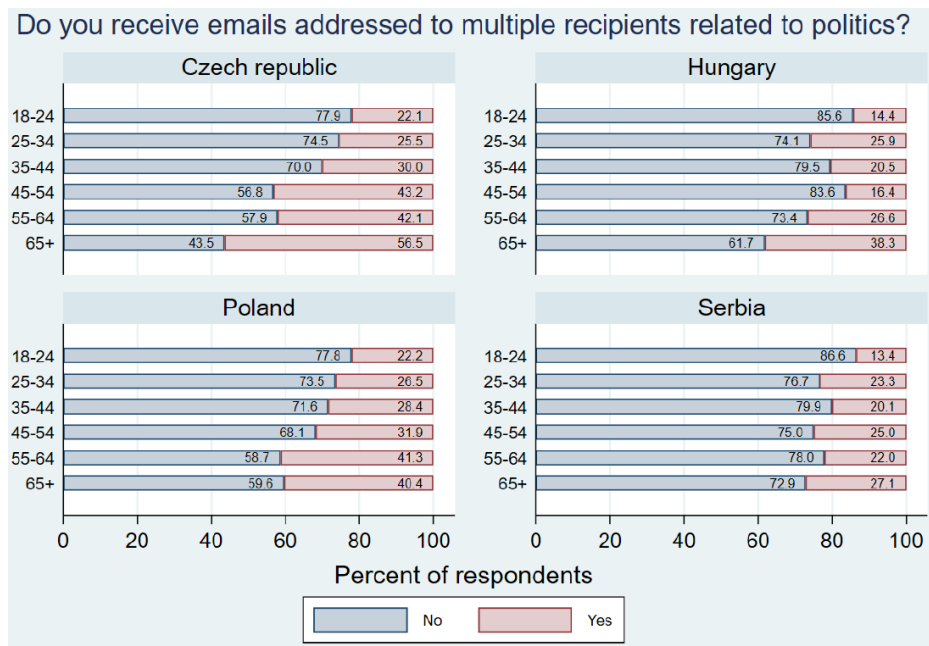
- When it comes to **attitudes towards Muslims**, we see an almost mirror image of the previous findings on immigration; higher consumption of public service media (PSM – TV & radio) is, again, linked with less negative attitudes towards Muslims in the Czech Republic, but with more anti-immigration attitudes in Poland, Hungary and Serbia. Total news media use, as well as messenger app use, was associated with higher anti-Muslim attitudes in Serbia.
- Another type of attitudes we measured as indicators for illiberalism were **attitudes towards LGBT issues**, which are notoriously contentious in the region. As it is well known, LGBT people in Hungary and Poland are targets of attacks (and not just verbal or online), and the state media are amplifying the hateful, homophobic rhetoric. As can be seen from the following graph, these attitudes are shared by their audiences in those two countries as well: higher consumption of public service media is clearly linked with more negative views on same-sex marriage in Poland and Hungary.
- Interestingly, there were also significant differences in the link between PSM consumption and **attitudes towards Russian foreign policy** (used as another indicator of illiberal leanings of the audiences). Our data shows that higher PSM consumption is linked with more negative attitudes towards Russian foreign policy in the Czech Republic, but with more positive attitudes in Hungary and Serbia.

News consumption, disinformation and conspiracy beliefs

The public sphere in Central and Eastern Europe has been overflowing with political disinformation and conspiracy theories long before the arrival of COVID-19. According to our survey, on average over 80% of respondents across the four countries reported encountering false information online in the past month, with the figure being the highest in Serbia (93%). There was an inverse relationship with age – the youngest cohorts reported seeing “messages that they knew were false” the most, which might have well reflected the ability to recognize disinformation, rather than the actual incidence of encountering it more often than the older age groups. The assumption that disinformation producers are targeting older citizens in CEE is supported by further findings from the

² All analyses used for this presentation are based on OLS regression, controlled for age, gender, education and domicile size. Statistical analyses have been performed by Fanni Tóth, Research Associate for The Illiberal Turn project.

survey, which documents that substantial proportion of respondents (from 21% in Serbia to 39% in the Czech Republic) has been receiving **political chain emails** – unsolicited messages sent or forwarded by email to multiple recipients, very often containing misinformation or conspiracy theories – with the oldest age group (65+) reporting significantly higher amount of such emails than the younger ones; in the Czech Republic, it was 56.5% (and half of those said they have been forwarding those emails to their colleagues, friends or family, engaging thereby in a further dissemination of disinformation). In the Czech Republic, we have documented significant correlation between receiving chain emails and **reading disinformation news servers** that have been known for publishing “fake news” and conspiracy theories.



- In our survey, we asked about beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, and explored their association with people’s news consumption patterns. In Hungary, Serbia and the Czech Republic, we have asked about **people’s opinions on George Soros** – the object of many conspiracy theories, and a Nr1 “public enemy” in Hungary, as portrayed by the government’s propaganda. As it turned out, heavy viewers of PSM in Hungary have significantly more negative attitudes to George Soros, while the opposite is the case for PSM audiences in the Czech Republic. Unfavourable opinions on George Soros are also associated with heavy consumption of digital media in the Czech Republic and Serbia; on the contrary, Hungarian digital news consumers (as well as social media users) have more favourable opinions on George Soros.
- In Poland, where George Soros is not (yet?) such a target of government propaganda and conspiracy theories concerning him are not as frequent, we asked instead about people’s beliefs in the popular theory (perpetuated by pro-government media) that the **Smolensk air crash (2010) was deliberately caused by someone**. While 46% of Poles do not believe that (vs 31% who do), this belief is significantly higher by heavy users of public service TV (as opposed to heavy users of digital news media).

- In Hungary, higher PSM consumption is linked with **beliefs that Russian does not have a strong influence over the country**; in the Czech Republic it is the other way around. Social media consumption and the use of messenger apps is linked with stronger opinions about Russia's influence in Hungary and Serbia.

Concluding remarks

- There is a link between consumption of news media that are under heavy political influence (PSM/state media, oligarch-owned media) and illiberal attitudes of their audiences (democracy, immigration, gay marriage), as well as with their propensity towards believing in conspiracy theories.
- Under such conditions, the more liberal-minded part of the population are often turning to digital and social media – especially in Hungary and Serbia, which are the countries with lowest scores of media freedom. In these countries, the audiences of digital and social media – though certainly not exempt from displaying illiberal attitudes – are overall less illiberal than those consuming primarily PSM/state and traditional media.
- In this sense, digital platforms – and messenger apps – might serve as a counter-balance to the government-controlled part of the news media ecosystem. We might think about them as pockets of resistance and (last) safe havens for independent journalism.
- While digital platforms remain significant source of disinformation across the CEE region (as well as platforms for hate speech), in many countries the biggest risks to democracy currently stem from the government and government-controlled media.
- This has implications for the contemporary debates about regulation of digital platforms. While there are strong reasons why to subject the platforms a much more stricter regulatory oversight, we also need to recognize that the over-regulation (especially as part of the fight against “fake news”) could play into the hands of the illiberal governments, and weaken their ability to serve as independent communication channels and sites of protests.

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