The Illiberal Public Sphere

Media in Polarized Societies

Václav Štětka · Sabina Mihelj

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Every book has a story. The story of this book starts back in 2004, when our academic paths first crossed at a conference for postgraduate students in media and communication organized in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Given our shared interest in comparative media research and Eastern Europe, we continued to meet and collaborate in subsequent years, first on a research project on the European Public Sphere, supported by a British Academy Visiting Fellowship (2006), and then in the framework of the EU-funded network 'East of West: Setting a New Central and Eastern European Media Research Agenda' (2005–2009). The research problems we were drawn to then were still marked by the relative optimism of the post-Cold War era, boosted by the process of European integration that saw ten formerly communist countries—including our home countries, the Czech Republic and Slovenia—join the European Union between 2004 and 2007. Over the coming decade, this optimism quickly evaporated. Two of the most successful new democracies in Eastern Europe, Hungary and Poland, strayed away from the course of democratization, and many other countries in the region and beyond were witnessing the rise of illiberal parties and movements. By 2016, when Václav joined Loughborough University—where Sabina has been based since 2004—the 'illiberal turn' had expanded well beyond Eastern Europe. First the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and then Donald Trump's victory in the United States demonstrated that even the oldest democracies are not immune to the appeal of illiberal politics, confirming that the trends seen in Eastern Europe were part of tectonic shifts in political culture globally.

Surprised by the relative lack of attention paid to the role of media and communication in these developments, we felt the time was ripe for a more systematic investigation, one that would focus on Eastern Europe as the 'laboratory of illiberalism' but use it as a basis for developing a more broadly applicable conceptual and analytical framework for the study of media and illiberalism. A research effort of this kind would not have been possible without substantial funding and institutional support. We were fortunate enough to secure funding from the UK Economic and Social Research Council, a public research funding body that forms part of UK Research and Innovation (grant no. ES/S01019X/1), for a project entitled 'The Illiberal Turn: News Consumption, Polarization and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe' (2019–2022, www.illiberal-turn.eu). This funding enabled us to collect and analyse most of the data that this book draws upon. The Centre for Research in Communication and Culture and the wider community at Loughborough University have provided a supportive base for our research, and we are grateful to the many Loughborough colleagues who have generously helped us with advice, critical feedback, and encouragement, especially Burçe Çelik, Andy Chadwick, David Deacon, John Downey, Alena Pfoser, Michael Skey, James Stanyer, Liz Stokoe, Cristian Vaccari, and Dominic Wring.

We are particularly indebted to the members of the 'Illiberal Turn' research team who supported us with the data collection and analysis that informs this book, and contributed to the project in many other ways: Fanni Tóth, who managed quantitative data collection and analysis; Katherine Kondor, who collected and analysed qualitative data for Hungary and managed the comparative analysis of qualitative data; as well as Marketa Doležalová, Damian Guzek, Irena Reifová and Ana Stojiljković, all of whom collected and analysed qualitative interview and diary data for the Czech Republic, Poland and Serbia. We are also grateful to academic Advisory Board members, including Steven Hutchings, Snježana Milivojević, Grzegorz Ekiert and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, who offered support and advice on various aspects of the project, and to Marlene Laruelle and Afonso de Albuquerque for delivering keynotes at the project conference, organized in Loughborough in April 2022. Special thanks are due to Renee Karunungan and Denis Halagiera, who were instrumental in the smooth running of the project conference. Of course, nothing would have been possible without our research participants, who shared their knowledge, opinions and experiences through surveys, interviews and diaries.

As our qualitative data collection coincided with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of lockdowns, we are especially thankful to the 120 individuals who persisted in writing their media diaries despite all the disruption caused by the health crisis. We also owe thanks to local media experts from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Serbia who participated in our expert survey.

Given the timeliness and urgency of research on illiberalism, the 'Illiberal Turn' project had an important knowledge exchange component and involved collaboration with several stakeholders from the media industry. We are particularly grateful to our key partners and their representatives, who offered advice on the initial design of the project, facilitated the dissemination of results, and supported the development of recommendations informed by results: Maria Donde, Senior Vice-Chairperson of the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities; Ricardo Gutiérrez, General Secretary of the European Federation of Journalists; Sasha Scott, Head of Transformation Services at the European Broadcasting Union; Marius Dragomir, then Director of the Centre for Media, Data and Society, previously at the Central European University; Wojciech Przybylski, Chairman of the Res Publica Foundation; and Elda Brogi, Scientific Coordinator at the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, European University Institute. We also give our thanks to several journalists, editors, media regulators and policymakers, as well as representatives of non-governmental organizations who contributed to the two stakeholder events organized as part of the project in September 2019 and June 2021.

Many of the arguments presented in this book were previously aired at conferences, workshops and seminars, and we have benefited greatly from the comments shared and questions asked by the participants. These events included regular conferences organized by relevant professional academic associations and journals, including the International Communication Association conferences in May 2020 (online), in May 2021 (online), and in May 2022 in Paris; the European Communication Research and Education Association conferences in October 2021 (online) and in October 2022 in Aarhus; The ECREA Political Communication Section conferences in June 2019 in Poznań and in August 2023 in Berlin; and the *International Journal of Press/Politics* conferences in Loughborough in 2019 and 2022. We are also grateful for invitations to the thematically more focused events organized by a range of academic

and non-academic organizations, as well as by our project partners, and for the helpful feedback provided by participants on these occasions. A full list can be found on our project website (www.illiberal-turn.eu).

Parts of this book draw on research published previously in the form of journal articles. Chapter 3 utilizes some of the results initially presented in 'A media repertoires approach to selective exposure: News consumption and political polarization in Eastern Europe', *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 28(4), 884–909; Chapter 5 expands on some of the insights developed in 'News consumption and immigration attitudes: A mixed methods approach', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(17), 4129–4148, and in 'The ambivalences of visibility: News consumption and public attitudes to same-sex relationships in the context of illiberalism', *European Journal of Communication*; and Chap. 8 incorporates some of the findings originally published in 'Audience engagement with COVID-19 news: The impact of lockdown and live coverage, and the role of polarization', *Journalism Studies*, 23(5/6), 569–587, and in 'Establishing trust in experts during a crisis: expert trustworthiness and media use during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Science Communication*, 44(3), 292–319.

The final, most heartfelt thanks go to our partners and children, who have patiently endured the many additional work travels and long working days that a project of this kind entails: Amy, Adam and Filip, and Clara, Emma and Jovan.

Loughborough, UK

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Ethics Approval The research that underpins this book complies with relevant codes of conduct, ethical principles and guidelines of professional bodies associated with communication and media research, and with the Code of Practice on Investigations Involving Human Participants, Loughborough University. The study obtained approval following the process overseen by the Loughborough University Ethics Approvals (Human Participants) Sub-Committee on 19 March 2019.

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Sabina Mihelj is Professor of Media and Cultural Analysis at the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture at Loughborough University. Her research examines the interaction between media, politics and culture, especially in the context of semi-democratic, authoritarian and post-authoritarian countries. She is the author of *Media Nations: Communicating Belonging and Exclusion in the Modern World* (Palgrave 2011), *Central and Eastern European Media in Comparative Perspective: Politics, Economy and Culture* (Ashgate 2012, with J. Downey) and *From Media Systems to Media Cultures: Understanding Socialist Television* (Cambridge University

Press 2018, with S. Huxtable). She is currently leading an international study of the impact of populist politics on pandemic communication in Brazil, the United States, Poland and Serbia, funded through the Transatlantic Platform for Social Sciences and Humanities, and starting a new project that investigates how disinformation travels across cultural and linguistic boundaries, funded by the UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

There is little doubt that the era of triumphant liberalism is over. The much-debated seismic events of 2016—the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and Trump's victory in the US presidential election—exposed the fragility of liberal democracy even in its historic strongholds. Parallel events in other parts of Western Europe, from the Yellow Vests protest movement in France to the ascent of far-right parties such as the Alternative for Germany, the Freedom Party of Austria, or Lega Nord and the Brothers of Italy, confirmed that the decline of liberal democracy is threatening to become endemic. These developments led several scholars to raise serious concerns about the state of liberal democracy, mapping its gradual deterioration and even foreseeing the possibility of its complete fall (Applebaum, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Moghaddam, 2019; Mounk, 2018; Przeworski, 2019; Runciman, 2018; Snyder, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has given a new impetus to these fears, fuelled by the attempts of several governments to use the pandemic as a pretext for restrictions on civic freedoms and curtailing of democratic rights. According to monitoring carried out by the V-Dem Institute, the majority of countries around the world displayed some form of violation of democratic standards between March and December 2020 (Edgell et al., 2021). And just as the world bid farewell to the 'annus horribilis' of 2020 and welcomed the new year with an optimistic prospect of mass vaccination, it was shocked by the events in Washington on 6 January 2021, which saw an armed insurrection against the government of the world's first modern-day democracy, broadcast live on television and incited by its

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outgoing president who refused to accept his electoral defeat. The images of the violent mob storming the Capitol and jeopardizing the safety of the parliamentarians, in what President Joe Biden later called 'the worst attack on our democracy since the Civil War' (Biden, 2021, April 28), were perceived as emblematic of the vulnerability of not just the US political system but of contemporary democratic societies in general.

It is not just the long-established democracies that are in turmoil. Several countries with comparatively weaker democratic traditions have recently seen a rise of right-wing nationalist strongmen who have claimed the top seat in the political hierarchy. Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Narendra Modi in India have all taken their countries down the authoritarian path, demonstrating that illiberalism is indeed a global phenomenon (Vormann & Weinman, 2020). In Eastern Europe,[1] the gradual decoupling of electoral democracy and constitutional liberalism, a trend encapsulated in Fareed Zakaria's (1997) term 'illiberal democracy', has been particularly palpable, with several countries in the region joining Hungary in an apparent turn away from the ideals of liberal democracy as a system of governance to aspire to and preserve. Even though most recent elections in parts of the region seem to have pushed the pendulum back in the other direction, attacks on liberal values and attempts to politicize key democratic institutions remain an integral part of public life in the region. The ongoing war in Ukraine, prompted by Russia's invasion in 2022, further highlighted the vulnerability of democracy in the region, compounding internal political contestations over liberalism by an external threat. Scholarship analysing the current woes of democracy and mapping the global turn to illiberalism is growing quickly. However, for the most part, it focuses on political institutions, actors, and policies, while paying little attention to the broader cultural, social, and technological environment underpinning the political system. In particular, the communication perspective is largely missing—a rather curious omission given the crucial role played by the media in sustaining liberal democracy, as well as in enabling

[1] Throughout the book, we use 'Eastern Europe' to refer to a subregion of the European continent that comprises, among others, the four countries that are at the forefront of analysis: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Serbia. We acknowledge the multiple and often problematic connotations the term Eastern Europe has acquired over time (e.g. Wolff, 1994) as well as the fuzzy geographical boundaries of the region it refers to. Nonetheless, we feel it offers the best—and shortest—way of referring to a group of countries that have been variously designated as belonging to Central, Eastern, East-Central, Southern, and Southeastern Europe.

political actors seeking to undermine it. From the problematic practices of political advertising and foreign propaganda enabled by digital platforms, exemplified in the Cambridge Analytical scandal and the role of Russian Internet trolls during the 2016 US presidential election, to attempts of populist leaders in Eastern Europe to monopolize public service broadcasting, there is ample evidence of the crucial role played by communication technologies in advancing the 'illiberal turn'. Clearly, understanding the involvement of media and communications in fostering the decline of the liberal order is a key prerequisite for appreciating the nature of challenges faced by contemporary democratic societies.

Addressing this gap is not a straightforward task. Much of recent communication and media research is already examining the link between the changing information environment and recent political developments contributing to the illiberal turn, including the rise of populist leaders and far-right movements. Yet, this research typically shies away from broader theoretical reflections on how these shifts might be changing the institutional underpinnings and normative foundations of public communication. We argue that this is in part a result of the overreliance on the concept of populism, which—while very useful for the field—is increasingly used in an indiscriminate way that conflates disparate ideological and political trends. If we want to fully understand the contemporary challenges to liberal democracy and the role of media in these challenges, we therefore need to move beyond the conceptual framework of populism. Specifically, we need an additional set of conceptual tools that can help us examine what happens to public communication *after* populism becomes a widespread feature of political life, especially in the aftermath of the successful mobilization of populist strategies by far-right or ultra-conservative political actors in their rise to positions of power.

To help develop such a set of tools and advance the debate on the role of communication in contemporary challenges to democracy, this book builds on emerging debates on illiberalism and introduces the concept of the *illiberal public sphere*, defined as *a communicative space comprising both traditional and new media that promote and amplify illiberal actors, views, and attitudes.* Traditionally, the public sphere has been treated as an inherently liberal project, following Jürgen Habermas' (1989) analysis of the historical development of the bourgeois public sphere in Western Europe. Yet, several scholars have pointed out that the public sphere—either as a normative ideal or as an empirical reality—is far from unitary and is not wedded to a single space, set of values, or political ideology. The polymorphous character of the concept is reflected in the different adjectives

attached to it over the years, such as 'proletarian public sphere' (Negt and Kluge 1993), 'transnational public sphere' (Fraser, 2014), 'authoritarian public sphere' (Dukalskis, 2017), 'empathetic public sphere' (Korstenbroek, 2022), or simply 'alternative public sphere', as a broad label adopted by many authors to designate the type of public sphere that exists in parallel with (and often in opposition to) the dominant one.

In this book we argue that much as democracy does not necessarily go hand in hand with liberalism, a public sphere can coexist with an illiberal political order and indeed plays an instrumental role in its establishment and consolidation. To put it differently, the declining popularity of liberal democracy and the growing appeal of nativist populism and authoritarian governance are occurring in conjunction with the rise of an illiberal public sphere. The government often plays a central role within this sphere, for example by capturing public service media or by adopting illiberal media and cultural policies, but it is far from the only actor. Right-wing populist and ethno-nationalist politicians, parties and social movements, corporate and religious figures and organizations, news media (often controlled by oligarchs or government's cronies) pursuing illiberal agendas or disinformation, conspiracy news websites, social media channels, and other 'alternative' outlets spreading illiberal narratives are all key building blocks of the illiberal public sphere. We argue that the illiberal public sphere gradually colonizes the institutions that have previously served as a cornerstone of the liberal public sphere, including independent news organizations and public service broadcasters, contributing to the polarization and radicalization of political discourse, as well as to the proliferation of illiberal attitudes among citizens. It is however important to note that the illiberal public sphere operates within the framework of a political system that is not (yet) fully authoritarian, as it allows for pluralistic political competition and the existence of basic democratic rights and freedoms, even if those might be in the process of being curbed by the government.

This book further develops and provides empirical support for these arguments by utilizing a combination of original and secondary data collected over the course of several years in a region that acts as a key battleground of illiberalism and constitutes a particularly apposite site for research on this topic: Eastern Europe. We focus on four countries that are characterized by a shared history of communist rule and democratic transition but have been affected by the rise of illiberalism in different ways and hence constitute a good basis for comparison: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Serbia. Combining population surveys with an

extensive set of media diaries and qualitative interviews, we examine how public attitudes—both liberal and illiberal—are informed by news media diets and how they interact with the changing communication ecosystem, increasing political polarization and illiberalism in these four countries. We pay particular attention to the role of the Internet and social media, which have become important instruments not just for political communication but also for political participation in these countries over the past decade.

Throughout the book, we seek to situate these regional developments in a global context and close with a reflection on how the theoretical and analytical framework developed in the book—anchored in the concept of the illiberal public sphere—can help elucidate the interaction between communication and illiberalism globally. In the rest of this introductory chapter, we first review some of the key causes of the decline of liberal democracy and situate them vis-à-vis developments in the sphere of communication. We then proceed with a brief discussion of Eastern Europe as a battleground of illiberalism and, finally, outline of the chapters that follow.

1.1 Democracy in Retreat: Populism, Polarization, and the New Communication Environment as Vehicles of Illiberalism

Scholarly debates and concerns about the crisis of liberal democracy are certainly nothing new. Theorists of democracy have long pointed out that there is an inherent tension within the concept of liberal democracy, which is torn between the key principle of democracy—the popular rule, i.e. the majority rule—and the protection of individual rights and liberties, which is the cornerstone of liberalism (Salkever, 1987). Critical scholars inspired by Marxism, particularly those associated with the Frankfurt School, repeatedly highlighted a fundamental incompatibility between capitalism and its pursuit of an unrestrained free market economy that promotes inequality and a political system that derives its legitimacy from the notion of equality of votes and rights of citizens (e.g. Habermas, 1996).

And yet, despite ongoing doubts about its legitimacy and viability under the conditions of late capitalism, liberal democracy has demonstrated resilience as well as global appeal, as the world witnessed several countries transition to democracy over the course of the twentieth century, especially as part of the 'third wave of democratization' which rolled over parts of Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa between the 1970s

and the early 1990s (Huntington, 1993). Even though Francis Fukuyama's (1989) famous claim about liberal democracy representing the 'end of history'—that is, 'the end point of mankind's ideological evolution' (p. 4)—was met with widespread dismissal, the fact remains that ever since the 1990s, the proportion of world's countries classified as democratic has been higher than those labelled as authoritarian (Diamond, 1997; Desilver, 2019, May 14).

However, the relative success of democracy over the past half a century is now being overshadowed by the gradual decline in its quality and even by a reversal of the democratization process in some parts of the world. All the main organizations that monitor the state of democracy across the globe, including Freedom House, The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and the V-Dem Institute, have recently recorded a notable slump in democratic performance. In 2019, the EIU's Democracy Index fell to a level that corresponded to 'the worst average global score since the index was first produced in 2006'.[2] As a result of the pandemic and government-imposed restrictions on freedoms and liberties, the 2020 average dropped even further, with almost 70% of countries having recorded a decline in their total scores (EIU, 2021). In its 2019 Freedom in the World report, Freedom House pointed to a 'consistent and ominous' pattern of decline in global freedom, affecting both established democracies as well as countries ranked 'not free', whose share has started to grow again (Freedom House, 2019). These findings are corroborated by the V-Dem's Democracy Report 2021, which recorded not just a continuous decline of liberal democracy over the past decade, but also an acceleration of 'autocratization', i.e. a significant worsening of democracy that now affects 25 countries, compared with less than ten a decade ago (Alizada et al., 2021).

The decline in the quality of democracy as evaluated by experts has been complemented by the rising dissatisfaction with democracy among citizens. According to an analysis by the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, drawing on multiple data sets from across three decades, the level of global dissatisfaction with democracy reached its highest level in 2019, with the rise being especially sharp since 2005, the year that the report labelled as 'the beginning of the so-called "global democratic recession"' (Foa et al., 2020, p. 2).[3]

[2] The average score for 2019 was 5.44, measured on a scale of 0–10 (EIU, 2021).

[3] Since 2005, the proportion of people dissatisfied with democracy has risen by almost 20% globally, up to 57% in 2019. As a result, the authors claim that 'democracy is in a state of deep malaise' (Foa et al., 2020, p. 3).

How can we explain this turn of the democratization tide? To use Juan Linz's and Alfred Stepan's (1996) oft quoted expression: why does an increasing number of people no longer think of democracy as 'the only game in town'? (p. 15). While the specific explanations certainly vary to some degree from country to country, we can also discern some general trends that are shared across the world. Three trends are of particular relevance to the arguments developed in this book, namely the rise of populism, political polarization, and a changing communication ecosystem marked by the spreading of disinformation. As briefly outlined below, the interaction between these three trends contributed to the creation of a breeding ground for the rise of illiberalism.

Although populism is certainly not a new phenomenon in the history of democratic political systems (Mudde, 2004), electoral support for populist parties has grown over the last decade in Europe and Northern America. Most of these parties have been classified as either radical-right (Taggart & Pirro, 2021) or authoritarian (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). For Norris and Inglehart, it is the combination of populist rhetoric (rallying against the 'elites' and thereby corroding faith in the legitimacy of elected representatives) with authoritarian values (emphasizing the importance of security, group conformity and obedience towards leaders) that brings the most significant challenges to liberal democracy. This combination, they argue, has a threefold effect: it fosters tribalism, it promotes the politics of fear, which often involves majorities turning against minorities, and erodes democratic norms and institutions designed to protect individual and civic liberties. As Ivan Krastev (2020) observes, by taking the contemporary political situations in Hungary and Poland as examples, populist parties 'transform democracy from an instrument of inclusion into one of exclusion, delegitimizing nonmajoritarian institutions by casting them as obstacles to the will of the people' (p. 160).

However, as noted earlier, the concept of populism has come to be used in such an indiscriminate manner that it obstructs the analysis of contemporary transformations of liberal democracy. Norris and Inglehart's and Krastev's arguments outlined above are indicative of the problem but point to different solutions. Norris and Inglehart's argument rightly implies that populism alone is not damaging to liberal democracy. Rather, it turns into a threat primarily when combined with what they call 'authoritarian values'. This argument already suggests the need to move beyond the conceptual framework of populism in order to understand the threats faced by liberal democracy. Krastev, on the other hand, implies that

populist parties necessarily undermine the foundations of liberal democracy, thereby effectively conflating populism with illiberalism, if not with authoritarian or even fascist tendencies. Such a conflation of populism with illiberalism and other related phenomena has been observed in wider public debates across several parts of the world (Brown & Mondon, 2021; Kitzberger, 2023) and is rather problematic. As we explain in greater detail in Chap. 2, populism and illiberalism do share some important traits—most notably, they are both driven by a disenchantment with political participation and representative democracy—but also differ in significant ways. Most importantly, populism covers a much wider ideological terrain and encompasses discourses, strategies and styles of communication that are not inherently illiberal. As a result, conflating populism with illiberalism can arguably serve to trivialize deeply problematic ideological trends, including the rise of far-right ideologies and actors (Brown & Mondon, 2021).

Even though illiberal political actors—including those we focus on in this book—often use populist discourses and strategies to boost public support and undermine liberal political opponents, simply describing them as populist glosses over some of the key characteristics of their ideological convictions and governance practices, including disdain for cultural liberalism and a tendency to undermine key democratic institutions. To put it differently, when illiberal actors use populist strategies, they do so to spread illiberal attitudes among the general population or to encourage the adoption of illiberal policies. This occurs, for instance, when political leaders use appeals to the people to promote homophobia or hostility towards immigration or to legitimize the curtailing of minority rights or media freedom. However, populist strategies can also be used by political actors who are not illiberal, and who mobilize such strategies in ways consistent with democratic norms and liberal values—as was the case, for instance, with the Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders during the 2016 US presidential election campaign (Oliver & Rahn, 2016). Thus, when we say that the rise of populism constitutes one of the key trends that prepared the ground for the rise of illiberalism, what we have in mind is a particular use of populism as a strategy for mobilizing support for illiberal actors and values.

The adoption of populism as a strategy among illiberal actors is typically aimed at exploiting and further deepening political divides. As such, it has been linked to another trend conducive to the rise of illiberalism and observed in many liberal democracies, that is, increasing polarization (McCoy et al., 2018; Mickey et al., 2017; Svolik, 2019). As a process involving a growing division between opposing political camps, paralleled

by a shrinking of the political centre and shared political ground (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019, p. 1), polarization has long been considered a danger to the stability and durability of democratic political systems (Linz & Stepan, 1978; Sani & Sartori, 1983). Although most studies of polarization, and most explicit warnings about its impact on democracy, currently come from the United States, especially following the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 (Mickey et al., 2017; Pierson & Schickler, 2020), studies have documented political polarization in other liberal democratic countries as well, for instance in the United Kingdom (Duffy et al., 2019). Comparative research has suggested a link between increasing political polarization and government-led intimidation of the opposition, thereby supporting the conclusion that polarization leads to democratic erosion (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021) and to the rise of illiberalism. Other authors have pointed out that sharp political polarization encourages people to prioritize their partisan interests over democratic principles, an opportunity that is being further exploited by leaders with illiberal or authoritarian inclinations (Svolik, 2019).

Literature on populism, illiberalism, and polarization is increasingly acknowledging the role of media and communication technologies in facilitating and stimulating these processes. The rise of the Internet and digital platforms, and the subsequent establishment of a high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017), brought about a plethora of niche, partisan news channels and outlets that have been linked with growing polarization as well as with the electoral success of political actors relying on populist strategies—especially those holding illiberal views. Social media in particular have been blamed for fragmenting the public sphere and for deepening ideological divisions. This argument is commonly linked to the proliferation of algorithm-driven 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2011) or 'echo chambers' (Sunstein, 2017) within which people are selectively exposed to views that conform to their existing political attitudes and beliefs while avoiding information that would challenge them.

Although the empirical evidence of this relationship is not unanimous, digital platforms are persistently seen as one of the biggest villains in contemporary democratic societies. Alongside their impact on polarization, concerns have been voiced about these platforms' role as channels of misinformation and 'fake news', including strategically targeted disinformation campaigns, often linked to Russia, aimed at influencing the electoral process, as well as sowing distrust of democratic institutions. A specific breed of misinformation—conspiracy theories—has found an efficient

amplifier in social media, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when such beliefs have demonstrably contributed to an increase in vaccine hesitancy around the world. According to a survey conducted in Eastern Europe in autumn 2020, a third of citizens on average believed that COVID-19 was a hoax and every fourth respondent believed the vaccines contained nano-chips to control the population (Hajdu et al., 2020).

While concerns about the key role that digital platforms play in the crisis of liberal democracy are often well grounded, a focus on these channels alone can arguably distract from the wider transformation of the communication environment that accompanies the rise of illiberalism. Indeed, we argue that the focus on digital media as the vehicles of democratic erosion is in part attributable to the Western-centric focus of existing research, meaning that most studies to date are devoted to established liberal democracies where the rise of illiberalism is typically in its early stages. However, as we demonstrate throughout this book, the relative involvement of different types of media changes as illiberalism gains in strength, with mainstream media increasingly complementing digital platforms as key channels of illiberal values and narratives. This is to an extent evident also in the United States, where some of the legacy of mainstream news media, most notably television, but also radio and newspapers, have come to act as key amplifiers of illiberal attitudes. The continued struggles over public service broadcasting in several European countries, from the United Kingdom and Italy, Hungary and Poland, serve as further confirmation of the malleable nature of the illiberal public sphere and its shifting alignments with different communication technologies, including—but not only—digital media. Indeed, there are grounds to suggest that in countries where the illiberal public sphere is more entrenched, the respective roles of different media platforms and forms of communication shift, with social networking platforms increasingly providing a vital channel of liberal values—an argument that we explore in more detail in Chap. 6.

1.2 Eastern Europe: The Frontline of Illiberalism?

> 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 organization and instead includes a different, special, national, approach. (Orbán, 2014, July 26)

This famous quote from Viktor Orbán's speech following Fidesz's victory in the Hungarian parliamentary election in 2014 has become one of the symbols of the dawn of illiberalism not just in Hungary but in Eastern Europe more generally. Ever since Orbán's rise to power in 2010, this region has been undergoing a continuous process of democratic backsliding, with country after country falling victim to the rise of illiberalism. Freedom House's annual Nations in Transit report that evaluates the state of democracy in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia, poignantly titled its 2021 edition 'The Antidemocratic Turn', signalling the fact that two-thirds of the 29 countries covered by the report suffered a decline in their democracy scores. According to the report, 'this marked the 17th consecutive year of overall decline in Nations in Transit, leaving the number of countries that are designated as democracies at its lowest point in the history of the report' (Freedom House, 2021, p. 1).

The pace of the decline has accelerated in recent years, especially following the rapid deterioration of the situation in Hungary during the third government of Viktor Orbán (2014–2018) and in Poland after the presidential and then parliamentary elections in 2015, which brought to power the right-wing populist party Law and Justice, headed by Jarosław Kaczyński. In both countries, the process of democratic deconsolidation followed a similar pattern: capturing the judiciary, transforming public service broadcasters into a mouthpiece of government's propaganda and launching campaigns against various kinds of 'social enemies', particularly refugees, proponents of 'gender ideology', and the LGBTQ+ community (Buzogány, 2017; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018; Przybylski, 2018; Sadurski, 2018). In Hungary, the public anti-refugee campaign deployed in response to the 2015 migration crisis has captured the attention of international media, as well as human rights NGOs, who have criticised the Hungarian government for promoting xenophobic stereotypes and stirring hostility towards immigrants (see Chap. 5). In recent years, the Hungarian government has been systematically exploiting other polarizing issues, targeting the EU, 'liberals' and, most of all, George Soros, the Hungarian-born US billionaire of Jewish descent who is a known supporter of progressive and liberal causes in Hungary and the wider region. Similar shifts occurred in Poland, with the Law and Justice party fuelling political polarization by focusing its campaigning on the divisive issues of LGBTQ+ rights and abortion. More recently, the 2020 ruling of the Polish Constitutional Court (dominated by government appointees) to restrict access to abortions,

sparked widespread demonstrations as well as international condemnation of the infringement of women's rights (BBC, 2021a, January 28).

These are only some examples of general illiberal tendencies that have been recently observed in these two countries, illustrating governments' sustained attempts to curb the rights of minorities and to capture those institutions that are designed to protect individuals from the tyranny of the majority. In this sense, Hungary is arguably the closest of all EU member states to what Yasha Mounk (2018) has called a 'democracy without rights' (p. 11), i.e. a formally electoral democracy which is however effectively stripped of liberal institutions that protect individual rights and freedoms. However, while Hungary and Poland have arguably been attracting the most attention, the illiberal wave has been eroding democracy in other countries as well. The Czech Republic elected populist leaders in the 2017 parliamentary election and the 2018 presidential election. On both occasions, the newly elected leaders were vocal critics of the media and, in particular, of public service television that has since been fending off repeated attempts at political control (Reuters, 2021, April 9). The former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (one of the main presidential candidates in 2023) has until very recently also been among the leading media owners in the country, in a conflict of interest unseen in the EU since the days of the former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Between 2020 and 2022, Slovenia also temporarily joined the illiberal turn when it was led by the right-wing populist Prime Minister Janez Janša, a close friend of Viktor Orbán and vocal supporter of Donald Trump. Often emulating Orbán's domestic politics as well as Trump's social media strategy, Janša has been dubbed 'Marshal Twito' by its critics, a tongue-in-cheek nickname to mock his affection for Twitter and also point to the authoritarian tendencies in his rhetoric that often targets the media and individual journalists (Higgins, 2021, June 16).

The illiberal turn in Eastern Europe does not stop at the external borders of the EU. Serbia, an EU candidate country that started a 'delayed transition' to democracy during the late 1990s, has been experiencing a notable worsening of the quality of democracy and media freedom under the populist right-wing government and subsequent presidency of Aleksandar Vučić (2017–), with rising attacks on journalists, significant collusion between politicians, private media, and government control of public service broadcasting. At the same time, Serbia's politics and economy have been under the increasing geopolitical influence of Russia and China, with both powers attempting to sway Serbia from its nominally still

pro-European orientation. This influence became particularly tangible during the pandemic when Serbia received substantial medical assistance from China and later decided to prioritize the Chinese vaccine Sinopharm for its population (Associated Press, 2021, April 6). Meanwhile, Hungary bought and distributed a substantial quantity of the Russian vaccine Sputnik in another sign of the deepening rift between Hungary and the EU, as the country used to only purchase and authorize US and EU vaccines (BBC, 2021b, April 21). The fact that this rift was gradually growing into a regional one, and that Eastern Europe was witnessing the formation of an illiberal alliance alongside the former Iron Curtain, was further demonstrated by the joint appearance of the leaders of Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia—Orbán, Vučić and Janša—at a virtual panel called 'Europe Uncensored' in July 2020. The panel cautioned against the 'cultural Marxism' allegedly championed by the EU and called onto the 'West' with the claim that Eastern Europeans do not wish to be lectured on 'how … to live [their] lives' (Bayer, 2020, July 8).

The outcomes of some of the most recent elections in the region appear to have stemmed the tide of illiberalism, bringing more liberal players to a position of power in Slovenia (2022), the Czech Republic (2021 and 2023), and Poland (2023). Despite these developments, Eastern Europe finds itself at a crossroads, facing the challenge of what Ivan Krastev (2020) has called an 'illiberal revolution' that threatens to radically depart from the path chosen by the region thirty years ago. Arguably, this makes Eastern Europe a particularly suitable case study for an inquiry into the nature of the illiberal public sphere. It is beyond the scope of this book to provide a comprehensive answer to the question of why the illiberal turn took hold so successfully in this part of the world. We leave this task to historians, political scientists, and other scholars better equipped for such an inquiry. Rather, our focus is on the role that media and communication have played in the rise of illiberalism—a crucial factor that has remained marginal in existing scholarship on the demise of liberal democracy.

The comparisons between the four countries, where the power of the illiberal public sphere differs in strength and scope, enable us to infer conclusions about how the interaction between media and illiberalism changes as the illiberal public sphere becomes more entrenched. On the one hand, the Czech Republic offers an example of a society where the illiberal public sphere is in its infancy, with a still relatively strong and trusted public service media sector acting as an anchor of a shared public space capable of resisting the pull of political and ideological extremes. On the other

hand, the cases of Hungary and especially Serbia show what happens when the illiberal public sphere prevails and the process of political polarization advances to such a degree that a shared public space virtually disappears.

1.3 Plan of the Book

The second chapter sets out the theoretical framework of the book, centred on the key concept of the illiberal public sphere which provides the conceptual backbone to the analysis presented in the rest of this book. We first outline our understanding of illiberalism and explain what makes illiberalism distinct from related phenomena, such as populism and democratic backsliding. We then build on these initial observations to introduce the concept of the illiberal public sphere and elaborate on the historical relationship between liberalism and the public sphere, as explored by Jürgen Habermas (1989). We also consider existing alternatives to the classic public sphere model, including the 'authoritarian public sphere' (Dukalskis, 2017), the 'contentious public sphere' (Lei, 2017) and arguments about the nature of public communication under conditions of authoritarian control in communist countries, all of which indicate that a public sphere can exist outside of the scope of liberal democracy. We also identify three ideal-typical stages in the development of the illiberal public sphere. Finally, we conclude with a brief overview that charts the evolution and current stage of the illiberal public sphere in the four countries that are at the forefront of our analysis in the chapters that follow.

Following from the presentation of the broad contours of the illiberal public sphere and its evolution in our four countries, Chap. 3 shifts the focus to media audiences. In the first step, we seek to establish whether, and to what extent, a more advanced illiberal public sphere coincides with an increasingly ideologically and politically polarized media system and selective audiences. Combining data from the population survey with expert evaluation of media brands' performance across the four countries examined in this book—including both traditional media and leading news websites—we provide empirical evidence of media polarization, measured in relation to the ideological bias and political independence of the most relevant news brands in each country. Our findings indicate that media in Hungary and Serbia are the most polarized, while Czech media are more evenly spread across the ideological and political spectrum, with several important brands positioned around the centre, particularly public service broadcasters. Following from that, we move on to probing

people's political attitudes, utilizing data gathered from a population survey that indicate the respondents' position on selected, culturally sensitive issues that illiberal actors often exploit in election mobilization, as well as the perceived importance of some of the key institutions of liberal democracy. In the next part, these two data sets are juxtaposed to reveal the patterns of people's news consumption habits, explored from the perspective of how politically and ideologically open or diverse their 'news diets' are. Finally, we analyse whether and how these patterns of news exposure match audience attitudes and electoral preferences.

In Chap. 4, we consider how the patterns of news consumption outlined in the previous chapter relate to media trust. We ask how the levels and nature of media trust change as the illiberal public sphere gains in influence and consider whether high levels of media trust are always desirable, regardless of the nature of the political and media system in question. We start by providing a multi-layered mapping of media trust across the four countries, paying attention not just to the more commonly investigated generalized levels of media trust (i.e. trust in news media as an institution), but also trust in individual news brands. This approach allows us to investigate what happens with trust in individual news brands when generalized media trust declines. Borrowing from Christian Schwarzenegger's (2020) work on personal epistemologies of media use, we argue that, in a context where generalized media trust declines, people adopt a 'pragmatic' approach to media trust, seeking to follow news sources that may not be completely trustworthy, but nonetheless offer a more credible account than others. Second, we examine the relationship between media trust and news consumption and use qualitative data to situate media trust vis-à-vis multiple other determinants that shape news consumption. Here, we seek to engage with previous research that investigated why people consume media they distrust, challenging normative models of citizenship that assume news consumption is driven solely by rational aims such as information-seeking (Swart & Broersma, 2021; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). Finally, we use mixed methods to examine how citizens establish which media are trustworthy. The patterns we find challenge tacit assumptions that link media trust to universal criteria of trustworthiness, such as independence, impartiality, or objectivity. The results suggest that in a context where the illiberal public sphere assumes a dominant position, the normative foundations of media trust start shifting, ultimately leading citizens to place trust in media not because they offer impartial or accurate coverage of public affairs, but because they provide

an account of reality they personally agree with or, in extreme cases, because their account of reality is aligned with the one promoted by those in power.

Chapter 5 zooms in on two polarizing issues—immigration and LGBTQ+ rights—that are central to understanding the rise of illiberalism both in Eastern Europe and globally. We focus on the key actors involved in the process of mainstreaming immigration and LGBTQ+ rights as key polarizing issues in the four countries—primarily illiberal politicians, but also church leaders and other opinion leaders—and on the extent to which this process was either fostered or hindered by the media. In line with arguments developed in Chap. 1, we argue that the role of the media differed depending on how advanced the illiberal public sphere was in a particular country at a given point in time. When the illiberal public sphere is in an incipient stage, alternative and online outlets play a key role in the promotion of anti-immigrant and homophobic views, while independent mainstream media are still able to instil more liberal attitudes—as seen in the Czech Republic. As the strength of the illiberal public sphere increases, illiberal leaders can count on the support of an ever-wider range of mainstream media outlets which have the capacity to promote illiberal views on a large scale, potentially also leading to shifts in public opinion—a situation observed in Poland and, especially, Hungary. At the same time, a well-established illiberal public sphere, which resonates with widespread illiberal attitudes among the citizenry, can also limit the ability of illiberal leaders to steer away from the illiberal agenda. This is evident in Serbia, where elite promotion of LGBTQ+ rights and support of immigration as tools of gaining international recognition have had little impact on public opinion or were even faced with widespread opposition. In such a context, the illiberal public sphere becomes a powerful actor in its own right, capable of sustaining illiberalism independently of elite support.

In Chap. 6, we step away from the holistic examination of news consumption across all news media types to focus on social media, considering both social networking sites and messaging applications. The key question addressed in this chapter concerns the role that social media play in facilitating the proliferation of illiberal attitudes from the margins to the mainstream, as well as their potential to act as channels of liberal resistance once illiberal narratives and values have become part of the mainstream. The tone of both academic and public discourse on the matter has changed considerably in recent years, shifting away from the optimistic perspective that hailed the potential of social media to enhance democracy (Tucker

et al., 2018) to ever-louder calls for stricter regulation of digital platforms (Tambini, 2021). However, these debates have mainly centred on established Western democracies, leaving unexamined the role that digital platforms play in societies with comparatively shorter histories of democratic governance, and where an illiberal public sphere has taken hold. Aiming to fill this gap, this chapter opens with a brief overview of the rise in Internet penetration and social media use in Eastern Europe, and their adoption by political actors for electoral communication. Our data indicate that, in countries where the illiberal public sphere is more advanced and incorporates a larger proportion of mainstream news media, social media play a greater role as sources of information, often promoting liberal attitudes and support for democracy. At the same time, we also demonstrate the need to distinguish between different types of digital platforms. For instance, in Serbia, users of social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) tend to display more liberal attitudes, while people accessing news from messaging services (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Telegram) mainly display non-democratic and illiberal attitudes in three of the examined countries. This suggests that 'private' (or closed) platforms are more likely to serve as channels for illiberal narratives than more 'public' (or open) platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter. The argument about social media platforms having a strong democratic potential in this region is further supported by our data showing that people who use social media to express their opinions and engage with political content online tend to be rather resolutely pro-democratic and liberal in their attitudes. Based on these findings we highlight the key importance of social media for sustaining a liberal public sphere and resisting authoritarian populism in countries experiencing more significant democratic backsliding and argue for the need to reconsider blanket calls for digital platform regulation.

Chapter 7 is devoted to the mapping and analysis of the disinformation ecosystem across our sample. According to multiple reports, Eastern Europe is heavily saturated by political disinformation and conspiracy theories, generated and disseminated by ordinary citizens, political parties, and other domestic actors, as well as by foreign powers—especially Russia (Hajdu et al., 2020). While shared by political actors and public figures across the political spectrum, most disinformation and conspiracy theories circulating in the region are aligned with illiberal agendas and range from anti-Semitic beliefs about the Hungarian-born US philanthropist George Soros to right-wing conspiracies targeting immigrants and LGBTQ+

minorities. In this chapter, we examine the ways in which different stages of the illiberal public sphere are linked with the dissemination and reception of fabricated or manipulated information that promotes misleading narratives. We first explore people's exposure to misinformation and then map the mis- and disinformation ecosystems across the four countries, identifying specific channels and brands which play a major role in the dissemination of misinformation. Following from that, we examine the prevalence of beliefs that are rooted in some of the most popular conspiracy narratives in the region which serve to mobilize support for illiberal political actors and to stir antagonism against their liberal opponents. After that, we zoom in on a specific—and almost completely overlooked—communication channel which appears to be an important instrument for disinformation campaigns, the so-called 'chain emails' that are often shared across networks of family members, friends, and acquaintances, especially among the elderly. We conclude the chapter by considering the implications of media literacy initiatives promoted in the region and beyond.

In Chap. 8, we focus on information consumption and the influence of the illiberal public sphere during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, we ask whether countries where polarization was more extreme, and where the illiberal public sphere was more firmly established, responded to the COVID-19 crisis differently from those where illiberal tendencies were less evident. Drawing on a unique set of qualitative interviews and diaries collected across the four countries during the first wave of the pandemic, alongside secondary sources, we investigate how the combined effects of the disruption caused by the pandemic and the attempts to abuse the crisis for political gain affected citizens' engagement with COVID-19 news, their responses to government communication, trust in experts, and vulnerability to misinformation. Our analysis suggests that countries where the illiberal public sphere was more entrenched were at a distinct disadvantage when dealing with the crisis from the start, particularly if governing elites abused the situation to further expand their control over public life. Even though the leaders of all four examined countries initially avoided politicizing the crisis in the manner that Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro did in the United States and Brazil, in countries where the illiberal public sphere was more pervasive (i.e. Hungary and Serbia), the public health emergency was more easily turned into a divisive event, instrumentalized to sow distrust in the government and health professionals, thereby making citizens more vulnerable to misinformation.

The final chapter reflects on the broader implications of our findings. We first discuss what the comparison between the four countries tells us about the key constitutive processes and tipping points in the rise of the illiberal public sphere and then outline some of the most recent developments in Eastern Europe and beyond, asking what they might mean for the prospects of the illiberal public sphere. We conclude by offering some suggestions for journalistic practices and media policies that can help make media systems more resilient and able to deflect and contain the challenges of illiberalism.

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CHAPTER 2

The Rise of the Illiberal Public Sphere

Illiberalism is increasingly mentioned among the key threats faced by contemporary liberal democracies, typically alongside populism, right-wing nationalism, democratic backsliding, polarization, and hate speech. Yet, while other threats to democratic institutions and values attracted significant scholarly attention, illiberalism remains poorly defined and explicit attempts at its conceptualization are rare. As Marlene Laruelle (2022) observes, illiberalism is an 'emerging concept' in social sciences and is often used 'as a fuzzy and inconsistent classification, an intuitive way to describe ideologies and practices that diverge from liberalism […] without being entirely identifiable with authoritarianism or dictatorship' (p. 303). This conceptual fuzziness is reflected in the wide array of uses and meanings of the terms 'illiberalism' and 'illiberal', which have been stretched to encompass a plethora of phenomena that are seen as hostile to liberal democracy. These include different types of political regimes, ranging from dictatorship and despotism to totalitarianism and illiberal democracy (e.g. Dimitrijević, 2021; Zakaria, 1997); a variety of political practices, such as discriminatory procedures in the justice system or regulatory interventions that limit public debate or restrict democratic participation (e.g. Behrend & Whitehead, 2016); as well as diverse ideological convictions and attitudes, from right-wing nationalism and 'new conservativism' to hostility to LGBTQ+ rights (e.g. Bluhm & Varga, 2018; Yue & Zubillaga-Pow, 2012).

In communication and media research, a similar conceptual confusion is present and studies that explicitly foreground 'illiberalism' or the

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adjective 'illiberal' in relation to media and communication remain rare. Instead, phenomena that might fall under the umbrella of illiberalism are often studied under a range of other terms, especially populist communication (Reinemann et al., 2019; Van Aelst et al., 2017), but also democratic backsliding, media capture and media freedom (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013), as well as hate speech and incivility (Fiss, 1996; Levin, 2010; Titley, 2020). The first studies to explicitly focus on media and illiberalism appeared in the 2010s (Nakano, 2016; Yue & Zubillaga-Pow, 2012) with research accelerating from the late 2010s onwards (Akser & Baybars, 2022; Bakardjieva, 2023; de Albuquerque, 2021; Fong, 2022; Imre, 2019; Jensen & Chen, 2021; Nagy, 2018; Polyák, 2019; Surowiec et al., 2020; Surowiec & Štětka, 2020). As with discussions in social sciences more broadly, this body of research applies the term 'illiberalism' to a variety of phenomena that are seen to undermine liberal democracy, from political and regulatory practices to different forms of communication and discourses, without providing a clear definition. Especially in the context of public debate, this absence of conceptual clarity often goes hand in hand with the use of illiberalism as a pejorative term and as a rhetorical device employed to discredit political opponents, which presents a further obstacle to measured debate and analytical precision.

This conceptual fuzziness raises fundamental questions of definition. What is illiberalism and how, if at all, does it differ from other phenomena that undermine the quality of democracy and public life? And, in relation to that, what is the added value of studying illiberalism, as opposed to populism or democratic backsliding? We contend that the key advantage of illiberalism over its main conceptual competitors lies in its ability to offer both a more precise and a more comprehensive way of accounting for the grey zone between democracy and authoritarianism. The concept of illiberalism has the capacity to capture both the ideological and institutional dimensions of contemporary challenges faced by democratic societies and their media, and is better attuned to the dynamic, changing character of societies affected by these challenges. However, for the concept to be used in this way, its meaning and application must be better defined. In this chapter, we first outline our understanding of illiberalism and explain what makes illiberalism distinct from other related phenomena, such as populism and democratic backsliding. We then build on these initial observations to introduce the concept of the illiberal public sphere which provides the conceptual backbone to the analysis presented in the rest of this book. We also identify three ideal-typical stages in the development of the illiberal public sphere and conclude with an overview that

charts the evolution and current stage of illiberal public spheres in the four countries that are at the forefront of our analysis in the chapters that follow.

2.1 Conceptualizing Illiberalism

Our approach to illiberalism is informed by existing conceptualizations (e.g. Kauth & King, 2021; Laruelle, 2022; Sajó & Uitz, 2021), as well as by the empirical research presented in this book. It foregrounds three distinctive features of illiberalism: its paradoxical relationship with liberalism, its dual character as both an ideology and a set of practices and institutional arrangements, and its dynamic, processual nature.

First, illiberalism is paradoxically both opposed to and dependent on liberalism: it contributes to the erosion of liberal democratic institutions and undermines liberal values and attitudes but does so by relying on the very institutions and values it seeks to challenge. As Laruelle (2022) puts it: 'illiberalism […] represents a backlash against today's liberalism […] often in the name of democratic principles and thanks to them (by winning popular support)' (p. 305). Sajó and Uitz (2021) concur, arguing that illiberalism is 'associated with the waning of individual liberty', while at the same time being 'compatible with the political rituals of a competitive democracy' (p. xxiii). This central paradox of illiberalism is clearly apparent in the instrumental use of appeals to freedom of expression to legitimize different forms of hate speech that reject multiculturalism, gender equality, and minority rights (Fiss, 1996; Levin, 2010; Titley, 2020). In a similar manner, illiberal politicians in positions of power—from Viktor Orbán in Hungary to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil—have used complaints about biased reporting in mainstream news media as a pretext for refusing cooperation with established news channels, or even to justify policy changes that end up undermining media impartiality and professionalism (e.g. Jamil Marques, 2023). This constitutive paradox of illiberalism also means that illiberalism is at its strongest and most visible when it has a liberal competitor to challenge and rely on. When liberal democratic values and institutions collapse and give way to undemocratic ideologies and political systems, illiberalism becomes a taken-for-granted part of shared political culture, articulated primarily in attacks on liberal democratic values and institutions abroad. This is the case, for instance, in contemporary Russia, which often fashions its identity in opposition to the liberal democratic West.

The second feature that helps differentiate illiberalism from its competitors is its dual nature as both an ideology and a set of practices and institutional arrangements. On the one hand, illiberalism is clearly an ideological or symbolic phenomenon. It comprises specific ideological convictions, narratives, values and attitudes that are defined by their opposition to liberal alternatives and can range from anti-immigration attitudes and opposition to abortion or LGBTQ+ rights to the privileging of majoritarian and collectivist solutions over individual and minority rights. Laruelle (2022) develops a particularly elaborated understanding of illiberalism as an ideology, identifying five 'liberal scripts' or 'metanarratives' that illiberalism seeks to contest (pp. 312–313). These range from the political script that emphasizes the protection of individual freedoms and rights of minorities, to cultural liberalism that foregrounds individual rights and the recognition of a variety of ethnic, sexual and other identities. However, as we have argued elsewhere (Štětka & Mihelj, 2023), restricting illiberalism to an ideology or to a set of narratives or values is insufficient and misses a wide array of articulations of illiberalism that are often at the forefront of existing literature on illiberalism (cf. Smilova, 2021, p. 190). These comprise various practices and institutional arrangements that undermine liberal democracy and aid the proliferation and consolidation of illiberal attitudes, such as new policy and regulatory measures designed to undermine professionalism and independence and increase government control over key institutions, including civil services, the police, judiciary, and media (e.g. Vachudova, 2020).

The third distinctive feature of illiberalism is its dynamic, processual nature. Defined by its opposition to liberalism, illiberalism is never static. It persistently challenges the liberal democratic status quo and seeks to implement fundamental legislative, institutional, and ultimately social and cultural changes, which are predicated on the proliferation and acceptance of illiberal ideals. These ideals can vary depending on the specific combination of liberal scrips a particular version of illiberalism opposes, but typically include majoritarian solutions, an ethno-nationalist vision of society, and a commitment to traditional cultural hierarchies (cf. Laruelle, 2022). Through such changes, illiberalism contributes to a gradual decoupling of democracy from constitutional liberalism, leading to the establishment of what Yasha Mounk (2018) aptly called 'democracy without rights'. Such changes also potentially open doors for the establishment of a fully undemocratic political system within which illiberalism becomes a self-evident and widely accepted part of political structure and public life.

Aligned with these key distinctive elements, we define illiberalism as *an ideological universe that (a) underpins a set of practices and institutional arrangements that are both opposed to, and dependent on, liberalism; (b) pursues a vision of society that is governed by majority rule and underpinned by ethno-nationalist ideals and traditional cultural hierarchies; and (c) leads to a gradual decoupling of democracy from constitutional liberalism, potentially opening doors to authoritarianism*. This definition of illiberalism informs our conceptualization of the illiberal public sphere and helps us differentiate illiberalism from its key conceptual competitors. Chief among these is populism that is often conflated with illiberalism and, therefore, deserves a more extended discussion.

To start with, populism—like illiberalism—relies on a paradoxical relationship with contemporary liberal democracy. It is often fuelled by a general disenchantment with political participation and representative democracy, while at the same time relying on democratic institutions and principles to gain popular support. However, populism has been used to describe phenomena that are ideologically considerably more disparate than illiberalism. Described as 'promiscuous' (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 190), as a 'thin' ideology (Stanley, 2008, p. 95), and as an 'empty shell' (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 4), populism can be observed in a wide variety of ideologies and movements, from far-right parties in Europe to left-wing movements in Latin America, all of which use recognizably populist appeals to the people to justify their actions or fuel anti-elite sentiments in a bid to win the popular vote, but are not necessarily opposed to liberalism. Approaches that define populism as a type of discourse, frame, logic, or style of communication (e.g. Aslanidis, 2016; de Vreese et al., 2018; Laclau, 2005; Moffitt, 2020; Wodak, 2015) are particularly well suited to capture this ideological heterogeneity of populism, as they help foreground the shared discursive or stylistic features of populism that can be adapted to suit a variety of political ideologies, only some of which deserve to be labelled illiberal.

Furthermore, populism—unlike illiberalism—does not inherently constitute a threat to democracy. Although opinions on the subject vary, several authors have pointed out that populism can, at least occasionally, act as a corrective to democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012), by virtue of its potential to mobilize hitherto excluded groups and encourage debates on marginalized issues, thereby making democracy more inclusive (cf. Laclau, 2005). This ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy has led some scholars to argue against the overly indiscriminate use of

populism when describing contemporary political actors, warning that such a use can serve to euphemize and trivialize problematic phenomena such as racism or the far right and ultimately contribute to their mainstreaming (Brown & Mondon, 2021). This was also an important reason that motivated our decision to foreground the concept of illiberalism, rather than populism, in this book. Even though the key political actors in the countries examined here—especially Hungary's Viktor Orbán, the Polish Law and Justice Party, and Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia—have all used recognizably populist discourses and strategies, describing them merely as populists misses some fundamental features of their ideological convictions and governance practices. These include a shared commitment to ethno-nationalism, disdain for cultural liberalism, and a propensity for adopting majoritarian solutions and undermining key democratic institutions, such as the judiciary and independent media (cf. Bayer et al., 2019; Przybylski, 2018; Surowiec & Štětka, 2020; Vachudova, 2020). As such, we argue that they are more accurately described as illiberal.

It follows from this that populism can be combined with illiberalism, but should not be equated with it. For instance, political actors can use appeals to the people and anti-elitist rhetoric to promote illiberal attitudes towards immigration, abortion, or LGBTQ+ rights, as is the case in the four countries examined in this book. In this case, populism can facilitate the shifting of political contestation towards polarizing issues, paving the way for the proliferation of illiberal attitudes in the public domain that ultimately help illiberal actors win the popular vote. However, populist discourses and strategies can also be used by actors that are not illiberal at all. For instance, during the 2016 US presidential election campaign, Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders regularly attacked economic elites and adopted a rhetoric of blame. He even used appeals to 'our American people' and 'Americans' considerably more often than his Republican rival Donald Trump (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 194). Conversely, not all illiberal actors rely on populist discourses to further their political agenda. An example is provided by Vladimir Putin who, in his rise to power and during his first presidential term, did not use the characteristic antagonism of Russian people against the elites, but rather emphasized the restoration of state autonomy (Robinson & Milne, 2017, pp. 415–416). Further differences between populism and illiberalism emerge when considering specific ideological or organizational elements—notably, illiberalism does not necessarily require a charismatic leader and is rarely anti-elitist (cf. Laruelle, 2022, p. 318).

2.2 The Illiberal Public Sphere: A Communicative Approach to Illiberalism

To capture the communicative aspects of illiberalism and to provide a basis for analyzing the role that media play in the rise, spreading and everyday operation of illiberalism, this book introduces the concept of the illiberal public sphere. Following in the footsteps of a longstanding tradition of theorizing about the public sphere within media and communication scholarship (Curran, 1993; Dahlgren, 2005; Garnham, 2000), we define the illiberal public sphere as *a communicative space comprising both traditional and new media that promote and amplify illiberal actors, views, and attitudes.* As will be further explained in the paragraphs that follow, and consistent with the conceptualization of illiberalism advanced in the previous section, the illiberal public sphere is explicitly set against the liberal public sphere, seeking to displace its liberal opponent. The concept of the illiberal public sphere also helps us to adequately capture the dual nature of illiberalism in the communicative realm, enabling us to show how illiberal media and communication practices work in tandem with mediated illiberal attitudes and narratives to undermine liberal democracy.

The classical theory of the public sphere, originating from Jürgen Habermas' seminal study *The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere* (1962/1989), traditionally treats the public sphere as an inherently liberal project. For Habermas, the early modern bourgeois public sphere emerged in Western Europe at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century as both a physical and a virtual space, enabled by new institutions such as coffee houses, salons, and newspapers. This new communicative space—a 'sphere of private people come together as a public' (Habermas, 1989, p. 27)—facilitated the formation of public opinion. Propelled by progressive liberal ideas, such as individual political rights and equality of participation regardless of social status, the bourgeois public sphere has played a vital role in the historical struggle against absolutism. Despite Habermas' own pessimistic account of its alleged decay from the late nineteenth century onwards, driven by processes of commercialization and étatization of society, the public sphere remained a cornerstone of modern liberal democracy.

Because of the wide-ranging impact of Habermas' theory, his liberal-bourgeois public sphere model has come to be seen as the predominant—or even the only possible account of—the public sphere. However, various

scholars have pointed out that Habermas' model is too hegemonic, marked by structural gaps in relation to gender, class and ethnicity, and unable to accommodate alternative types of the public. In one of the first critical responses to Habermas' model, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972/1993) coined the concept of a proletarian public sphere that exists to protect the specific interests of the working class and opposes the bourgeoisie. Nancy Fraser (1990) has talked about 'subaltern counterpublics' as 'parallel discursive arenas' for members of subordinated social groups—including women, workers, people of colour, gay and lesbian people—who 'have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics' (p. 67). The concepts of counterpublics or alternative/counterpublic spheres have since been adopted by various authors, especially following the rise of the Internet, which has been seen as a particularly suitable channel for traditionally marginalized groups (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Wimmer, 2005; Dahlgren, 2005; Toepfl, 2020).

However, the existence of alternative public spheres that allow marginalized groups to formulate their interests, generate solidarity, and strengthen their collective identity, does not automatically mean that such communicative spaces advance progressive social ideas and embrace liberal democratic values. As Fraser (1990) herself noted, 'I do not mean to suggest that subaltern counterpublics are always necessarily virtuous; some of them, alas, are explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian' (p. 67). Likewise, Downey and Fenton (2003) cautioned against falling prey 'to a Left cultural romanticism that sees all forms of grassroots cultural expression as 'resistance' (p. 193). They provide as an example the extensive use of the Internet by radical right-wing groups in various countries, including the United States and Germany, at a time when the newly emerged communication technology was still largely on the fringes of the hegemonic public sphere. The rise of right-wing populism in many Western democracies in the 2010s, driven by an anti-establishment ethos, has also been analytically captured by referencing the concepts of counterpublics and 'counter-sphere'. In this respect, Korstenbroek (2022) talks about an 'uncompromising counter-sphere' that cannot be absorbed into the hegemonic public sphere (a scenario envisaged by Habermas) as it 'alludes to structural incongruence between liberal democracy and radical-right populism' (p. 74). Following this line of argument, Bennett and Kneuer (2024) argue that such right-wing, illiberal movements, parties, and other actors are best seen as 'transgressive publics' rather than counterpublics, because they do not seek inclusion into the liberal democratic system but

rather seek to exclude others and adopt illiberal forms of communication that violate basic liberal democratic norms such as civility, inclusion or reasoned exchange.

While the scholarship outlined above has attempted to expand the theory of the public sphere beyond the Habermasian liberal-bourgeois model, it has still largely remained within the perimeters of the democratic political system. Other authors have, however, demonstrated that the public sphere is not necessarily tied to democracy and may exist even outside of its boundaries. Juxtaposed as an antithesis to the 'democratic public sphere', Alexander Dukalskis (2017) has coined the concept of the 'authoritarian public sphere', defined as 'a realm of political discussion and information that is dominated and manipulated by the authoritarian regime and/or its allies' (p. 4). Building on empirical examples from authoritarian states, such as North Korea, Myanmar and China, Dukalskis displays how these regimes are in full control of the public sphere—particularly of the information that is unable to circulate freely—and use their domination 'to preclude a democratic public sphere […] from emerging' (p. 3). Under these conditions, any dissent in the authoritarian public sphere is suppressed.

This is not the case with the 'contentious public sphere', a concept introduced by Ya-Wen Lei (2017) to describe the communicative situation in China during the brief period of liberalization of the communist regime in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The move towards liberalization opened some opportunities for people's expression and participation, facilitated by the spread of the Internet. Lei tracks how, during this time, the previously fully hegemonic, authoritarian public sphere started opening up to make space for the formation of public opinions that were not under the communist party's control, thereby enabling people to contest dominant ideological narratives. Similarly, Zhongxuan (2014) talks about the Internet as a channel for an 'alternative public sphere' in China, which is not synonymous with a 'democratic public sphere', but rather designates a system of 'alternative, subaltern, and resistant spaces' that bypass the ruling power, without however seeking to confront it directly (p. 146).

A similar range of arguments about the nature of public communication under conditions of authoritarian control was developed also in historical research on communist countries. For instance, Stuart Finkel's (2007) study of the transformation of Soviet intelligentsia during the 1920s shows how Bolsheviks established a distinctly Soviet version of 'publicness' (*obshchestvennost*), one that was 'purged of the political

heterogeneity, partitioning, and divisiveness that characterized the bourgeois public sphere' (p. 4). A similarly restricted, 'official' public sphere, largely dominated by the Party-state, is discussed also by Rittersporn et al. (2003), who draw on case studies from a range of communist countries. However, building on Nancy Frazer's arguments, Rittersporn et al. point out that 'Soviet-type' societies also gave rise to an 'alternative public sphere' (p. 441), removed from the gaze of the state, and associated with dissident opposition. This sphere, they argue, was still permeated by 'the symbols, themes and dreams of the official canon' (p. 441), but also enabled critique of the state apparatus.

While representing an improvement on a monolithic conception of the Soviet-style public sphere, a binary conception that juxtaposes 'official' and 'alternative' spheres of communication is nonetheless problematic, as it glosses over the many ways in which the two spheres interacted and overlapped. As Fielder and Meyen (2015) showed in their analysis of communication in the GDR, even the official, staged public sphere could enable citizens to participate in discussions with the ruling elites and gain insight into their actions and intentions. Especially during periods of relative liberalization, for instance during the 1960s, mainstream media in countries such as Poland or Yugoslavia explicitly encouraged popular participation and social critique, leading to relatively open discussions of the rift between political ideals and the reality of life under communist rule (Mihelj, 2013; Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018, pp. 138–140). Another aspect of communication that defied a neat opposition between official and alternative public spheres under communist rule was the widespread practice of letter writing addressed to media professionals. All major media outlets typically possessed a department for processing audience letters, many of which not only commented on aspects of news coverage or individual programmes, but also expressed criticism of various aspects of life under communism and asked media professionals to challenge the inadequate behaviour of authorities (e.g. Fitzpatrick, 1996; Kozlov, 2013). Although such communication was removed from the public gaze, it nonetheless provided an important means of interaction between citizens and authorities, using the media as key intermediaries. In light of such examples, Mihelj and Huxtable (2018) proposed to think of the public sphere under communist rule as a semi-public communicative space that spanned both official and alternative domains and was stimulated 'both by conscious attempts of dissident circles to create an alternative space of

communication and by Party-endorsed promotion of popular participation and social critique' (p. 136).

All these conceptual alternatives to the Habermasian public sphere—from Dukalskis' (2017) 'authoritarian public sphere' to Finkel's (2007) notion of a distinctly Soviet public sphere, confirm that a form of public sphere can indeed exist outside of the framework of liberal democratic political systems. At the same time, the debates outlined here also point to the importance of acknowledging the dynamic nature of public communication outside of the realm of liberal democracy, with both Lei's (2017) concept of a 'contentious public sphere' and Mihelj and Huxtable's (2018) arguments about the 'semi-public' nature of public communication under communism highlighting the shifting, porous boundaries between official or state-controlled communication and alternative or dissident communication. A similar recognition of instability is also at the core of our conception of the illiberal public sphere which we see as a dynamic, rather than a static, phenomenon. Following the previously outlined processual nature of illiberalism, we propose that the illiberal public sphere also changes its scope and character over time, depending on its level of success in setting itself against the dominant liberal public sphere. However, if the concepts of contentious public sphere and semi-public communication under communism enable us to capture trends that could potentially democratize an authoritarian public sphere, or even turn it into a liberal one, *the illiberal public sphere allows us to conceptualize the processes by which a liberal public sphere gradually morphs into an authoritarian one.* As such, our concept also helps us break away from the implicit teleological, West-centric vision of history and social development that often underpins theorizing in the field and which assumes a largely linear progression of public communication from authoritarian to liberal models, without considering the possibility that this trajectory might be reversed.

2.3 The Three Stages of the Illiberal Public Sphere

To facilitate a mode of analysis that is sensitive to the dynamic nature of the illiberal public sphere, we identify three ideal-typical stages in the development of the illiberal public sphere: incipient, ascendant, and hegemonic. These three stages differ in several key aspects: the relative scope and reach of the illiberal public sphere and its relationship with the liberal

public sphere; the media forms and outlets that support it; the key political and cultural actors involved in it; the nature of media policies and regulation; and the nature of media ownership and independence. In the paragraphs that follow, we outline the key characteristics of each of these stages and discuss how they change as the illiberal public sphere progresses from the edges of the liberal-democratic system to a place of dominance, overthrowing its liberal counterpart.

Before proceeding with our analysis, we must clarify that, although we mostly refer to it in the singular, the illiberal public sphere—much like its liberal competitor—always operates on several scales, from the local to the regional, national, and transnational. This is perhaps clearest at the incipient stage, where the illiberal public sphere effectively consists of several loosely connected layers tied to a variety of actors, ranging from fringe political movements, cultural institutions, and influencers operating exclusively locally or nationally, to wider, transnationally networked illiberal organizations and movements. As the illiberal public sphere gains strength and colonizes key mainstream media outlets, all the while becoming embedded in national media and cultural policies, it grows increasingly integrated and 'national' in scope. However, transnational channels and connections remain important throughout and play a central role in supporting transnational alliances between illiberal actors, facilitating the transmission and adaptation of techniques aimed at undermining the liberal order.

In the first, *incipient* stage, the illiberal public sphere is relatively limited in its scope and reach, and is confined to a handful of minor, fringe, or hyper-partisan outlets, as well as social media platforms, which act as vehicles of illiberal attitudes and narratives and provide channels for attacks on mainstream media and individual journalists, as well as on other actors associated with 'liberalism'. It can be argued that, to some extent, this form of illiberal public sphere is present in all democracies, but in most of them it operates either as a counter-public sphere, as outlined above in relation to the works of Fraser (1990) and Downey and Fenton (2003), or as a 'transgressive public sphere' that does not seek inclusion in the liberal democratic system, but rather actively excludes others and disregards the norms of civility and tolerance (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024). Under these conditions, political actors advocating illiberal values who, for the most part, overlap with right-wing populists, are not among the strongest players in the national political arena. Although they might make it into Parliament, or even reach a notable one-off electoral success, as has been

the case with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) or the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), they typically remain outside of central power. These actors and their voters and adherents are commonly vilified by mainstream media and elite discourse, an aspect that they instrumentalize to secure continuing electoral support.

At the second, *ascendant* stage, the illiberal public sphere has grown in size and influence to the extent that it is on par with its liberal counterpart and competes with it for dominance. Apart from an expanded and consolidated communication ecosystem, comprising hyper-partisan outlets and social media channels, it now also incorporates some of the mainstream news media outlets, including major legacy news brands with well-established broadcast, print or online channels. Such mainstream channels have been co-opted into the illiberal public sphere using different techniques, including legislative changes enabling government capture of media regulatory authorities or public service media, as well as media ownership changes that consign previously independent media into the hands of oligarchs and other owners allied with illiberal political actors (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017; Štětka, 2012). The process of colonization of the liberal public sphere is also carried out via discursive practices that normalize illiberal attitudes while simultaneously undermining liberal values, such as the adoption of a more xenophobic and exclusionary rhetoric by mainstream political actors (cf. Korstenbroek, 2022), or attacks on independent journalists, often combined with misogynistic or racist slurs, or accusations of bias and 'fake news' (e.g. Jamil Marques, 2023). These legislative, ownership and discursive shifts typically go hand in hand with the rise of illiberal actors to positions of power. No longer confined to the fringes of the political systems, these parties and individual leaders by this stage occupy central positions of power, including within the government. Both political and media landscapes are polarized along the liberal/illiberal axis, a situation typically discussed in the context of contemporary US politics, but that also affects other democracies where liberal and illiberal governments or presidents have been recently taking turns at power, including Brazil, Poland, Slovenia, and Bulgaria.

The third, *hegemonic* stage, indicates the moment at which the illiberal public sphere has become dominant, having colonized most mainstream news media channels, and forced the liberal public sphere into retreat. The liberal communication landscape has been limited to a handful of independent outlets, mostly existing online and struggling for survival. Social media and foreign-owned radio stations (such as Radio Free Europe), as

well as foreign-owned cable and satellite channels, might also play an important part in sustaining the remaining liberal media ecosystem. Public service media have been nationalized and transformed into channels of government propaganda and most other mainstream news outlets have fallen under the control of the illiberal government or its business allies. Apart from the media, illiberalism pervades other institutions of the public sphere as well, including museums, galleries and scientific organizations, and is supported through illiberal cultural policies (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021; Rosenfeld, 2023). The illiberal government has managed to cement its power and has been winning consecutive elections also by bending existing legal and constitutional frameworks to weaken the system of democratic checks and balances and, thereby, gain a comparative advantage over its liberal opponents. Hungary under the government of Viktor Orbán (2010–) is arguably among the best-known examples of this stage, but other countries can be mentioned as well, including India under Narendra Modi (2014–), and Serbia under Vučić (2014–).

However, despite having achieved a clear dominance in this third stage, the illiberal public sphere is still different from the authoritarian public sphere, as described by Dukalskis (2017). In contrast to it, the illiberal public sphere is neither all-encompassing, nor fully controlled by the government. Although the dominant political and cultural narratives are produced and disseminated by channels that adhere to illiberalism and independent journalists are subject to intimidation, hostility, and other forms of pressure, the liberal public sphere is still present—and to some extent tolerated—as long as it does not threaten the power of the government. In this sense, the illiberal public sphere follows a different trajectory than Lei's (2017) contentious public sphere: while the latter helps to gradually open up and pluralize the authoritarian political system, the illiberal public sphere is set to undermine liberal democratic rule, potentially paving the way to authoritarianism.

The three stages of the illiberal public sphere and their key characteristics are summarized in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 The three stages of the illiberal public sphere (IPS)

	Incipient	*Ascendant*	*Hegemonic*
The scope of IPS and its relationship with the liberal public sphere	IPS fragmented, limited in scope and reach, subordinated to its liberal competitor	IPS increasingly integrated and national in scope, on par with liberal competitor	IPS in dominant position, liberal public sphere in retreat
Key media forms and outlets of IPS	IPS limited to minor, fringe or hyper-partisan outlets and social media platforms, functions as a counter-public sphere	IPS has colonized some of the mainstream channels, including well-established legacy brands and public service media	Most mainstream media channels colonized; the liberal public sphere pushed online or reliant on foreign-owned outlets
Key political and cultural actors of IPS	Minor oppositional parties or illiberal parties with limited parliamentary representation, fringe movements, illiberal cultural institutions and NGOs, etc.	Illiberal politicians rise to positions of power, including in the government	Illiberal politicians entrenched in positions of power; illiberal actors have also colonized key cultural institutions and other positions of authority
Media policy and regulation	Media policies and regulation guaranteeing media independence from the government	Legislative changes enable government capture of media regulatory authorities and public service media	Most mainstream media subjected to control of the illiberal government; public service media nationalized
Media ownership and independence	Transparent media ownership and high levels of media independence	Untransparent media ownership changes; independent media taken over by illiberal owners and government allies	Most media lack independence and are under the control of the illiberal government or its business allies
Position of illiberal narratives	Illiberal narratives limited to fringe outlets and commonly vilified by mainstream media and elite discourse	Mainstreaming of illiberal narratives; illiberal style of communication by government officials	Illiberal narratives prevail in the public domain

2.4 Eastern Europe as a Battleground for the Illiberal Public Sphere: The Four Cases

Following the introduction of the illiberal public sphere as a concept, we now move towards outlining how it manifests itself empirically in the four countries investigated in this book: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Serbia. While all four countries have been affected by the rise of illiberalism (Buzogány, 2017; Guasti, 2021; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Kapidžić, 2020; Pirro & Stanley, 2022), the actual history and dynamics of this rise, as well as its impact on the public sphere, have varied considerably. Thanks to this, these countries provide suitable case studies to illustrate the different stages of the illiberal public sphere sketched above. This does not mean that each of these countries fits neatly into one of the three stages, or that their positions are static within this framework. Rather, the three stages should be treated as ideal-typical developmental points on what is effectively a continuum, with the actually existing illiberal public spheres positioned at different points on the continuum and often moving from one stage to another (or back again) over time.

The overview must start with an acknowledgement that at the time of conducting this research (2019–2022), the illiberal public sphere has moved beyond the incipient stage, in all four countries. The Czech Republic was positioned between the incipient and ascendant stages (but closer to the latter), Poland between the ascendant and hegemonic stage, and Hungary and Serbia in the hegemonic stage. Looking at developments over time, the incipient phase could have been observed in three of the examined countries—Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary—roughly from the end of the period of democratic consolidation in the late 1990s, which concluded the tumultuous post-1989 transformation process and was symbolically marked by the accession to NATO and the EU in 1999 and 2004, respectively. For all three countries, this was a period of relative political and economic stability, characterized also by fairly high levels of media freedom, as evidenced by the position of these countries in the World Press Freedom ranking.[1] This stability, however, started to crumble around the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first

[1] In 2010, Hungary occupied 23rd spot in the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders, just one above the Czech Republic (24th), while Poland was ranked 32nd. Ten years later, in 2020, the Czech Republic was placed 40, Poland was 62nd and Hungary dropped down to 89th place (RSF, 2023).

century, as the populist wave—aided by the impact of the 2008 global economic crisis—shook political systems across Europe and prompted the strengthening of the illiberal public sphere across all three countries.

The trajectory of the illiberal public sphere in Serbia was substantially different, as the country never reached the stage of consolidated democracy and, therefore, never experienced the incipient stage of the illiberal public sphere. Rather, illiberalism has been an important aspect of Serbian politics throughout the post-communist period. Key political players that emerged victorious from the country's first multi-party elections in 1990, in fact, never fully embraced democratization. In particular, the Socialist Party of Serbia, led by Slobodan Milošević, used a combination of illiberal techniques and right-wing nationalist and populist rhetoric to retain control over the political system, including the media (Gallagher, 2000; Lutovac, 2020). The illiberal public sphere played an important role in fostering virulent nationalism during the Yugoslav Wars and the subsequent territorial conflict over Kosovo (Mihelj et al., 2009; Thompson, 1995). Despite an exponential increase in private media outlets, their independence—and therefore their ability to foster the growth of a liberal public sphere—was stifled by a lack of advertising revenues, continued government control over media regulation and allocation of frequencies, as well as over key legacy outlets, including public service media. Key private media outlets at the time, including commercial stations Pink TV and BK TV, were owned by Milošević's allies, while main opposition media, such as Radio B92, relied on funding from international donors (Castaldo & Pinna, 2018, p. 269). The situation deteriorated even further during the Kosovo Crisis in the late 1990s, when a new media law drafted by the then Minister of Information and now president of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić enabled the government to further increase control and harassment of opposition media (Jovanović, 2019).

It is only after the NATO bombing of the Serbian capital, Belgrade, in 1999, and especially after the electoral defeat of Milošević in 2000, that Serbia embarked on a more fully fledged attempt at democratization, which also saw a brief retreat of the illiberal public sphere during the first decade of the twenty-first century. However, progress remained slow and marred by clientelism and corruption, as well as obstructed by internal tensions over Kosovo and EU accession (Bieber, 2020, pp. 42–44). These internal tensions were compounded by the spill-over effects of the 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing populist wave which contributed to the strengthening of illiberalism in the country during the second decade of

the twenty-first century. These developments also went hand in hand with the re-consolidation of the illiberal public sphere.

In the paragraphs that follow we take a closer look at the evolution of the illiberal public sphere in each of the countries over the last two decades, thereby setting the stage for the empirical analysis presented in the rest of the book.

2.4.1 Hungary: Towards Illiberal Hegemony

Hungary was the first of the new EU member states to turn away from liberalism and to see the illiberal public sphere expand from the fringes to the mainstream. This process has been, at least in part, explicitly orchestrated by Fidesz—the once-liberal-turned-conservative party that later grew to dominate the country's political system. According to Bátorfy and Urbán (2020), Fidesz was systematically building its own media empire following its electoral defeat in 2002, with 'the openly professed goal … to create a "second national public sphere", to offer an alternative to the left-liberal dominance in the media and among opinion leaders' (p. 50), and calling onto its supporters to subscribe to specific media outlets, particularly the daily *Magyar Nemzet*, the weekly political magazine *Demokrata* and the online publication *Heti Válasz* (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020, p. 50).

However, it was only after Fidesz's decisive victory in the parliamentary elections in 2010 that the illiberal public sphere moved from the incipient stage to the ascendant one. The results of this watershed election gave the party two-thirds of parliamentary seats, thereby enabling it to change the constitutional order in a way that weakened the system of checks and balances and cemented its own power (Bánkuti et al., 2012). Some of the first legislative changes implemented by Viktor Orbán's government concerned the system of media regulation, which was completely reorganized to safeguard Fidesz's control. Already in 2010, new regulatory bodies were established—such as the National Media and Telecommunications Authority, headed by the Media Council—to monitor and enforce new media laws (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013; Brouillette et al., 2016). With the appointment process firmly in Fidesz's hands, the Media Council became a key instrument for attaining the party's media policy objectives, including the facilitation of market changes that played into the hands of pro-government outlets, while weakening oppositional ones (Polyák, 2019). The public service broadcaster MTV was effectively turned into a channel

of government propaganda, displaying a strong pro-government bias (OSCE, 2018; Bátorfy et al., 2022) and amplifying illiberal narratives, particularly those targeting immigrants (Kondor et al., 2022; Ruzicka, 2019) and LGBTQ+ communities (Mihelj et al., 2023; Tamássy, 2019).

These changes went hand in hand with the gradual departure of foreign investors, prompted by the worsening of economic conditions for legacy news media, but also by shifts in the regulatory environment and intensifying political pressures (Štětka, 2012). These ownership changes, in turn, gave a further boost to the illiberal public sphere; by the end of the 2010s, the Hungarian media market was almost completely controlled by domestic owners, most of whom were affiliated with Fidesz (Dragomir, 2019). The ultimate step in this process was the establishment of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) in 2018. Repeatedly criticized for its close links with Viktor Orbán and dubbed 'media monster' by the International Press Institute (IPI, 2018), this entity has amassed over 470 outlets—television and radio stations, newspapers, magazines, and news websites—which were all 'gifted' to the Foundation by their previous owners.

By the end of the 2010s, when we started collecting the data presented in this book, Fidesz had colonized the vast majority of the traditional media market. Aside from public service media—now effectively transformed into state media in all but name—Fidesz now dominates most commercial media as well, which 'are also controlled by pro-government actors, whether through ownership, state advertising, or other forms of public funding' (Bognár, 2022, p. 84). The online media sector is relatively more pluralistic and partly free from government's influence, but most of the independent digital media are struggling for economic resources and fighting off government's pressures, including smear campaigns against journalists (IPI, 2023). In light of these developments, we can claim that the illiberal public sphere has reached a hegemonic stage in Hungary. While the liberal public sphere persists and is sustained by a variety of channels—including news websites 444.hu, Telex.hu and 24.hu, and the talk and news radio Klubrádió (forced to move online only in 2021, after the Fidesz-controlled Media Council refused to renew its licence)—their combined reach and political impact are very limited, especially compared with outlets that operate under the control and in the interests of the government and its allies.

2.4.2 Poland: Following in Orbán's Footsteps

The evolution of the illiberal public sphere in Poland in many ways resembles the Hungarian scenario, with some notable differences. One of them is the fact that the transition to the ascendant phase started about five years later than in Hungary—namely, in October 2015, following the victory of the right-wing populist Law and Justice party in the parliamentary elections that were preceded by the victory of the Law and Justice candidate, Andrzej Duda, in the May 2015 presidential election. This double victory allowed the party led by the ultra-conservative politician Jarosław Kaczyński to be in government for the second time (after the 2005–2007 coalition tenure), opening the doors for the acceleration of the illiberal turn and the ascendance of the illiberal public sphere.

From this point onwards, Poland followed the Hungarian 'roadmap' to establish full dominance over the media landscape with remarkable precision. First came the regulatory capture, carried out via the establishment of the new National Media Council, which was allocated regulatory powers over public service media, previously held by the National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT). At the same time, KRRiT itself became gradually politicized, and accused of acting in the interests of the government (Klimkiewicz, 2022; Połońska, 2019). Almost simultaneously, the public service broadcasters (TVP and Polish Radio) fell under government control, with party loyalists appointed as top managers and disloyal staff dismissed (Dragomir, 2019). The mission of TVP was also redefined to align it with the illiberal political goals of Law and Justice (Surowiec et al., 2020), de facto turning it into a state broadcaster.

The Law and Justice government's tactics and strategies targeting oppositional media have also largely emulated Fidesz's approach. State advertising was used to indirectly subsidize pro-government media outlets, while depriving independent and oppositional media of a significant part of advertising revenues (Chapman, 2017; Zgut, 2021). Like the Fidesz's government in Hungary, Law and Justice also sought to push out foreign investors, seen as a major source of resistance against the government's political control of the media market. This is true especially of the US-based Discovery Channel, which owns the biggest Polish commercial TV station, TVN, and the Swiss-German Ringier Axel Springer, publisher of the tabloid *Fakt*, one of the best-selling Polish newspapers along with several other magazines. However, in contrast to the Hungarian scenario, Polish attempts to shift independent media outlets from foreign into

domestic ownership, framed as 're-polonization' by Law and Justice politicians, have had limited success. The repeated legislative attempts to cap foreign investments—most recently in 2022, targeting TVN—have been unsuccessful, although the government did manage to facilitate a takeover of the German-owned monopoly publisher of regional daily press Polska Presse, which passed into the hands of the state-owned fuel company Orlen Group in late 2020 (Konarska, 2022) with personnel and editorial changes following suit (Klimkiewicz, 2022). Despite these changes, Poland's illiberal leadership has not established a hegemonic position in the media market. Rather, the market remained divided with a significant presence of independent, liberal-minded outlets, including the above-mentioned TV channel TVN and tabloid *Fakt*, alongside daily newspapers *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*, and the commercial TV channel Polsat (see Chap. 3 for further details). The same is true for the digital media sector, which at the time of conducting this research featured both pro-government and oppositional outlets among those with the biggest reach (Makarenko, 2022). This layout of the Polish media landscape, which has been in place throughout the period of research presented in this book, is consistent with the ascendant stage of the illiberal public sphere.

2.4.3 The Czech Republic: Resisting Illiberal Capture?

In contrast to Hungary and Poland, the illiberal public sphere in the Czech Republic has followed a somewhat different path of development and with slower progression. While it started rising to prominence roughly around the same time as Poland, from the mid-2010s onwards, and has moved well beyond the incipient stage, it has arguably not reached the fully fledged ascendant stage by the time of conducting this research. There are several explanations for this. First, the Czech experience with illiberalism has been more limited in scope and intensity. Drawing on Buštíková and Guasti (2017), we could argue that the country has so far experienced only an illiberal 'swerve' (p.166), rather than a more decisive illiberal 'turn'. The country has, in fact, undergone only a single electoral cycle under a government pursuing illiberal policies. The antecedents of this swerve can be traced back to the electoral success of the first Czech populist party (Public Affairs) in 2010, and especially to the 2013 parliamentary elections, which brought into government the movement Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO, 2011), founded by the billionaire Andrej

Babiš. ANO's electoral success was in part facilitated by the strengthening of the illiberal public sphere, evident in Babiš's acquisition of Mafra, one of the biggest media houses in the country. This move also provided a key stepping stone on the route to ANO's sweeping victory in the 2017 parliamentary elections, which marked the beginning of the first—and, so far, the only—illiberal swerve in the country. The latest parliamentary elections in 2021 saw Babiš and ANO defeated by the centre-right 'democratic coalition' of five parties—a move that has put the brakes on the advancement of illiberalism in the country. In contrast, Hungary and Poland have both experienced two electoral cycles under illiberal governments—with Poland facing its first illiberal 'swerve' already between 2005 and 2007 under the first Law and Justice government. These repeated cycles have allowed illiberal elites to consolidate their hold on independent institutions, including the media, and thereby establish a more far-reaching and potentially more long-lasting illiberal turn.

Apart from the Czech experience with illiberalism being more limited in scope and depth, it has also not been as closely associated with right-wing ideologies as its Polish and Hungarian counterparts. The ANO 2011 movement is typically discussed as a representative of 'technocratic' or 'managerial' populism (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019; Císař, 2017; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Havlík, 2019) and distinguished from right-wing conservative populism by its relative lack of emphasis on exclusionist nativism and conservative values, as well as by its commitment to a 'business-like', pragmatic approach to politics and governance. Nevertheless, Babiš's (2017) fixation on efficiency, centralization of power, majoritarianism, and on weakening the checks and balances in order to 'get things done', evidenced by his vision of the Czech society, strongly resonates with the sentiments towards democracy displayed by illiberal leaders (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018). ANO's affinity towards illiberalism became even more apparent in the run-up to its sweeping victory in the 2017 parliamentary elections which was aided by strong anti-immigration rhetoric, as well as in the formation of a minority government with the support of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM).

The period of Andrej Babiš's government (2017–2021) was characterized by a clear move from the incipient towards the ascendant phase of the illiberal public sphere. This was demonstrated by the increasingly frequent attacks on independent media and public service broadcasters, but also by his repeated attempts to capture media regulatory bodies, especially the Czech Television Council. Both attacks on journalists and attempts at

regulatory capture were largely aimed at exerting pressure on Czech public broadcasting, and especially on Czech Television, perceived as one of the strongholds of independent journalism. These attempts have ultimately failed thanks to vocal support by the civil society and international organizations (Štětka, 2021). Nonetheless, together with the unprecedented collusion of political and media power in the hands of Andrej Babiš, these attempts have contributed to the downgrading of the Czech Republic in the World Press Freedom Index, from the thirteenth to the fortieth position between 2015 and 2021 (RSF, 2022).

The 2021 parliamentary elections, however, appear to have slowed the advance of the illiberal public sphere—a development reflected in the Czech Republic climbing back to ranking twentieth in the 2022 edition of the World Press Freedom Index (RSF, 2022). Nonetheless, the illiberal public sphere remains alive and vibrant, with several channels spreading illiberal narratives and giving platforms to illiberal actors. Apart from some of the mainstream media channels, including those controlled by Andrej Babiš (especially the dailies *MF DNES* and *Lidové noviny*), an advanced alternative media ecosystem has been established over the course of the 2010s, centred around a network of websites that are known to be disseminating disinformation, conspiracy theories and pro-Russian propaganda (Štětka et al., 2021). In addition, chain emails targeting mostly the elderly population have become a popular instrument for spreading disinformation as well as smear campaigns during electoral campaigns (Syrovátka, 2021). This means that the Czech Republic sits somewhere between the incipient and ascendant stages of the illiberal public sphere, at the opposite end of the spectrum from Hungary and Serbia.

2.4.4 Serbia: The Renewed Dominance of the Illiberal Public Sphere

If the Czech Republic only ever experienced an illiberal 'swerve', rather than a more fully fledged illiberal 'turn', Serbia's experience has been the exact opposite. Its political trajectory since the end of communist rule features only liberal 'swerves', rather than a more long-lasting turn towards liberal democracy. The second and most successful of these liberal 'swerves' occurred after the electoral defeat of Milošević in 2000, when the country's first fully democratic government committed to liberal values set the country on an accelerated path towards democratization and EU accession. This was reflected in several major legislative and regulatory changes

designed to increase media independence and stimulate greater competition in the sector (Castaldo & Pinna, 2018, pp. 270–272), as well as in improvements to the quality of media discourse by providing oppositional actors with better access to the media (Vladisavljević, 2020).

Despite these changes, the grip of the illiberal public sphere proved difficult to loosen. Political interference in the media sector and other structural problems persisted throughout the 2000s, gaining in strength and influence from the 2010s onwards (Castaldo & Pinna, 2018, pp. 270–272). The planned transformation of government media into independent public service media stalled as well. The country's public service broadcaster, Radio Television of Serbia, was yet again subjected to political colonization and government instrumentalization (Marko, 2017). From 2008, these internal structural problems were compounded by the financial crisis, which reduced advertising revenues and thereby made the financial sustainability of independent media outlets even more challenging, while also leading to the drying up of foreign investments (Orenstein & Bugarič, 2022, p. 180). Media outlets that played a key role in the downfall of Milošević gradually declined as they lost independent financial support and were therefore either closed or transferred into the hands of domestic owners susceptible to political pressure (Steele, 2023). Along with existing economic weaknesses, these shifts made Serbian media even more vulnerable to political influence. The renewed strengthening of the illiberal public sphere was also reflected in the deterioration of the quality of media coverage from 2010 onwards, driven by a substantial decline in media access for opposition parties compared with for political authorities, and by a downturn in both accountability and competition (Vladisavljević, 2020).

From the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections onwards, the illiberal public sphere intensified even further, as some of the key players of the Milošević's era returned to power. This included Aleksandar Vučić, the former Minister of Information under Milošević and now leader of the Serbian Progressive Party, who went on to become Prime Minister following the 2014 parliamentary elections. Despite the adoption of several new media laws in 2014, all nominally aimed at increasing media independence, media freedom effectively decreased owing to poor implementation, compounded by continued state control over a large portion (25–40%) of the advertising market, increasing pressures on independent journalists, and open censorship of critical news shows and politically motivated dismissals (Castaldo & Pinna, 2018, pp. 75–277; Kmezić, 2020).

All these developments echo trends seen in Hungary in the same period. Similar techniques of suppressing independent media were adopted by governments in both countries (Milutinović, 2022), ultimately leading to the full hegemony of the illiberal public sphere. Apart from public service media channels, the illiberal public sphere in Serbia now comprises the vast majority of mainstream outlets, including most of the major commercial TV channels, such as TV B92, TV Pink, and Happy, as well as an array of tabloid newspapers, such as *Informer*, *Alo*, *Srpski telegraf*, and *Kurir*, which all play an important role in promoting the distinctive image of Vučić as a strongman and a victim of attacks from domestic and foreign enemies, including the EU and United States (Jovanović, 2019). Several media monitoring studies also showed the prevalence of biased electoral coverage, clearly slanted in favour of Vučić and his allies, in most major media outlets (FNF, 2022; Gruhonjić, 2017). However, unlike in Poland and Hungary, where public service media are the central pillar of the illiberal public sphere, major public service channels in Serbia tend to adopt a more moderate tone and provide less biased electoral coverage than some of the commercial outlets in which bias is more blatant, and which also regularly feature attacks on independent outlets and journalistic associations as 'conspirators' in the war against Vučić (FNF, 2022, p. 6). Consistent with the hegemonic stage, the liberal public sphere in Serbia is confined to a handful of outlets, including the daily newspaper *Danas* and two cable television channels, N1 and Nova S, all of which are owned by the Luxembourg-registered United Group that operates both mass media and telecommunications platforms across South-eastern Europe.

2.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, we sought to overcome the conceptual confusion surrounding illiberalism and its relationship with media and communication. Through critical engagement with existing literature, we have clarified our understanding of illiberalism and explained how illiberalism differs from related phenomena such as populism. We have provided a definition of the illiberal public sphere and identified three key stages of its evolution—incipient, ascendant, and hegemonic—and have examined this evolutionary process in the four countries that are at the forefront of our analysis in this book. Furthermore, we have outlined some of the key differences between countries where the illiberal public sphere is by now in a hegemonic position, as is the case in Serbia and Hungary, and those where its

liberal counterpart is still holding ground, as seen in Poland, or resisting the tide of illiberalism, as documented in the Czech Republic.

However, the overview presented here has focused primarily on tracing the institutional, systemic or macro-level dimensions of the illiberal public sphere and its evolution, without providing much insight into how these interact with more diffuse changes in the symbolic and cultural domain, which are often visible only at the micro-level—for instance, changes in media discourses and communicative strategies, in news consumption practices and preferences, in epistemic and normative assumptions that underpin media trust and public attitudes. This is because, as argued elsewhere (Štětka & Mihelj, 2023), existing research on the four examined countries—and indeed on media and illiberalism more generally—pays only scant attention to symbolic and cultural dimensions. And yet, without investigating these dimensions and tracing their development alongside systemic and institutional features, we cannot know how and to what extent the rise of the illiberal public sphere contributes to the rise of illiberalism more generally by, for instance, moulding the way citizens interact with the public domain, facilitating their access to some news channels over others, or shaping their understanding of societal issues (such as immigration and LGBTQ+ rights) and their attitudes to democracy. Research that examines the symbolic, cultural, and micro dimensions of the illiberal public sphere alongside its material, institutional, and macro-systemic aspects, is also essential to developing an understanding of the 'supply side' of illiberalism, allowing to unpack the interaction between top-down initiatives of illiberal elites and bottom-up initiatives by grassroots organizations and ordinary citizens attracted by illiberal ideas.

This is the gap we seek to fill in the remainder of this book, by drawing on an original dataset of population surveys, qualitative interviews, and media diaries conducted in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Serbia, alongside a range of secondary sources. By comparing these four countries that are positioned at different points on the continuum between the incipient and hegemonic stages of the illiberal public sphere, we seek to chart the complex process through which audience practices and attitudes change as the illiberal public sphere gains in strength. In the next chapter, we begin by looking at how the increasingly illiberal communication environment, marked by the increasing polarization of media outlets along the liberal vs. illiberal axis, relates to the extent of selective news exposure and to the assumptions and values that guide citizens' news preferences for and choices of news outlets.

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CHAPTER 3

Polarized Media, Polarized Audiences? News Sources and Illiberal Attitudes

In the previous chapter, we laid down the conceptual foundations of our approach towards the relationship between media and illiberalism. We outlined how media play a key role in the rise of the illiberal public sphere, facilitating its progression from the incipient to the ascending stage and potentially growing further into the hegemonic stage, as illustrated by the examples of Hungary and Serbia. So far, we have primarily discussed this phenomenon in relation to institutions, observing how news media are captured by illiberal actors and used as channels for the dissemination of an illiberal rhetoric and programmes. In this chapter, we gradually shift our focus from institutional settings and actors to media audiences. We examine audiences' news consumption patterns, as well as the extent to which these patterns are mirrored by people's attitudes towards selected polarizing issues that are frequently exploited by illiberal actors across the four countries we examine.

Drawing on our expert survey, we begin our analysis by mapping out the editorial bias of a sample of major news media in each of the four countries. We do so to ascertain the degree of polarization that characterizes these countries' media systems and its relation to ideological and political axes. Utilizing data from the population survey, we then explore and compare audiences' news media diets—or *repertoires*—which we assess in relation to their political and ideological orientation and diversity.

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The central part of the chapter is devoted to the investigation of the relationship between these patterns of news consumption and people's voting preferences, as well as (il)liberal attitudes. Our analysis foregrounds two dimensions of illiberalism: cultural (represented particularly by attitudes towards minorities and their rights) and constitutional (i.e. the importance attributed to selected democratic institutions and principles). Beyond news repertoires, we also specifically consider the link between (il)liberal attitudes and exposure to particular types of media, namely public service broadcasters, commercial television, and radio. We conclude by interpreting our findings within the broader context of the evolution of the illiberal public sphere in the four examined countries.

3.1 Media Polarization: Whither the Centre?

The rise of illiberalism in democratic countries is usually accompanied by a deepening polarization of both political and media landscapes alongside the liberal/illiberal axis. Defined by McCoy et al. (2018) as 'a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "us" versus "them"' (p. 18), polarization can serve as a powerful political strategy to mobilize the electorate by exploiting existing societal cleavages (McCoy & Somer, 2021). While the use of such a strategy is not necessarily limited to illiberal parties and politicians, they nonetheless are the ones who tend to adopt it most frequently and benefit from it. According to Somer and McCoy (2018), this is because polarization 'advantages actors willing and able to employ unyielding, exclusionary, and demagogic politics and rhetoric', while facilitating 'the development of rigid and antagonistic political identities' (p. 5). Moreover, polarization also works in favour of illiberalism by severely restricting the common ground where a compromise might be reached, weakening democratic norms and eroding trust in institutions that are supposed to serve the entire society (McCoy & Somer, 2021; Svolik, 2019; Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019).

While both elite polarization (i.e. the divergences between political parties) and mass polarization (i.e. the cleavages in public attitudes on political issues) have been subject to an increasing amount of research, especially in recent years (Moral & Best, 2023; Zingher, 2022; Enders, 2021; Diermeier & Li, 2019), empirical explorations of media polarization are

still relatively scarce, particularly comparative ones. The question of how far apart news media are when it comes to their ideological leaning or political orientation has been traditionally examined within the conceptual framework of media partisanship or bias, and empirically investigated using different methods, most commonly content analysis (Shultziner & Stukalin, 2021; Hameleers, 2019; Budak et al., 2016), expert surveys (Popescu et al., 2011; Castro-Herrero et al., 2016), or a combination of the two (Castro, 2021). However, available studies on media polarization in Eastern Europe are either substantially outdated (Castro-Herrero et al., 2016) or limited with regard to their geographical reach or variety of news outlets (Olechowska, 2022).

Filling this gap has therefore been the necessary first step to lay the foundations for our analysis of the relationship between audience news choices and their adherence to illiberal values. Focusing on the ideological orientation (i.e. conservative vs. liberal bias) and general political leaning (measured as pro- vs. anti-government editorial stance) of selected news brands, our mapping was carried out by means of an expert survey that assessed a sample of the most politically relevant news outlets in each country (for more details on the methodology of the expert survey, as well as on the selection individual news brands, see the Methodological Appendix at the end of this book). Given that the data were collected in spring 2020, the assessment of both the political and ideological biases of the selected outlets, and, consequently, of the polarization of the news media system as a whole, reflects the situation at that specific time point. However, because we are primarily interested in determining the depth of political and ideological divides across news media systems and in exploring the relationship between media and audience polarization, the mapping is relevant regardless of any changes that might have happened since the collection of the data.

The results (Fig. 3.1) paint a picture of strongly polarized media landscapes in Hungary and Serbia where there is a clear divide between news media brands that display a pro-government bias and those whose editorial line is critical towards the government, with none positioned around the centre of this scale. In Serbia, most of the news outlets represent the former camp, including the brands with the biggest audience reach, such as the tabloid *Blic*, or the commercial TV stations ALO or Pink. The anti-government media bloc is composed of a handful of low-circulation papers—the daily *Danas*, the weekly *Vreme*, the 24/7 cable news channel N1 (an affiliate of CNN, operating from Slovenia), and the Balkan branch

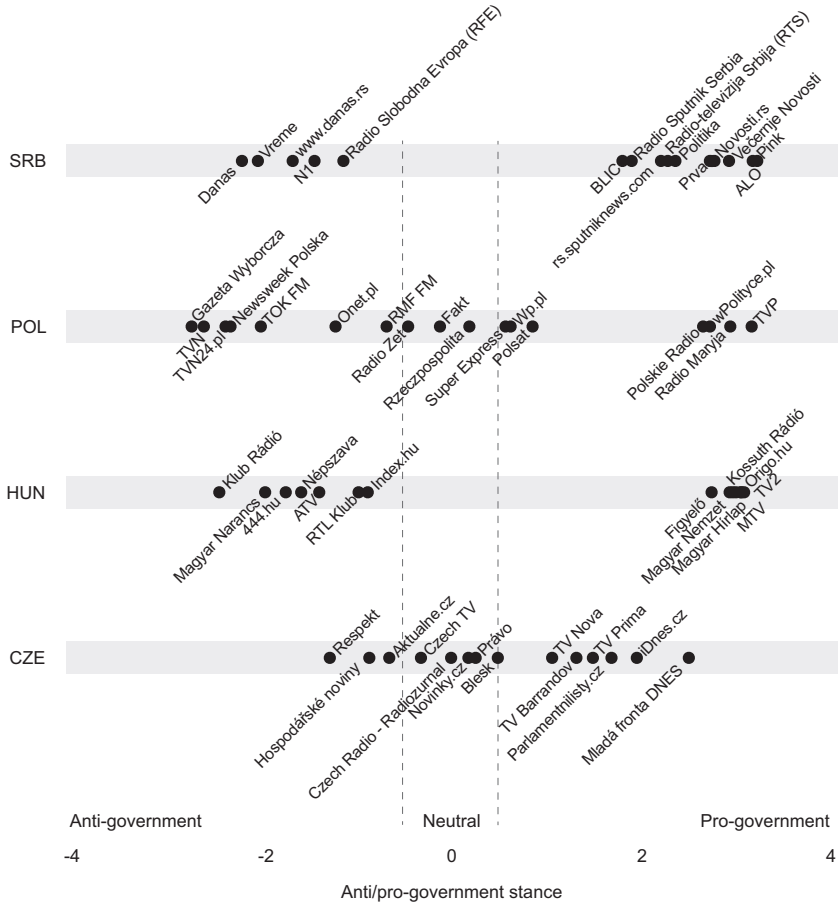

Fig. 3.1 Political bias of selected news outlets

of the US-funded Radio Free Europe (Radio Slobodna Evropa, RFE), broadcasting for the former Yugoslav countries. The comparison between these two camps makes it clear which one significantly prevails. Therefore, while we can still describe the Serbian media landscape as being polarized, we must also recognize that this polarization is heavily asymmetrical, leaning in favour of the government.

The extent of polarization in Hungary is similar. However, in contrast to Serbia, some of the anti-government brands have a large following, especially the commercial television channel RTL Klub, the news websites *444.hu* and *Index.hu* (since the time of our survey, the latter has changed ownership and editorial line, becoming a Fidesz supporter and thereby adopting a pro-government position).[1] In addition, compared with Serbia, the pro-government media bloc is much more closely aligned in terms of its level of support for the government, indicating closer political control over these outlets.

The other two countries—the Czech Republic and Poland—display a greater variety of political bias across selected outlets, implying a relatively lower level of media polarization. The key outlets in the pro-government media bloc are the state-controlled public service media (TVP, Polish Radio), the online outlet *wPolityce.pl*—whose ownership is crucially linked to the Law and Justice party—and the catholic Radio Maryja, infamous for its ultra-conservative agenda (Krzemiński, 2016). On the other side of the spectrum, there are outlets belonging to the main oppositional media house Agora—the biggest non-tabloid daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* and the radio station TOK FM—as well as US-owned broadcaster TVN, a long-term target of government attacks and pressure. However, there are also several news brands which that can be classified as belonging to a 'neutral' zone or close to it, including the biggest tabloid *Fakt* and the largest commercial television network Polsat.

The Czech media landscape appears to be the least polarized of all four countries, with individual brands spread across the scale rather evenly. Even though some of them might have swapped their anti- and pro-government orientation since data collection—following the 2021 parliamentary elections which installed a new, non-populist government—none of them is positioned as far away from the centre as some of the brands in Poland, Hungary, and Serbia. Finally, there are multiple brands that occupy the 'neutral' zone, including public service media (Czech Television and Czech Radio), as well as the biggest tabloid *Blesk*.

[1] The takeover of the popular website *Index.hu* by business actors close to the Hungarian government took place via a series of ownership changes which culminated in March 2020, when Fidesz-supporter Miklós Vaszily acquired 50% of *Index*'s parent company Indamedia. After a conflict with the editorial room over the website's political independence, the editor-in-chief Szabolcz Dull was fired in July 2020, which was followed by the departure of the majority of journalists, who subsequently established a new, independent news website *Telex.hu* (Polyák, 2020, September 2).

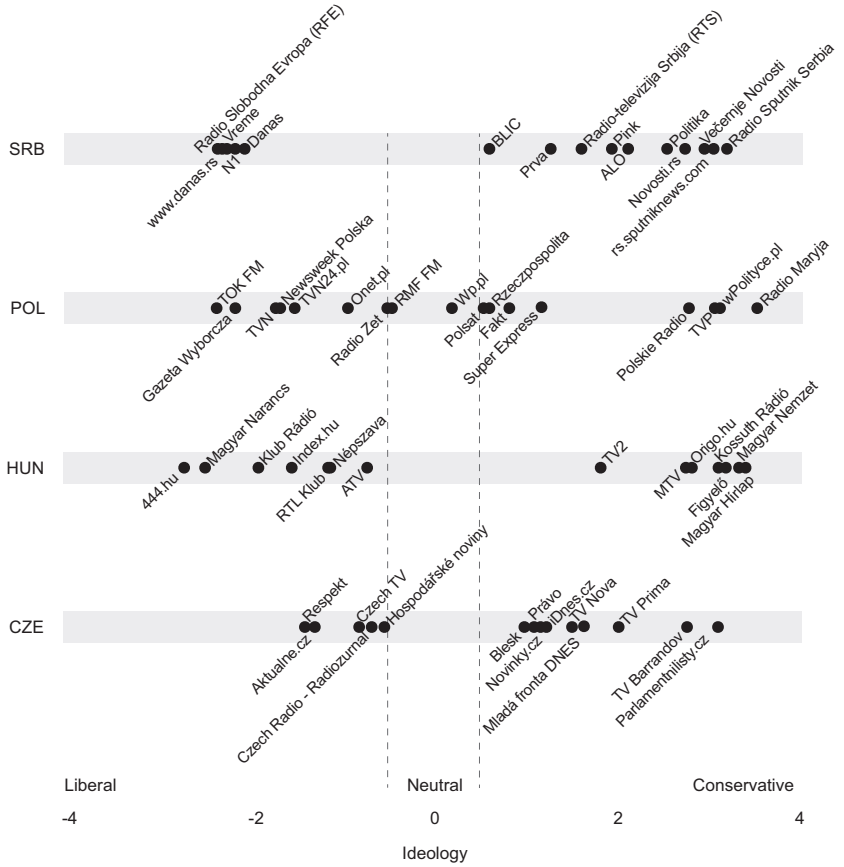

Fig. 3.2 Ideological bias of selected news outlets

The expert ranking of news media brands by their orientation on the liberal-conservative scale (see Fig. 3.2) complements the previous map of the brands' political bias. Again, Hungary and Serbia are the more polarized ones, with a significant gap between the liberal and conservative camps and no outlet in the 'neutral' area. The Polish and Czech media landscapes are characterized by relatively greater ideological diversity, with the Czech Republic lacking in outlets that would be positioned on the far ends of the spectrum.

Overall, the combination of these two maps, that—as formerly clarified—reflect the situation in the first half of 2020, suggests that media polarization is more deeply engrained in the countries with the most advanced illiberal public sphere, Hungary and Serbia. Whether assessed by virtue of their support for the government or by their ideological inclination (two elements that, for most brands, strongly correlate), the media in these two countries are sharply divided, with the pro-government/conservative camp visibly dominating in Serbia in terms of its market strength. The Czech media system appears to be the only one withstanding the centrifugal tendencies observed in the other countries, an aspect that might be attributed to the strong position that public service media occupy in the country's media landscape. The fact that both public service radio and television are currently leaders in their respective market segments and simultaneously enjoy a high level of trust stemming from the perceived quality of their output, as well as editorial independence (Newman et al., 2021), means that they are in an influential position to set the standards for the rest of news media organizations, preventing the country from spiralling down the process of partisanship and polarization observed in the other countries.

To further demonstrate the extent of polarization across the region, the two previously presented graphs are plotted onto a 2-D map, showing the position of each of the news brands simultaneously on both axes (Fig. 3.3). As it is apparent, only two of the four quadrants are populated: the bottom-left one (comprising brands that are both anti-government and liberal-oriented), and the top-right one (occupied by brands that display both pro-government and conservative bias). In other words, at the time of mapping, there were virtually no (significant) news media outlets in either of the four countries that would be classified as both pro-government and liberal, or anti-government and conservative. Even though this is arguably no longer the case in the Czech Republic, where some of the conservative media adopted a government-critical editorial stance since the October 2021 elections (most notably the dailies controlled by the ex-PM Andrej Babiš), the map represents a plastic portrayal of the overall diminishing plurality within the media system in Eastern Europe as a consequence of growing political polarization and media partisanship.

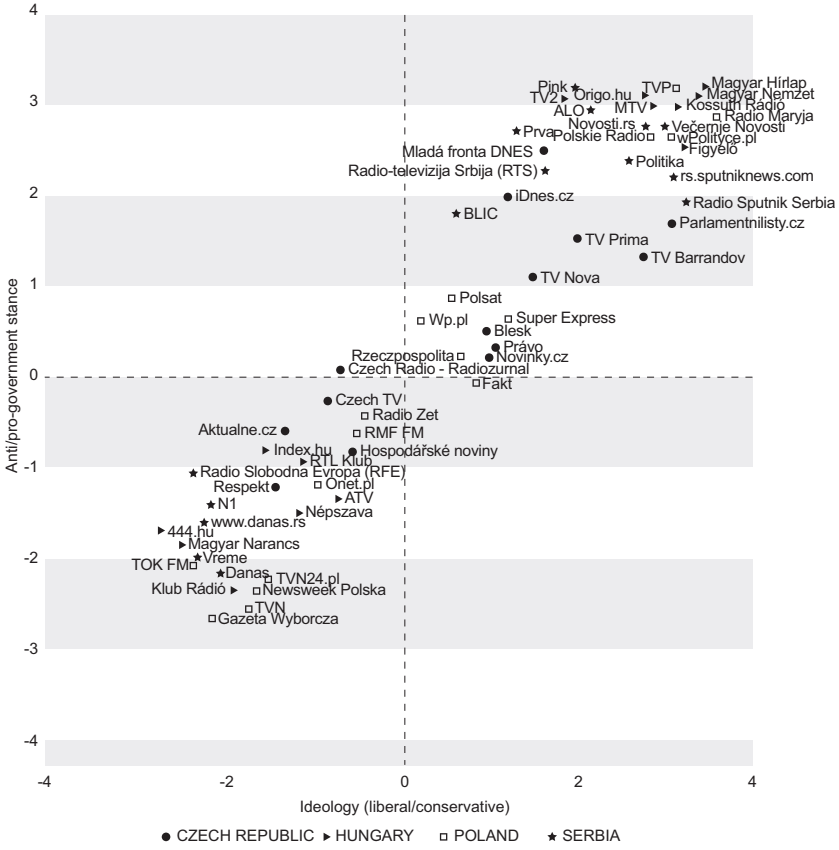

Fig. 3.3 Map of political—ideological bias of selected news outlets

3.2 Mapping Liberal Attitudes: Cultural and Constitutional Liberalism

Having outlined the extent of polarization across the media landscapes of the four examined countries, based on the expert assessment of the political and ideological bias of selected news brands, we now turn to audiences to examine the extent to which their news consumption habits reflect this polarization. Our assessment is aimed at establishing whether audiences' exposure to particular news brands aligns with their political attitudes,

especially on issues that are known to be polarizing in those countries and are often utilized by illiberal actors to mobilize their electorate.

Drawing on the population survey data collected between December 2019 and January 2020, we start by outlining the prevalent attitudes we observed among audiences. To empirically gauge people's attitudinal susceptibility towards illiberalism, we have constructed two composite measures derived from a set of survey questions. The first one, labelled *cultural liberalism index*, is based on the responses to eleven individual questions, inquiring on the respondents' opinions on immigration (i.e. whether immigration poses a threat to local culture, causes the rise of criminality or abuse of the welfare system), same-sex marriage and same-sex adoption, and assessing, more broadly, their tolerance towards specific minorities, particularly immigrants, same-sex couples, Muslims, Roma, Jewish and black people (see the Electronic Supplementary Material for the exact wording of the questions). The second measure is what we call *constitutional liberalism index*, which quantifies the importance that respondents assign to some of the key institutions underlying modern-day liberal democracy. These are: (a) free and fair elections, (b) law and order, (c) freedom of speech, (d) peace and stability, (e) independent media, (f) strong political opposition, (g) a courts system that treats all citizens equally, and (h) equal rights for women (Table 3.1).[2]

Table 3.1 Cultural and constitutional liberalism index

	Cultural liberalism index	*Constitutional liberalism index*
Czech Republic	3.96	6.22
Hungary	3.89	6.40
Poland	4.06	6.41
Serbia	3.73	6.43

Note: The figures represent average scores on the 1– to 7-point scales

[2] These eight items were previously used in the 'Life in Transition Survey' carried out by The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, in collaboration with the World Bank, in three waves between 2006 and 2016 (EBRD, n.d.). Scalability measures for both indices show that they constitute medium and strong scales, respectively. Mokken scale analysis confirms medium scalability for the cultural liberalism index (Loevinger's H = 0.41) and strong scalability for the constitutional liberalism index (Loevinger's H = 0.6). Cronbach's alpha confirms scale reliability for both (0.87 and 0.9, respectively).

The results show far greater variance on the cultural liberalism index than on the constitutional liberalism index. The cultural liberalism index largely follows a normal distribution (see the Electronic Supplementary Material), with Poland displaying the highest average score of the four countries (4.06 on a 1–7 scale), followed by the Czech Republic (3.96), Hungary (3.89) and Serbia (3.73). The fact that the Polish respondents appear to be more 'liberal' than Czech respondents—contrary to what could be expected based on the comparative state of the illiberal public sphere in the two countries, which is more advanced in Poland—is explained by differences between these countries on the specific dimensions of the index. While the Czech respondents show relatively high support of same-sex marriage (60% in favour, compared with Poland at 38.5%) and same-sex adoption (55% in favour, compared with 22% in Poland), they are significantly more hostile towards immigration (64% agreeing that 'immigrants are a threat to our culture' and 66% that 'immigrants cause the rise of criminality', compared with 43% and 46.5% in Poland).

In contrast to the distribution of scores on the cultural liberalism index, the index of constitutional liberalism is heavily skewed towards the top end, with the average scores (on a 1–7 scale) showing very small gaps between the four countries (Serbia 6.43, Poland 6.41, Hungary 6.40, the Czech Republic 6.22). This reveals that respondents agree on the chief importance of institutions of liberal democracy, even at a time when they are being undermined by illiberal actors across the region. Nevertheless, it is still possible to test whether attitudes towards democratic institutions are impacted by their news media exposure. This analysis will be the focus of the following section.

3.3 From Individual News Brands to Media Repertoires: Selective Exposure as a Cross-Media Phenomenon

Before getting into the data on the relationship between news consumption and political attitudes, it is first necessary to explain the approach we have used for measuring what kind of news media people are exposed to. While our research draws on selective exposure theory (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Klapper, 1960; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), which argues that people prefer to be exposed to messages that are congruent with their existing opinions and beliefs rather than those that challenge them, we do not

follow the traditional approach towards testing it. Instead of observing and comparing people's exposure to individual news brands in isolation from each other (e.g. Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Arendt et al., 2019), we have based our analysis on the innovative concept of *media repertoires* (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012; Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017). We have chosen this methodology because we believe it better reflects the nature of today's high-choice media environment where people's news media diets are likely to be composed of a variety of sources comprising different media types, rather than a singular medium type (i.e. television, newspapers, online platforms) or even a single channel (see Tóth et al., 2023, for a more detailed elaboration of this approach).

In recent years, this method has been increasingly employed to measure news consumption and analyse behavioural and attitudinal variables such as political participation (Strömbäck et al., 2018), political interest and knowledge (Kim, 2016), and partisan preferences (Edgerly, 2015), or to quantify support for political actors, such as Donald Trump (Mourão et al., 2018). However, our approach deviates from much of these previous studies, as we focus on the underlying political and ideological position of the individual media brands consumed by our respondents, instead of simply grouping together media brands by type or genre. This means that the repertoires are indicative of the relative political/ideological homogeneity or heterogeneity of people's news media diets. In other words, they show how resistant or open people are to information and opinions from across the political and ideological spectrum.

To ascertain the number and character of news media repertoires across our survey sample, we have first identified respondents' 'regular' media consumption (i.e. at least once a week) of the aforementioned pre-selected news media brands, spanning a variety of media types (Fig. 3.1 and Fig. 3.2; also see Methodological Appendix for their full list). Utilizing the scores for ideological and political bias of such news brands as evaluated by our expert survey, we then used latent profile analysis (LPA) to calculate the probability with which the respondents' news consumption patterns

fall into specific, ideologically and politically coherent, media repertoires.[3]

The analysis revealed five different types of media repertoires, distinguished by their level of homogeneity or heterogeneity (in other words, 'closedness' or 'openness') with regard to the political-ideological position of the news brands consumed by the respondents. The repertoires are broadly positioned alongside the diagonal axis cutting across the four quadrants in Fig. 3.3, dividing the media map between anti-government/pro-liberal brands on the one hand side, and pro-government/conservative brands on the other. Their classification as 'open' or 'closed' is determined by the extent to which respondents—while showing preference for one or the other side—also allow into their news media diets some of the brands from the opposite camp. Hence, what we define as the 'closed liberal anti-government repertoire' and the 'closed conservative pro-government repertoire' are both characterized by politically and ideologically very coherent media diets, with only a minimal presence of the sources representing a notably divergent editorial line. Conversely, people who fall within the 'open liberal anti-government repertoire' and the 'open conservative pro-government repertoire' are, as the names suggests, relatively less orthodox when it comes to the editorial leaning of their chosen news brands, even though, overall, one side still clearly prevails over the other. Finally, the 'balanced media repertoire' comprises people whose media consumption is most diverse and non-discriminant, showing a slight preference for politically and ideologically neutral media,

[3] As explained in detail in a previously published article stemming from this project (Tóth et al., 2023), the analytical procedure for creating media repertoires involved multiple steps. Firstly, two sets of variables were created. The first set identifies the proportion of anti-, pro-, and neutral government brands that each respondent consumes regularly, when considering all media brands they declared to use at least once a week. Similarly, the second set identifies the proportion of liberal, conservative, and neutral brands that each respondent consumes. Secondly, these six variables were used in a latent profile analysis (LPA) to explore the media repertoires that emerge in the four countries. The analysis was weighted by demographic distribution, and we used the Akaike's information criterion (AIC) and Schwarz's Bayesian information criterion (BIC) for determining the best fit in terms of parsimony, and the entropy criterion value to select the model providing the greatest evidence for partitioning data in terms of well separated groups or clusters (Celeux & Soromenho, 1996). Finally, ordinary least squares linear regressions were performed to examine the relationship between membership in our repertoire groups and the ideological and political preferences of our respondents in each country separately.

but still exposed to plenty of liberal and conservative media and, to a lesser extent, pro-government brands.

The proportions of each of these five repertoires in the four countries are displayed in Fig. 3.4. As we can see, with the exception of Serbia, 'open' repertoires are more common than 'closed' ones, suggesting that extreme forms of selective exposure might be relatively less prominent than commonly assumed. In the Czech Republic, the amount of people whose news diets can be said to form a kind of ideological/political 'bubble' (on both sides of the spectrum) is less than 17% and, in Poland, it is around 20%. In Hungary, however, it is more than a third of the sample (34%) and, in Serbia, the same figure rises to nearly 50%. These two countries are also characterized by a complete absence of the fifth—balanced—repertoire, in line with the previously observed gap in the political and ideological 'centre' on their respective media maps. The sizeable proportion of the balanced repertoire in the Czech Republic (31%) is significantly aided by the strong market position of public service television and radio, both demonstrably neutral in their political leanings.

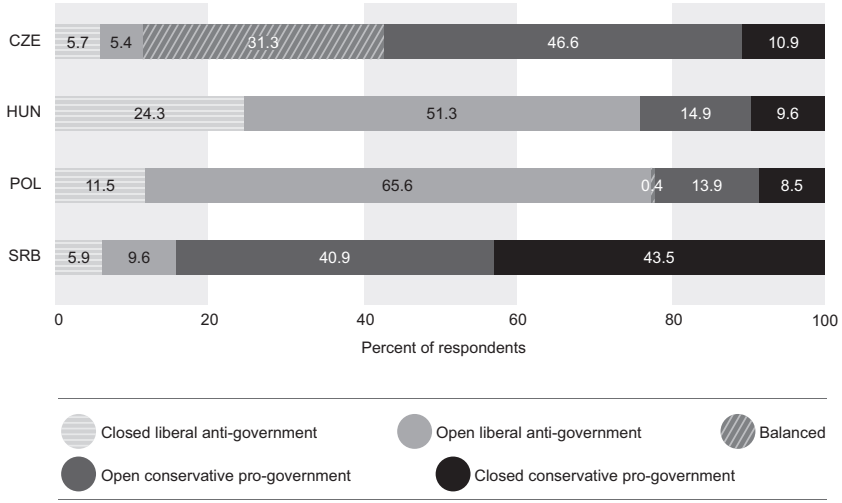

Fig. 3.4 The five media repertoires

3.4 Media Repertoires and Liberal Attitudes

To finally address the question of whether and how people's news consumption is reflected in their political preferences and attitudes, this chapter will now turn to the examination of the relationship between the key variables considered in our survey, namely people's news repertoires and the indexes of cultural and constitutional liberalism.

Figure 3.5 shows the breakdown of the average scores on the *cultural liberalism index* (1–7 scale) across the five media repertoires in each country. In three of the four countries, people who consume news almost

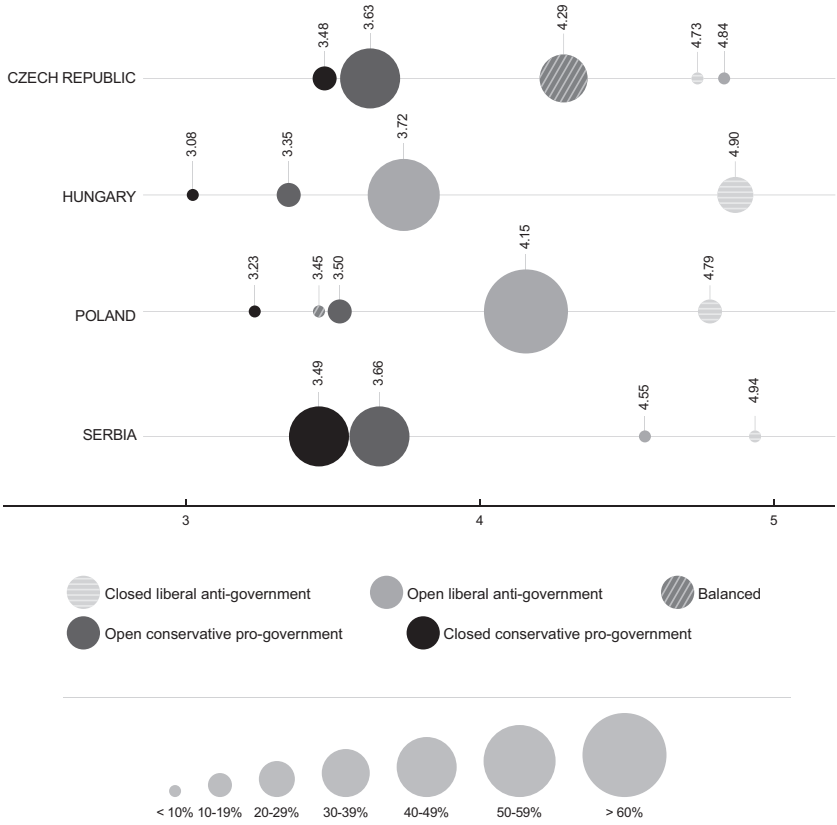

Fig. 3.5 Media repertoires and cultural liberalism

exclusively from liberal anti-government media (i.e. have a closed liberal anti-government news repertoire) are culturally the most liberal. The only exception is the Czech Republic, where people with an open liberal anti-government repertoire are slightly more culturally liberal than those with a closed one. However, the difference between the two means is not significant because of the low N in both groups, as apparent from the Fig. 3.5 (in which the sizes of the individual 'bubbles' represent the proportion of people characterized by the specific media repertoire in each country). Conversely, people whose news diets are restricted merely to conservative pro-government sources exhibit the least liberal attitudes. This is the case in all four countries, with the lowest scores on the index being displayed by conservative pro-government news consumers in Hungary (3.08), followed by Poland (3.23), the Czech Republic (3.48) and Serbia (3.49). Overall, the results confirm that, in line with selective exposure theory, a link exists between the kind of media people are exposed to and their attitudes towards selected cultural issues that have a potential to polarize the public alongside the liberal/illiberal axis in these countries. Across our sample, people whose news diets are characterized by consuming primarily news brands with a liberal editorial orientation (which, at the time of data collection, also overlapped with these brands' anti-government profile), tend to display relatively more liberal attitudes than those who predominantly consume conservative, pro-government sources.

As for the attitudes towards some of the key institutions of liberal democracy captured by the *constitutional liberalism index*, the differences in average scores among the individual media repertoire groups are less prominent (see the Electronic Supplementary Material for full data), reflecting the relatively low variance of this index, as discussed earlier in this chapter. However, they point in a similar direction, thereby corroborating the trend highlighted by the cultural liberalism index. Across all four countries, the people who attribute the highest importance to democratic institutions are typically those whose news media diets consist solely of liberal anti-government sources, while those who consume predominantly conservative pro-government sources are comparatively less persuaded of the significance of these institutions, though still being largely supportive of them.

Apart from demonstrating general associations between people's selective news exposure and their attitudes, the data captured in Fig. 3.5 offer an additional opportunity to explore how close or far apart the members of individual repertoire groups are with regard to their views on selected

cultural issues (as represented by the cultural liberalism index), thereby indicating the extent of polarization in each country. Comparing the average scores of respondents with closed liberal anti-government news diets and those with closed conservative pro-government ones, we can see that the gap between those two opposite groups is the widest in Hungary (1.89), and the narrowest in the Czech Republic (1.36), with Poland (1.57) and Serbia (1.45) in the middle.

Furthermore, comparing the levels of cultural liberalism across all four repertoire groups that display partisan bias (that is, leaving out the balanced repertoire, which is effectively present only in the Czech Republic), we can observe interesting patterns in the way these scores are distributed on the scale. In Poland, the difference between the average scores for the members of the first and second repertoire (closed- and open liberal anti-government) is virtually the same as the gap between the members of the second and fourth repertoire. These data indicate that people who have predominantly liberal and anti-government news diets but occasionally mix them with conservative and pro-government sources are, after all, not too significantly distant in their cultural attitudes from their counterparts on the right (those consuming predominantly conservative pro-government media, but sometimes being exposed to liberal content, too). In other words, the division between these two open repertoires in Poland is less sharp than in the Czech Republic, where the consumers of liberal anti-government media and the consumers of conservative pro-government outlets—regardless of whether they fall into an open or closed variant of the respective repertoires—are distinctly far apart from each other when it comes to their attitudes to selected cultural topics.

The same pattern is even more prominent in Hungary, where the average score on the cultural liberalism index for news consumers who fall within the open liberal repertoire is actually much nearer to the closed conservative repertoire than to the closed liberal one. This shows that the views of people in the open liberal repertoire on selected cultural issues are more likely to overlap with those displayed by the audiences of conservative outlets, rather than those of consumers who only stick to liberal anti-government sources. To put it more bluntly, in Hungary it is only the members of the first, closed liberal anti-government repertoire who stand out as culturally liberal, while the remaining three form a distinct cluster that, overall, shows adherence to more illiberal than liberal values. This puts the previously outlined shares of individual repertoires (Fig. 3.4) in a different perspective: even though the largest proportion of audiences in

Table 3.2 Voting for/against the government party in the last elections by news repertoires

	Czech Republic	*Hungary*	*Poland*	*Serbia*
Closed liberal anti-government	Against	Against	Against	Against
Open liberal anti-government	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	Against
Balanced	*n.s.*	*n.a.*	*n.s.*	*n.a.*
Open conservative pro-government	*n.s.*	For	For	*n.s.*
Closed conservative pro-government	For	For	For	For

Note: Data from population survey (N = 4092), analysis based on OLS regressions (controlled for age, gender, education, domicile size and religiosity), with voting for government party as dependent variable (binary); n.s. = effect not significant; n.a. = repertoire not present due to no membership in dataset. See the Electronic Supplementary Material for complete regression data tables

Hungary are characterized by open liberal anti-government news diets (51.3%), they do not appear to be particularly liberal-oriented, at least when it comes to their views on selected cultural issues.

The findings regarding the link between selective partisan exposure and attitudes on polarizing issues are further supported by the electoral choices of the members of each of the media repertoires across the four countries (see Table 3.2). Overall, the pattern observed for news consumers in both of the closed repertoires is similar to the one detected in relation to the cultural liberalism index. In all four countries, people predominantly getting their news from liberal anti-government sources had a statistically higher probability to have voted against the governing party in the last national elections (2016 in Serbia, 2017 in the Czech Republic, 2018 in Hungary, and 2019 in Poland), while citizens preferring conservative, pro-government news brands were more likely to have voted in support of the incumbent government. The findings are a bit less clear for those whose news diets have been more open. The open liberal anti-government repertoire only shows statistically significant correlations with voting against Aleksandar Vučić's government in Serbia, while in the other countries, the results are statistically inconclusive. Similarly, the open conservative pro-government repertoire shows significant correlations with pro-government vote in Hungary (Fidesz) and Poland (Law and Justice), but not in the Czech Republic (ANO 2011) and Serbia (Serbian Progressive Party), though in both these countries, the relationships between these variables point in the expected direction. However, regardless of statistical significance, it is worth pointing out that the patterns

found in Hungary virtually mirror those outlined in the previous paragraph: the only repertoire whose members were likely to vote against Viktor Orbán's government in 2018 was the first (closed liberal anti-government) one, while the members of the second repertoire (open liberal anti-government) were clearly divided between pro- and anti-government parties, and overall closer to the voters whose news diets preferred conservative pro-government sources.

3.5 Public Service Media: Channels of Illiberalism, or Harbours for Liberal Audiences?

So far, the relationship between media exposure and (il)liberal attitudes among Eastern European publics has been analysed with a focus on media repertoires, emphasizing a more complex perspective on news consumption patterns and on their role in shaping attitudes in the contemporary high-choice media environment. Aside from this theoretical reason, we also avoided exploring such links in the context of individual news brands for practical and statistical reasons, given the relatively low number of users of most news brands in our survey. Nevertheless, we shall now zoom in on the meso level of selected media types and look specifically at public service media (PSM)—a notoriously contested institution across the region, as described in more detail in Chap. 2.

The results of our analysis, captured by Table 3.3, reveal clear differences among the four examined countries when it comes to the cultural attitudes of PSM audiences. In the Czech Republic, watching Czech Television or listening to Czech Radio significantly increases the probability of leaning towards liberal values on the cultural liberalism index. Likewise, attitudes to liberal democratic institutions also strongly correlate with exposure to public service media broadcasters. This represents a stark contrast to Hungary, where audiences of PSM are presenting the opposite pattern: the more frequent exposure to MTV, TV2, or Kossuth Radio, the lower people score on both the cultural and constitutional liberalism indices. Similarly, in Poland, frequently watching TVP or listening to Polish Radio makes it more likely for people to display illiberal attitudes with regard to cultural issues. However, this is not the case for constitutional liberalism, where the effect of PSM exposure is not statistically significant. The opposite is true for frequent audiences of news programmes broadcast by Radio Television of Serbia (Radio-televizija Srbija, RTS) who do

Table 3.3 Impact of consuming public service vs. commercial media news on liberal attitudes

		Cultural liberalism index	*Constitutional liberalism index*
Czech Republic	PSM TV + Radio	+**	+**
	Commercial TV + Radio	−**	*n.s.*
Hungary	PSM TV + Radio	−**	−*
	Commercial TV + Radio	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
Poland	PSM TV + Radio	−**	*n.s.*
	Commercial TV + Radio	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
Serbia	PSM TV + Radio	*n.s.*	−**
	Commercial TV + Radio	−*	*n.s.*

Note: Data from population survey (N = 4092), analysis based on OLS regressions (controlled for age, gender, education, domicile size and religiosity), with cultural liberalism index (1–7 scale) and constitutional liberalism index (1–7 scale) as dependent variables. '+' indicates positive effect on the dependent variable (i.e. increasing liberal orientation) '-' indicates negative effect. Statistical significance *p<0.05, **p<0.01, n.s. = effect not significant. See the Electronic Supplementary Material for complete regression data tables

not show particular preferences on cultural issues (on the cultural liberalism index), but attribute significantly lower importance to democratic institutions (as measured by the constitutional liberalism index) than those who consume news from this broadcaster less frequently. Furthermore, in contrast to Poland and Hungary where heavier consumption of commercial television and radio does not seem to correlate with any preference for liberal or illiberal attitudes, Serbian consumers of commercial channels are more likely to hold illiberal attitudes on cultural issues than those who primarily consume public service channels. This suggests that, in Serbia, where the illiberal public sphere is most entrenched, both commercial and public service media contribute to the reproduction and spreading of illiberalism, albeit in different forms.

These more granular data largely confirm the general patterns outlined above, namely the congruence between exposure to media that display a particular political-ideological orientation and the corresponding views of their audiences. With regard to public service broadcasters, this overlap is clearest in Hungary, where the institution of PSM has been effectively turned into an instrument of government propaganda and is known to be

promoting illiberal values (Tamássy, 2019; Kondor et al., 2022). A similar situation is observed in Poland and Serbia although, in both cases, the match between the exposure to PSM and people's attitudes only relates to one of our two measures of attitudinal illiberalism. In Poland, it concerns attitudes towards culturally polarizing issues, actively exploited by the government-controlled Polish national broadcasters TVP and Polish Radio. In Serbia, it relates to the perceived significance of democratic institutions, as captured by the constitutional liberalism index. The liberal orientation of Czech Television and Czech Radio, which both enjoy a fair amount of political independence, is comparatively much less prominent than the conservative bias of their counterparts in the other three countries (see Fig. 3.2); however, their audiences still exhibit relatively strong liberal attitudes. Interestingly, the negative effect of consuming news from Czech commercial broadcasters on cultural liberalism is just as strong as the effect of consuming news from the Hungarian state-controlled PSM. This further supports the argument made in Chap. 2 that the channels of the illiberal public sphere are potentially not just limited to media captured by illiberal governments or political actors, but can include commercial media too, often simply because exploiting culturally polarizing issues reveals to be a profitable business strategy, as is well known from the United States and other Western countries (Klein, 2020).

3.6 Conclusions

This chapter has presented several key findings from the analysis of both the expert and population surveys which shed more light on the contemporary processes of media and political polarization across Eastern Europe, improving our understanding of how news consumption might be related to these trends. First, we have demonstrated that the news media landscapes in the four countries under our investigation have a tendency towards polarization alongside the political and ideological axis. Nevertheless, the actual level of polarization—the extent of the divide between the two opposite poles of the political spectrum—exhibits some variations across the sample. These variations broadly correspond to the different stages of the illiberal public sphere observed in the countries and outlined in Chap. 2. Hungary and Serbia, the two countries at the most advanced (hegemonic) stage, clearly display the highest degree of polarization in terms of the positioning of individual news brands across both the political and ideological spectrum. However, the data from our sample

reveal that polarization in Serbia is also very asymmetrical, heavily tilted towards the pro-government and conservative side, which is represented by substantially more news brands and with notably bigger audience reach than those labelled as anti-government and pro-liberal. In Poland, where the illiberal public sphere has reached the ascendant but not yet hegemonic stage, the news landscape is comparatively more varied. However, some of the key representatives of the opposite camps—such as the government-controlled TVP and the leading quality newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza—are still positioned at the far sides of both the political and ideological spectrum. Finally, in the Czech Republic where the illiberal public appears comparatively the least developed, situated between the incipient and ascendant stages, the news system is the least polarized of all four countries, although still showing some clear divides, particularly along the ideological axis. Nevertheless, the Czech Republic also has a relatively sizeable 'centre', represented by the presence of several brands that are classified as relatively neutral and impartial (especially the public service media), which we believe acts as a countervailing force against the centrifugal pressures of polarization.

We have subsequently explored audiences' news media diets and classified them into five distinct groups of 'media repertoires', distinguished by the level of their political-ideological diversity. This method has allowed us to see evidence of patterns that are broadly compatible with levels of news media polarization. Our results challenge the rather widespread narrative that people are nowadays enclosed in impervious ideological 'bubbles' or 'echo chambers' by showing that the majority of respondents in our sample are characterized by 'open' media diets, being exposed to content from across the ideological and political spectrum. However, our data also show that the countries with the highest proportion of 'closed' news diets are those with the deepest levels of media polarization. In Hungary, more than one-third of people fall within one of the 'closed' repertoires (mostly the anti-government, liberal one); while, in Serbia, the share of people getting their news from politically and ideologically homogeneous sources reaches nearly half of the population, with most of those audiences relying almost exclusively on pro-government, conservative media, thereby illustrating the hegemonic scope of the illiberal public sphere. On the other hand, the proportion of 'closed' media repertoires in Poland is 20% and only 16.6% in the Czech Republic. Furthermore, the relatively lower extent of media polarization in the latter country is complemented by a

well-sized 'balanced' news media repertoire (31% of audiences), making the Czech Republic an outlier in the sample.

Through a subsequent analysis, we have remarked significant associations between the respondents' political attitudes and the political and ideological profiles of the media which they regularly consume, as well as (though less unequivocally) their voting behaviour. Generally speaking, the data confirm that the more people are exposed to conservative and pro-government news sources, the less likely they are to display liberal stances on culturally polarizing issues (i.e. same-sex marriage or immigration), and the more likely they are to vote for parties associated with illiberalism. Conversely, people displaying the most liberal cultural attitudes and the highest respect for democratic institutions are those whose news diets tend to be composed predominantly of liberal, anti-government sources. This sample is also more likely to vote against the main governing party which, in all four countries, at the time of data collection, was the one enabling the rise of the illiberal public sphere.

We acknowledge that the results presented above are certainly not a proof of causality. Given the limitations of our data, particularly the cross-sectional nature of the survey and the selective character of the news media sample, it is not possible to prove whether exposure to news media with a particular editorial bias determines people's political attitudes and electoral behaviour, or whether pre-existing political and ideological leanings determine people's news choices. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that both variables are mutually reinforcing each other and jointly affecting polarization, further deepening the divides in the media landscape and emptying its political-ideological centre. With regard to people's attitudes, this process is more likely to have an asymmetric rather than a symmetric effect, especially in countries with an advanced illiberal public sphere, as demonstrated by the case of Hungary, where only the people with closed liberal and anti-government news diets hold culturally liberal views, while all the other news repertoire groups (composing 75% of the total audience according to our survey) are, on average, closer to the illiberal end of the attitudinal spectrum. One explanation for this could lie in the fact that, as the illiberal public sphere progresses and captures ever more mainstream media brands, people who generally prefer liberal sources but are also open to consuming news from the other side of the political-ideological spectrum (a group that, in Hungary, amounts to over 50% of the population) will more frequently be exposed to the illiberal views actively pushed by such mainstream brands, thereby becoming more susceptible to

shifting their own opinions on culturally divisive issues. This, in other words, is what can be described as the process of normalization or mainstreaming of illiberalism, something that we examine in more detail later in the book. In the following Chap. 4, we examine how the growing polarization of media landscapes that accompanies the advance of the illiberal public sphere affects the levels and nature of media trust.

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CHAPTER 4

Media Trust and News Consumption in the Illiberal Public Sphere

Media trust is often highlighted as a key factor underpinning the quality of public deliberation and the quality of democracy more generally (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Existing research on media and trust also tends to assume that trust is the key element driving news consumption—that is, that people primarily follow news sources they trust. In this context, several scholars have expressed concerns about the steady decline in news media trust in several Western democracies (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Newman et al., 2019) and pointed out that this decline is leading people to turn to alternative, often partisan sources, thereby contributing to attitudinal polarization (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Ladd, 2011). However, much of this research operates within a context where the media are still relatively independent and professional, and where distrust is fuelled by political actors who seek to gain legitimacy by undermining the credibility of what are still, by and large, relatively trustworthy sources of information. In such a context, generalized media trust is—from a democratic perspective—an unambiguously good thing, as well as something worth defending and preserving. In contrast, generalized media distrust is justifiably seen as harmful to democracy, especially if it is driven by what Quiring et al. (2021) have called

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'dysfunctional cynicism' (p. 3497)—that is, if it is based on unsubstantiated assumptions about the malevolent, flawed nature of media in general, often associated with beliefs in a conspiratorial alliance between political and media actors.

However, in some of the countries examined in this book, such assumptions about the democratic desirability of media trust, and about the harmfulness of media distrust, no longer make sense. As evident from the previous chapter, the advancing illiberal public sphere, and the growing polarization of media landscapes in two of the countries—Hungary and Serbia—has by now reached such a degree that balanced, politically neutral media has virtually disappeared. To make matters worse, most news media privilege only one side of the ideological and political spectrum, meaning that the media systems in these two countries are not only polarized but also very asymmetrical, with only very few outlets adopting a liberal, anti-government perspective on current affairs. To put it differently, this means that most of the media in these two countries have become genuinely untrustworthy, and media trust is no longer an unambiguously positive thing. Rather than being a cause for concern, a low level of media trust could instead be a welcome sign, indicating that citizens are potentially still able to recognize biased, unreliable media coverage, and perhaps even identify alternative, more trustworthy sources.

Yet, as the evidence presented in this chapter indicates, such optimistic conclusions may not be fully warranted. While low levels of media trust do go hand in hand with critical attitudes to mainstream news, and often lead people to consume ideologically and politically diverse news sources, this does not necessarily mean that they are able to find trustworthy alternatives. In this respect, our conclusions echo the findings of a small but growing body of research on audiences in heavily polarized environments, such as Ukraine, South-eastern Europe, or the Baltic countries (Pasitselska, 2022; Pješivac et al., 2016; Szostek, 2017; Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2021, 2023), as well as in semi-authoritarian and authoritarian environments, including China and Russia (Alyukov, 2021, 2022, 2023; Mickiewicz, 2005; Oates, 2006; Szostek, 2018). This literature shows that distrust of mainstream media drives audiences to alternative sources of information, including non-media sources and personal experience, as a means of evaluating news credibility. At the same time, they also reveal that engagement with alternative sources does not necessarily help citizens evaluate information critically. Rather, it can also reinforce beliefs in messages coming from untrustworthy, propagandistic sources, leading to what Joanna Szostek (2018) aptly calls the 'paradox of dis/belief' (p. 68)—namely,

that audiences in such environments might distrust mainstream media and avoid propagandistic outlets, yet at the same time continue to believe in propagandistic messages circulated by such outlets because they resonate with those found in alternative sources or echo personal experiences and opinions of trusted others. This paradox of 'believing the message while disbelieving the messenger' (Szostek, 2018, p. 81) has been confirmed by other studies (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2021; Alyukov, 2023) and means that propaganda and misinformation can remain influential even in contexts where citizens recognize the bias of mainstream news channels and deliberately seek exposure to alternative sources of information.

In this chapter, we take a step further than these studies by providing a more fine-grained breakdown of media trust and its relationship with news consumption, using a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data to compare the status of media trust in the four countries we examine. First, our approach is not limited to the analysis of the more commonly investigated generalized levels of media trust—that is, trust in news media as an institution. Rather, it acknowledges multiple levels of media trust (cf. Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020), paying attention to trust in individual news brands. This approach allows us to tackle the understudied question of the relationship between different levels of media trust (Strömbäck et al., 2020) and investigate what happens with trust in individual news brands when generalized media trust declines. Borrowing from Christian Schwarzenegger's (2020) work on personal epistemologies of media use, we argue that, in a context where generalized media trust declines, people adopt a pragmatic approach to media trust, seeking to follow news sources that may not be completely trustworthy but nonetheless offer a more credible account than others. Second, we examine the relationship between media trust and news consumption and use qualitative data to situate media trust vis-à-vis multiple other determinants that shape news consumption. Here, we seek to engage with previous research that investigated why people consume media they distrust and query normative models of citizenship that assume news consumption is driven solely by rational aims, such as information-seeking (cf. Swart & Broersma, 2021; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005).

Finally, we use mixed methods to examine how citizens establish which media are trustworthy. The patterns we find challenge tacit assumptions that link media trust to universal criteria of trustworthiness such as independence, impartiality, or objectivity. As our analysis shows, even if people routinely refer to such seemingly universal criteria when justifying their

news choices, the way they interpret them can vary widely, opening doors for trusting rather biased, openly partisan and propagandistic media. This is particularly clear when looking at interpretations of media independence, which is not necessarily assessed in terms of independence from political or commercial interference, but rather in terms of independence from foreign powers, the political mainstream, or editorial control. These results suggest that, in a context where the illiberal public sphere assumes a dominant position, the normative foundations of media trust shift, ultimately leading citizens to place trust in media not because they offer impartial or accurate coverage of public affairs, but because they provide an account of reality they personally agree with or—in the extreme case—because their account of reality is aligned with the one promoted by those in power.

4.1 From General Media Trust to Trust in Individual News Brands

Media trust is commonly investigated at a general or institutional level, by means of surveys that inquire on people's trust in 'the media' in general. Such an approach offers important insights and, alongside the inclusion of general questions on media trust in major surveys, such as the Eurobarometer, the Edelman Trust Survey, or the World Values Survey, offers the opportunity for both longitudinal and transnational comparisons. Nonetheless, several authors have noted its drawbacks, including its inability to capture the variations in trust across individual news brands (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Seeking to address these drawbacks, our survey combines the measurement of general levels of media trust with the measurement of trust of ten individual news brands in each of the examined countries. In addition, we also investigate the link between media trust and media use, seeking to establish whether, and to what extent, higher trust in individual news brands corresponds with higher frequency of use.

Starting with general levels of media trust, all four countries display low levels of trust. Even in the Czech Republic, where trust levels are highest, only 34.8% of participants trust media in general, with the number dropping to only 13.9% and 10.7% in Hungary and Serbia (Fig. 4.1). These results stand in stark contrast to media trust in many other European

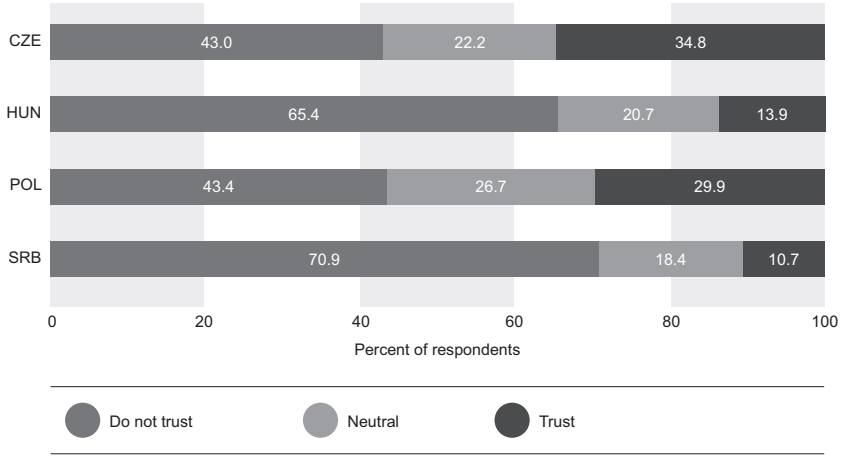

Fig. 4.1 Trust in news media (general)

countries, especially in Scandinavia, where over half of the population trusts the media (Newman et al., 2023). Despite comparatively low levels of media trust in all four countries, we should also highlight significant cross-country variations, with media distrust significantly higher in Hungary and Serbia than in Poland and the Czech Republic. While as many as 65.4% of the respondents in Hungary and 70.9% in Serbia stated that they do not trust the media, only around 43% did so in Poland and the Czech Republic. As Hungary and Serbia are the two countries where the illiberal public sphere reached the hegemonic stage, these results suggest that the advance of the illiberal public sphere might go hand in hand with the decline in general levels of media trust. Although we should be wary of inferring longitudinal developments based on cross-sectional data, existing longitudinal polls support this interpretation, showing a decline in media trust between 2016 and 2023 in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary (Newman et al., 2023).[1] Furthermore, the link between the advance of the illiberal public sphere and the decline in media trust is also consistent with existing work on media trust and polarization, which likewise suggests that advancing polarization goes hand in hand with lower media trust (see Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

[1] Serbia is not covered in this dataset.

However, low general levels of media trust in Hungary and Serbia do not mean that people distrust all media equally, nor do relatively high levels of media trust in Poland and the Czech Republic mean that all news brands in those countries are seen as equally trustworthy. Rather, in all four countries, general levels of media trust hide significant variations in trust between individual news brands (Fig. 4.2). As Schwarzenegger

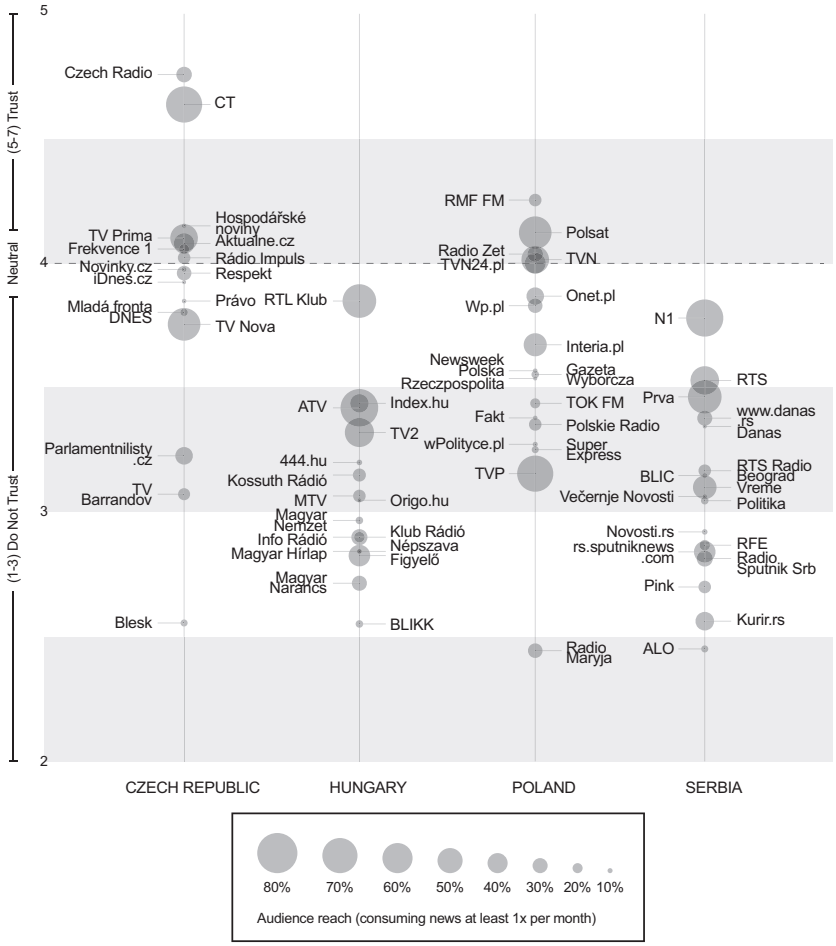

Fig. 4.2 Trust in individual news media brands

(2020) argues, media trust is pragmatic—namely, citizens can be sceptical of the media to varying degrees yet choose to trust selected sources for pragmatic reasons. The range of variation in trust is particularly notable in the Czech Republic, as evident from the distance between the most highly trusted outlets in the country, public service radio (Czech Radio—Radiožurnál) and television (Czech Television—Česká televize, CT) channels, and the least trusted medium, the tabloid *Blesk*. In the other three countries, and especially in Hungary and Serbia, the range of variation is considerably smaller. Another interesting pattern relates to the relative positions of commercial and public service broadcasters. In the Czech Republic, public service radio and television are by far the most trusted, while the most widely followed commercial broadcasters occupy the middle of the spectrum. In Poland and Hungary, the reverse is true: commercial broadcasters, such as TVN, Polsat, and RMF FM in Poland, and RTL Klub in Hungary, command the highest levels of trust, with public service brands including MTV and Kossuth Radio in Hungary and TVP and Polish Radio (Polskie Radio) fall around the middle of the spectrum. Finally, in Serbia, the commercial, oppositional TV channel N1 enjoys the highest levels of trust but is closely followed by the public broadcaster Radio-television Serbia (Radio-televizija Srbije, RTS), and the commercial pro-government broadcaster Prva, with the other major commercial broadcasters (Pink and Happy) much further down the spectrum.

Another key finding evident in Fig. 4.2 is that low levels of trust are not necessarily an obstacle to news consumption—a fact that is easily overlooked if one focuses only on the overall positive association with trust. As the size of 'bubbles' associated with individual brands in Fig. 4.2 indicates, some of the brands with largest audiences, such as public service broadcasters TVP in Poland or the commercial channel TV Nova in the Czech Republic, are found around the middle of the trust spectrum. Indeed, in some cases, even brands close to or at the bottom of the trust scale command relatively large audiences, with the most notable examples being the tabloid *Kurir* in Serbia and Radio Maryja in Poland. These findings suggest that significant numbers of citizens in the four countries may follow news media they do not find particularly trustworthy or even choose to consume sources they actively distrust.

These results run counter to the normative ideal of informed citizens who rationally consume only sources they trust (cf. Swart & Broersma, 2021) and challenge arguments that assume news consumption to be driven primarily by the desire to obtain accurate information about

current affairs (cf. Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). As Tsfati and Cappella (2005) argue, 'obtaining accurate and objective information is just one motivation for watching the news' (p. 254). Indeed, the patterns we see in our data suggest that news consumption may be shaped by a variety of other factors, including other needs—from diversion and entertainment to specific social identity needs—as well as less instrumental factors, such as force of habit and routine (cf. Rubin, 1984; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). In addition to these, the specific media environments we deal with here—especially in the case of Serbia and Hungary—require us to consider how the link between trust and news consumption might shift when illiberalism and polarization increase, and when mainstream media become increasingly biased and untrustworthy—that is, in environments where people may simply have no choice but pay attention to media they distrust.

4.2 Why Do People Consume Media They Distrust?

To investigate what might explain people's tendency to, at least on occasion, consume media they distrust, we asked selected survey participants—thirty on average in each of the countries—to explain why they consume the news sources they do, using both qualitative interviews and media diaries over a period of three weeks. Their responses confirmed that trust, while important, is not the only and, sometimes, not even the main consideration that guides news consumption choices. In addition to media trust, several other reasons were mentioned. Most common among these were convenience, habit, contextual restrictions linked to family, household or working environments, and the desire to get access to a diversity of views.

Convenience mostly referred to a particularly straightforward way of accessing a specific news source and was associated primarily with digital news consumption, although the specific devices used and modes of accessing digital news varied. Smartphones were particularly often mentioned in this context, chiefly because of their portability and adaptability. As a Czech participant explained: 'The smartphone is fast, practical, and I have it always with me … when I'm on a bus, streetcar, train, or even in the bathroom' (Cze-10, male, 41). Encountering news on smartphones as a result of push notifications or through social media feeds was also often

associated with convenience, reflecting the importance of accidental news exposure for contemporary, digital news consumption patterns. For instance, A Serbian participant explained that she keeps reading news about elections—even those she may not want to see—because of push notifications from Google News, noting that 'Google keeps pushing news about election onto me. I might not want to read them, but they keep imposing themselves on me' (Srb-23, female, 60+). Similarly, a Hungarian participant explained that he consumed the pro-government daily *Magyar Nemzet* more than other sources because he encountered it more often on Facebook (Hun-15, male, 38). Given that existing research has confirmed that online news consumption has the capacity to expose citizens to cross-cutting debates, including views they may disagree with or sources they distrust (e.g. Guo & Chen, 2022; Lu & Lee, 2018; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), it is feasible to infer that convenience of access—insofar as it leads citizens to rely on online news sources, especially via social media platforms—could be an important factor contributing to engagement with news sources one distrusts.

That said, the link between convenience of access and news exposure is not limited to online news consumption. Some of the participants mentioned convenience as a factor in choosing broadcast media. Typically, this was because broadcast media—especially radio, but also television—were seen as more compatible with other activities such as driving or household duties. As a Serbian participant explained, 'I turn on the TV when I'm in the middle of something, so I can at least listen to what they are saying' (Srb-27, female, 60+). For some users, news received through analogue media and especially TV was seen as more convenient than accessing news through their smartphones, because it was believed to require less effort. To the question of why she preferred to follow TV news, one of our Czech participants explained: 'Because I like to sit in my living room and turn the TV on to relax. When you use your phone, you must search for the news. But when you turn the TV set on with your remote, it's immediately there' (Cze-21, female, 56). Instances where convenience was associated with analogue media were almost exclusively mentioned by older participants, suggesting that long-standing habits—another factor frequently mentioned as important in influencing news consumption choices—likely play a role in shaping people's perceptions of what is convenient. Arguably, for older users, sticking to one's established news routines and devices may simply be more convenient than changing them and getting used to different (digital) devices and routines. In media systems where illiberal

governments have progressively taken control over broadcast and print media, forcing oppositional outlets to the digital sphere or limiting public access by excluding them from most convenient cable TV packages, such convenience-led consumption can also inadvertently push citizens into consuming media they distrust.

Another factor that occasionally drove participants to follow sources they distrusted was habit. In contrast to convenience, which was often used to explain preferences for a particular device—for instance, smartphones or the radio—habit was most often associated with specific news brands and programmes. For instance, writing in her media diary, a Polish participant explained her choice of watching the morning news programme on a commercial TV channel as an integral part of her routine on her days off. She wrote: 'Today is my day off. Like every day off, in the morning, I drink coffee and watch morning TV, usually *Good morning TVN*' (Pol-28, media diary on March 9, female, 49). Importantly, the consumption of public service TV news bulletins was often associated with particularly longstanding routines. For example, a Hungarian participant explained his preference for the pro-government public service TV channel M1 with reference to an enduring daily routine that remained unchanged for decades: 'Then I sit down, eat my breakfast, and watch TV. It has been like that for around two decades …. Always, always M1' (Hun-10, male, 75). Several other participants, especially from Hungary and Serbia, described their preferences for following the news bulletins on public broadcasting channels in similar terms, as an enduring routine or even 'tradition', which they occasionally traced back to their childhoods. The following quote from an interview with a Serbian participant, mentioning the public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) provides a case in point:

> And every night at 7:30p.m. I watch the news on RTS [laughs]. I've been doing this since I was born, it's sort of a tradition for me. I feel like it's a necessary part of our lives and our childhoods, and that's why we use it to keep ourselves informed. I don't think it's objective or better than the rest, but all in all, we do get the information that we need. (Srb-24, female, 26)

The above example is particularly interesting because it explicitly addresses the disjunction between habits and news quality and even presents it as part and parcel of more widely shared, collective news consumption habits. The participant notes that she continues to consume the RTS

news bulletin out of habit, even though she does not consider it objective or better than other sources. Furthermore, by using the deictic references 'we' and 'our', she frames this news habit as something that is shared by other Serbian citizens, constituting part of 'our lives and our childhoods'. Also worth noting is her final point about how, by consuming this news bulletin, 'we get the information that we need', which implies that the news provided by RTS is somehow useful despite its lack of objectivity.

Among other factors that contributed to the consumption of distrusted sources were contextual restrictions. These came in two main forms. On the one hand, several participants mentioned following specific news sources because of other household members or when visiting older relatives. In some cases, this meant following news associated with political or ideological orientations close to those of our participants. An example is provided by a 36-years-old Hungarian participant who listened to news on the oppositional radio channel when visiting her mother who shares her political views. She explained: 'Klubrádió plays some role because my mother also does not really support the current government and Klubrádió is always on in her kitchen. Even if I don't want to hear it, I do…' (Hun-22, female, 36). In other cases, however, this meant being forced to contend with news sources one disagrees with, as was the case, among others, with an 18-year-old Hungarian participant who 'sadly' had to watch the pro-government MTV while visiting his grandparents. (Hun-20, male, 18)

Another common category of contextual restrictions was associated with the workplace and with one's commute to work. Here, contextual limitations often overlapped with convenience of access. Most often, participants would mention listening to radio news while at work, or overhearing radio news or reading a free paper they picked up while commuting using public transport. In these cases, too, participants often noted that the choice of media was not necessarily to their liking, suggesting that they may have been forced to follow news they did not find particularly trustworthy. This was especially clear in Hungary where several participants expressed consternation at the free, pro-Fidesz partisan paper *Local*. The following quote from a 59-year-old woman is indicative of this wider pattern:

> Oh, I know! It's terrible … It's dreadful! I've read things in it like Sárközy is definitely homosexual … so it's terrible. I am ashamed of myself, but I sometimes take it for the sudoku…and it's great for heating. (Hun-12, female, 59).

In many cases, such instances of news consumption, shaped by contextual factors, arguably constitute another version of accidental news exposure, similar in kind to the more commonly researched accidental exposure on social media. This form of accidental news consumption is likewise shaped by one's social networks—family members, friends, or coworkers—who may not share one's ideological or political orientations. The case of readers of the pro-Fidesz paper *Local* in Hungary, however, reminds us that not all contextual restrictions are accidental, but can rather be intentionally manufactured by illiberal elites who, once in power, manipulate people's everyday media environment in ways that make the consumption of biased news almost inevitable, facilitating access to sources that are sympathetic to their causes. Whether happening in online or offline environments, such cases of news consumption provide yet another piece of the puzzle that helps explain why people may end up consuming media they do not trust.

The last notable factor influencing the consumption of news participants considered untrustworthy was the desire to get access to diverse views. Tellingly, this factor was evident only in three of the countries—Hungary, Poland, and Serbia—suggesting that the pursuit of diversity may be driven by the more advanced polarization of media landscapes in these three countries, and especially by the disappearance of impartial media capable of covering a diversity of perspectives. This is evident from participants' comments that demonstrated an awareness of diverse political and ideological views on current affairs in the public domain, while simultaneously recognizing that such diverse views could not be easily found in a single news source, thereby prompting them to consume multiple news sources. In Poland, for instance, several participants mentioned following both the pro-government public broadcaster TVP and the oppositional commercial broadcaster TVN, sometimes alongside other sources, as in the following example:

> I look at what they say on TVN and Polsat and on TVP1, but these are three extremely different viewpoints on the same events. I just watch all three just to see how they present these different outlooks. (Pol-08, female, 36)

It is important to note that the desire to obtain access to diverse perspectives was mentioned by participants from a range of political and ideological backgrounds. In Hungary, for instance, diversity was often mentioned by participants sympathetic to the government who felt the

need to turn to oppositional media to hear perspectives that were otherwise rarely presented in pro-government outlets. As one pro-government participant explained, he consumes a variety of oppositional media news sources, including both left-wing and extreme right-wing outlets:

> There are aspects that I read there so that I have a wider perspective. So, I do read left-wing and extreme right-wing sources sometimes, and I'd like to add that at times I get more precise, detailed news from these sources. (Hun-01, male, 47)

Several anti-government participants would likewise report following sources opposite to their own persuasions, as in the following excerpt from an interview with a participant who identifies herself as left-wing, but regularly reads right-wing news websites, such as *Magyar Hang* and *Heti Válasz* (also known as *Válasz Online*):

> I find the right-wing point of view interesting. I really didn't trust Szabolcs Szerető, I still don't completely do, but I am interested in … how should I say … The papers I read usually look at things from a left-wing perspective, I need someone who looks at them from a right-wing one. *Válasz Online* … they are excellent, excellent right-wing journalists. They are very good. Each new article is better than the previous one. (Hun-29, female, 79, rural)

The above quote clearly juxtaposes trust and news consumption, by explaining that the participant does not trust Szabolcs Szerető (a regular contributor to *Magyar Hang*) but is nonetheless interested in his views to acquaint herself with a different political perspective. This attitude echoes previous research (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003) that found that some people use specific news sources precisely *because* they distrust them and want to hear their side of the story regardless. This quote also indicates that following news from ideologically or politically diverse sources is not necessarily linked with a willingness to reconsider one's own positions. Rather, as some of our participants explained, such news habits were aimed at 'knowing the enemy' or 'knowing the other side' without questioning one's own opinions. When asked to explain why he consumed the oppositional news website *Index*, a Hungarian anti-government participant noted: 'Because it's good to check… what the other end, for example, thinks of the same topic, even if I don't agree with it, just to… see' (Hun-15, male, 38). Another conservative, pro-Fidesz

participant, who likewise consumed oppositional sources, was even more unequivocal in her explanation: 'Because you have to know what others … what our enemies think [laughs]' (Hun-14, female, 56). Although we should be wary of drawing conclusions about cross-country differences based on what is a very small sample, it is worth noting that such unequivocal answers that justified exposure to a diversity of views with reference to 'knowing the enemy' were particularly common among Hungarian pro-government participants. This pattern is consistent with the survey findings presented in the previous chapter, which showed that in Hungary (and to a somewhat lesser extent in Poland) respondents with open news repertoires—even those who consumed primarily liberal, anti-government sources—were rather illiberal in their views on both cultural and constitutional issues.

In sum, our qualitative findings confirm that trust is an important, but clearly not the only factor informing news consumption choices, and that a fuller understanding of people's news preferences requires us to pay attention to a range of other factors, including convenience of access, the force of habits, the impact of contextual incentives and restrictions imposed by family, workplace and related environments, as well as the desire to counteract perceived media bias by means of accessing a diverse range news sources. As we have seen through numerous examples, consuming media one does not find trustworthy can cut both ways: it can serve as a basis for establishing a more multifaceted, balanced view on current affairs, or alternatively to reinforce one's pre-existing opinions. In the following section, we build on these insights by taking a closer look at media trust itself to consider what it might mean to citizens of the four examined countries, and which criteria they might use when seeking to establish which media to trust.

4.3 Finding Trustworthy Information in an Untrustworthy Media Environment: Unpacking the Criteria of Trustworthiness

So far, we have proceeded under the assumption that the meaning of trustworthiness and the criteria used to establish it are self-evident. This is also common in existing research on media trust, which pays little attention to what people mean when saying they 'trust' the media. Even though several scales have been developed to measure media trust and related

concepts such as media credibility (see Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019), researchers rarely pay attention to how specific media qualities relate to media trust. The handful of studies that do examine these relationships offer mixed results, with some finding positive correlations between trust and quality perceptions, including accuracy, impartiality, fairness, seriousness, tonality and journalists' expertise, while others did not find any significant correlations (see Fawzi et al., 2021, p. 161). As we show in this section, our conversations with citizens from the four countries, especially those most affected by the rise of the illiberal public sphere, confirmed that the meanings of criteria used to establish media trustworthiness are far from uniform. Indeed, in some cases, the way people judged trustworthiness effectively led them to trust outlets that were untrustworthy.

Unpacking the link between media trust and perceived media independence is particularly revealing in this context. Media independence is central to the World Press Freedom Index, an annual ranking of countries produced by Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF, 2023) that is routinely used as an indicator of the state of media globally. Media independence also features prominently in public debates in the countries we focus on, and recent public opinion surveys conducted in these countries confirm that it is seen as important by most citizens (e.g. Committee for Editorial Independence, 2023). Yet, our analysis suggests that the way citizens understand media independence is not necessarily conducive to finding reliable sources of information.

At first sight, when looking at survey data on citizens' perceptions of the media in general, the relationship between media use, media trust and perceived independence brings few surprises. In all four countries, both perceived independence and frequency of use are significantly positively associated with trust—in all cases, statistical significance is $p < 0.01$—meaning that citizens are more likely to use the media they trust, and more likely to trust media if they perceive them as independent. However, once we break these patterns down by individual media brands (Figs. 4.3 and 4.4), the picture becomes more complicated. Although the general pattern still holds for most news brands in all four countries—that is, news brands that are perceived as more independent are more likely to be trusted—there are some clear exceptions. In all four countries, we found at least one prominent news brand that enjoys disproportionately high levels of public trust, despite being perceived as lacking in independence. Such exceptions are particularly pronounced in Serbia, where two major pro-government television channels—the public service channel RTS and

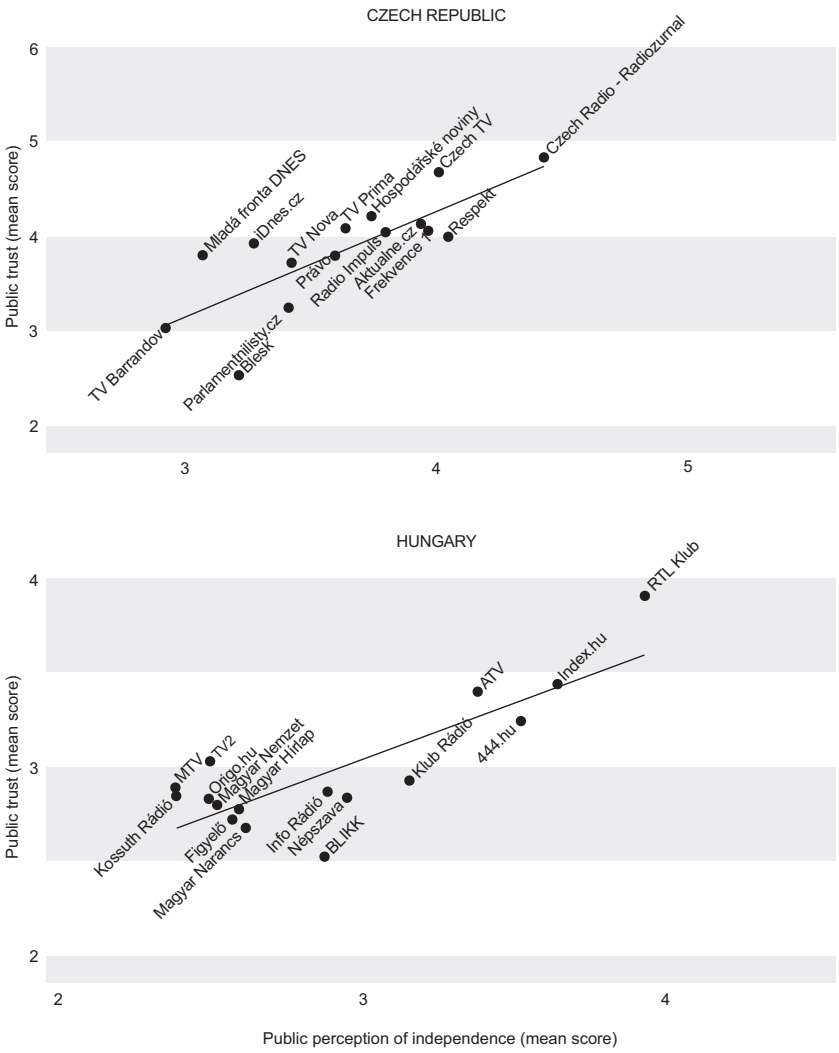

Fig. 4.3 Perceived independence and trust in news media brands (Czech Republic and Hungary)

the commercial channel Prva—were considered almost as trustworthy as the independent commercial channel N1 (although it is worth highlighting that none of these channels is trusted by most of the population). The presence of these outliers is also reflected in the overall strength of the correlation between perceived independence of individual brands and media trust, which is considerably weaker in Serbia than in the other three countries.

There are several possible explanations for these patterns, and specifically for why the correlation between perceived media independence and media trust might be weaker in Serbia. First, the results of recent media monitoring exercises suggest that public service media in Serbia, along with the commercial channel TV Prva, provide considerably more balanced electoral coverage than other commercial pro-government broadcasters, including TV Pink, Happy, and TV B92, and are considerably less likely to adopt a negative tone when reporting on opposition parties (FNF 2022: 12–13). Although such balanced, neutral reporting appears to be limited to the election period only, it may be sufficient to give a boost to public trust despite widely recognized lack of independence. This is particularly likely given the fact that Serbia experienced only very brief periods of liberalization, and that the illiberal public sphere is by now firmly established, meaning that citizens have become accustomed to an environment where media independence is in short supply, and where truly independent outlets are harder to access. In such a context, discriminating between more or less biased media coverage may well be essential to navigating the news environment, leading citizens to trust news sources that are firmly under government control, but have the relative advantage of providing somewhat less biased coverage than more openly partisan outlets. This interpretation is consistent with the findings of a qualitative study of media trust in Serbia, Macedonia and Croatia (Pješivac et al., 2016), which likewise found media distrust most prevalent in Serbia. The authors link this to the country's specific pattern of political development after the fall of communism that they see as conducive to a generalized distrust of political institutions including the media.

However, while citizens' adaptation to an illiberal public sphere can help explain the patterns observed in Serbia, understanding the relatively high trust in some of the government-controlled media in Hungary and, especially, Poland where the illiberal public sphere has a relatively shorter history and is less advanced than in Serbia, requires us to consider other possible factors. Particularly revealing in this context is the position of

public service media in three of the countries where public service outlets are under government control: Radio-television Serbia (RTS) and Radio Beograd in Serbia, MTV and Kossuth Radio in Hungary, and TVP and Polish Radio in Poland. In all cases, the correlation between perceived independence and trust is not linear, suggesting that there are significant numbers of citizens who continue to trust public service media even though they might acknowledge that they lack independence (Figs. 4.3 and 4.4). This suggests that public service media hold a special status in the trust-independence nexus, and that some citizens continue to trust them even when they undergo governmental capture and are integrated into the illiberal public sphere. Why might that be?

The key to answering this question lies in acknowledging that media independence might not mean the same thing to everyone. To start with, for some participants in Serbia and Hungary—notably those who claimed to trust public service media while recognizing its lack of independence—government influence was simply not considered problematic. On the contrary, it was the very reason that made them see public service media as trustworthy because it meant that they provided access to the 'official' perspective and represented the opinions of those in power. Several Hungarian and Serbian participants mentioned trusting public service channels precisely because they are under government control. For instance, participant Hun-30 (male, 38) explained: 'Well, given that it is government-owned news, if I'd rather hear something official, I will switch to MTV'. In a similar manner, a Serbian participant explained that she continued to trust Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) despite knowing it was biased, because of its association with the power of the state: 'RTS is state property, which means they are the biggest and strongest, so to say, so I trust what they say' (Srb-14, female, 42). The emphasis on power—'the biggest and the strongest'—and the reference to public service media providing 'official' views are particularly telling here and indicate that trust is not bestowed on sources that offer an impartial account, but rather on those that have the power to make their account of news look official and consequential. Ultimately, then, what guides these participants' news consumption choices and media trust for is not the desire to obtain an accurate account of current affairs, but rather the desire to get access to the official, state-endorsed view, whether it corresponds to reality or not.

Arguably, given the nature of the media and political environment in Serbia and Hungary, such an interpretation of trustworthiness can be considered, in a sense, pragmatic (cf. Schwarzenegger, 2020). Given that the

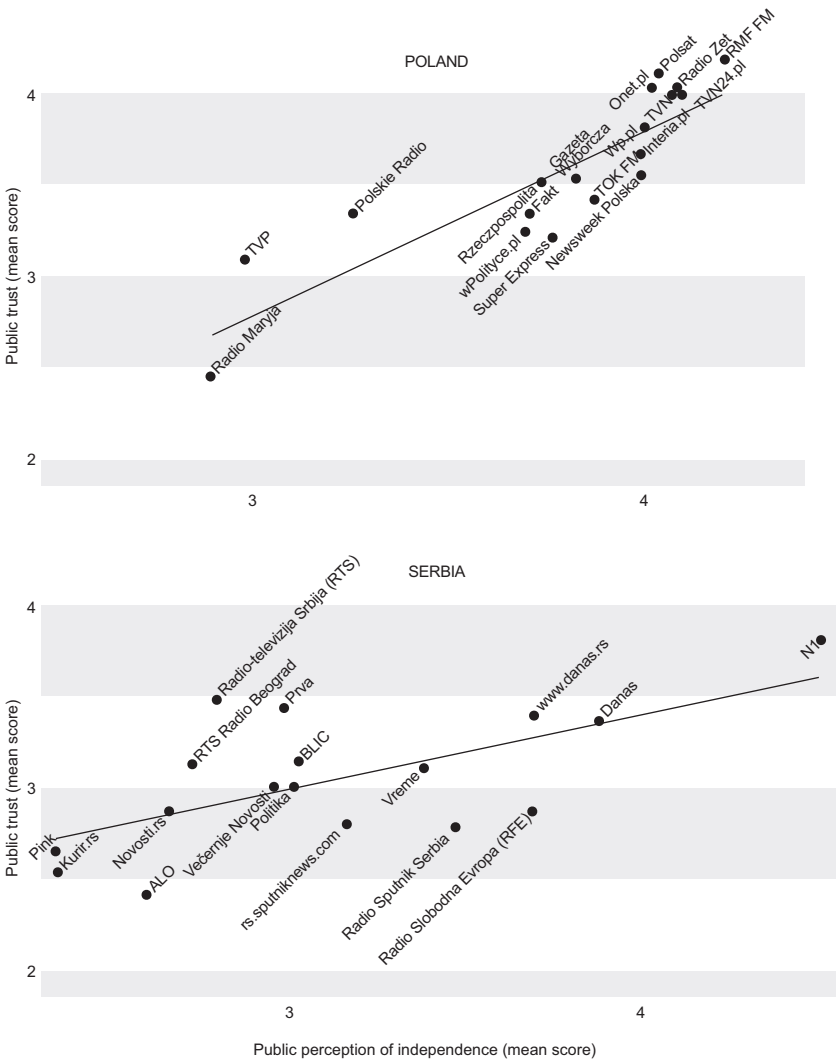

Fig. 4.4 Perceived independence and trust in news media brands (Poland and Serbia)

government holds considerable power to set the limits of what can be aired in public and to define what counts as 'official' truth, government-controlled outlets provide trustworthy sources of official narratives. Even though these narratives themselves are not true, familiarizing oneself with them is important, because it helps one navigate the limits of what is publicly desirable. Such reasoning was occasionally present also among participants who were clearly critical of government-controlled outlets, but nonetheless found it important to follow them. The following quote from an interview with one of our Serbian participants offers a case in point. This participant was clearly annoyed by the pro-government tone of many Serbian outlets, and the primacy given to President Vučić's view, yet she insisted that she had to keep listening to such coverage 'to be informed':

> When I see all those other portals, social media and newspapers, I feel like they see me as a… well, not a sheep, but an animal without reason, who is there to blindly follow in their lead. It makes me sick. Even in the 90s, when I was younger, it wasn't like that. Sometimes, when I listen to what Vučić has to say, I keep swearing all around the house, as if I'm arguing with my TV. But it makes me so mad that I can't help it. And I still keep listening because I have to be informed, and sometimes I even consider it a pastime. I mean, listening to that man's comments and his lies… (Srb-19, female, 62)

While instances such as the ones mentioned above—where media were seen as trustworthy because they were under government control—were rather rare, several other participants judged media trustworthiness based on criteria that likewise diverged from established normative and epistemological assumptions associated with trustworthy information sources. Even though participants referred to familiar values—such as independence, impartiality, balance, or objectivity—their interpretation of these terms could vary widely. The different interpretations of independence as a basis of trust provide a particularly telling example. On the one hand, some participants interpreted independence in terms of independence from the state. For instance, some of the liberal, anti-government participants in Hungary explained that they trusted sources such as the news websites *Index* and *444.hu*, or the free-to-air TV channel RTL Klub, or weekly magazines *Heti Világgzdság* (*HVG*) and *Magyar Narancs* because they believed they were independent from the government. Following this reasoning, lack of independence was seen as a reason for distrust. For instance, one of the Serbian participants (Srb-27, female, 60+) explained

that she avoids watching pro-government TV channels—including commercial channels Pink, Happy and B92, as well as the public service channel broadcaster—because they are all biased in favour of President Vučić and his allies.

However, for some of the other participants, independence from the government was not sufficient. If a news outlet was privately owned, especially if it had foreign owners, it was considered problematic, too. For instance, as one of the Polish participants explained, both the public broadcaster TVP and the major commercial broadcaster TVN lack in independence, albeit in different ways: 'TVP operates in accordance with what the government wants, because the government provides the money. TVN is influenced by foreign capital, following the money trail' (Pol-03, male, 34). As a result, he felt that they were both equally biased and untrustworthy, offering 'competing realities', while truth was 'somewhere in the middle'. Indeed, our interviews and diaries indicate that 'independence' was so malleable that it could be applied to far-right outlets associated with extreme political movements and parties. This was the case with one of our Hungarian participants, who thought that the far-right news portal *KurucInfo* was independent and therefore trustworthy. Although he acknowledged its association with the far-right Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk), he clearly felt that independence from other political parties, as well as from foreign influence, was considerably more important. He claimed: 'This [*KurucInfo*] is the one, that … can be called independent … Obviously not of Mi Hazánk but of the rest, it definitely is … It is independent of political parties and foreign influence' (Hun-15, male, 38).

Finally, a handful of participants interpreted independence as independence from news media and from editorial control. This argument was used to justify trust in information found on social media, which were seen as uniquely suited to enabling unmediated access to reality and, therefore, authentic information on public affairs. For instance, a Czech participant explained that he trusts information found on Facebook accounts of politicians and parties, because this gives him fist-hand access to their tweets and texts, rather than relying on a second-hand account provided by news media: 'So when I see it directly on their accounts, I have an immediate, first-hand account. I don't get it from somebody else who could adjust the information in a way' (Cze-06, male, 19). A Polish participant justified his preference for YouTube as a source of information using a very similar argument:

> Yes, because YouTube offers you the most credible information, and it's not censored in any way unless the content is inappropriate in some way, while a website has an administrator and the information you can find there depends on them. (Pol-16, male, 34)

These perceptions echo existing research on the appeal of social media, which often notes the importance of perceptions of social media as vehicles of unmediated, authentic reality (Heřmanová et al., 2021). Moreover, they align with the findings of existing qualitative research on media trust, which likewise reveal that for a notable minority who perceive social media as trustworthy, this is typically associated either with the assumption that social media offer access to a broad range of sources or views or with their presumed authenticity (Newman & Fletcher, 2017).

The divergent interpretations of media independence evident from our qualitative data puts the quantitative association between media trust and perceived media independence in a different light and suggests that relying on perceived independence as a basis of trust may on occasion lead citizens to untrustworthy sources. This leads to the question of whether other criteria of trustworthiness used by citizens may be equally problematic. Impartiality, often discussed in conjunction with objectivity, was another indicator of trustworthiness frequently mentioned by participants. In most cases, impartiality and objectivity were interpreted in ways consistent with standard understandings of media trustworthiness and associated either with Czech public service media or with some of the commercial, oppositional outlets in the other three countries—that is, sources that are indeed most trustworthy.

However, a small number of Serbian participants, along with one Hungarian participant, associated impartiality and objectivity with news sources that did not deserve to be trusted, namely, state-controlled Russian outlets. Although at least some of the participants acknowledged the pro-Russian slant of such media, they believed that the coverage of domestic politics was considerably more impartial, neutral, or objective than coverage of domestic affairs provided in domestic media. A Serbian participant who found the Russian news website Sputnik trustworthy was not even aware of Russian ownership, and insisted that in contrast to some of domestic media, Sputnik's reporting is more factual, free from opinion, and allowed him to make up his own mind:

> They're objective. Now, someone might ask if it is even possible to be objective today … Some will say, well, Vučić or Vučić's brother is the owner, so how can it be objective. But I don't know who the owner is, I'm reading what they have written. So, there was never a moment where I saw written in some of their political articles: 'I like this one, vote for him, he is the best for us'. There is nowhere, never a personal conclusion […] In all other media—*Blic*, *Kurir*—the journalist is the one who concludes for me whether someone is good or bad. And here [on Sputnik), in general, I hear what is happening today, what kind of events happened, was it some sort of a meeting […] and there is no sign of that, that conclusion, where I am being guided by the journalist, indirectly, to vote or to like somebody. I am told what happened, who, what, why, and goodbye. 'Now, you think for yourself.' (Srb-03, male, 46)

Another Serbian participant who found Sputnik particularly trustworthy was aware of its pro-Russian bias, but nonetheless compared it rather favourably to domestic media, arguing that political influence and bias are less obvious:

> Of course, they are not objective, they are media and they are paid to do what they do, so they certainly cannot be objective. They follow a carrot on a stick and are told what to write. Of course they do it, but I think it is less visible with them [Sputnik], compared to *Informer*. (Srb-10, female, 52)

In a similar way, a participant of Russian origins from Hungary claimed that the TV channel *Russia 1* was 'neutral, meaning neither left-wing nor right-wing, and publishing neutral news' (Hun-02, female, 44).

A common trait shared by all these responses was profound disappointment with mainstream media, which was particularly palpable in Serbia, where most participants found media in general rather untrustworthy and often felt that bias plagued not only pro-government but also oppositional sources. Yet again, we see how a climate of distrust of mainstream media, while encouraging citizens to be critical and look for alternative sources, could ultimately lead them to rely on untrustworthy news outlets.

Finally, although most participants kept referring to familiar criteria of trustworthiness—such as independence, impartiality, and objectivity—some abandoned those criteria altogether and instead explained they trusted specific news sources because they shared their political or ideological views. Such interpretations of trustworthiness were found among participants across the political spectrum, although they were somewhat

more common among more illiberal participants. For instance, in Hungary, a right-wing government supporter used similar arguments to explain her preference for the right-wing TV channel Hír TV: 'Of course they say that Hír TV is biased, it is true that it is a right-wing channel but since I share a similar way of thinking… [laughs] this is what I want to listen to' (Hun-14, female, 56). In Poland, a participant who voted for the Law and Justice (PiS) party explained her belief in the credibility of the public broadcaster with direct reference to its alignment with her political preferences—'Because it's the most credible for me. It's a broadcaster in the hands of PiS, and I'm a PiS supporter' (Pol-13, female, 38). However, similar arguments were occasionally found also among more liberal participants. For instance, an anti-government participant from Hungary explained his preference for the TV channel RTL Klub by recalling that, a few years prior, 'they [had] criticized Orbán government quite heavily' and as a result, she 'started to like them more' (Hun-22, female, 36). A similar argument was used by a Serbian participant who explained that she prefers to follow oppositional media such as the TV channel N1, the daily Danas, or the weekly magazine *Vreme*, 'because what they say and show is similar to my own thoughts and opinions; similar to my perception of the world and events' (Srb-19, female, 62) even though she also acknowledged that they might not be always right.

In cases like these, much as with some of our Serbian and Hungarian participants who trust public service media because they are controlled by the government, the desire to obtain an accurate, impartial account of current affairs is no longer the central driver of trust. Rather, preference is given to those news sources that can be trusted to provide a particular version of truth—either one that is aligned with one's personal politics and ideological preferences, or one that is consistent with official views. It is telling that such an approach to trustworthiness, in which trust becomes fully detached from the search for truth, was found exclusively in Hungary, Poland and Serbia, and that it was most common in Hungary and Serbia. These were also the only two countries where some participants trusted public service media precisely because they were subjected to government control. Even though we should be mindful of the qualitative nature of the investigation, the fact that these cross-country differences align with different stages of the illiberal public sphere in the four countries suggest that the shifts in the normative and epistemological foundations of media trust outlined above may well be indicative of wider changes in news cultures driven by the rise in illiberalism.

4.4 Conclusions

The findings presented in this chapter help us further develop our arguments about the illiberal public sphere and its impact on news consumption, while also bringing important contributions to wider debates on news consumption and media trust. With regard to the dynamics of the illiberal public sphere, the findings suggest that the different stages of the illiberal public sphere (outlined in Chap. 2) go hand in hand not only with growing polarization of media landscapes, audience attitudes, and news repertoires (as shown in Chap. 3), but also trigger fundamental shifts in media trust. These comprise a decline in levels of generalized media trust, consistent with existing findings on links between media trust and polarization (see Hanitzsch et al., 2018), but also changes in the relationship between media trust and media use, and in the normative and epistemological foundations of criteria people use to evaluate trustworthiness.

More specifically, we showed that in an environment where the illiberal public sphere becomes increasingly dominant, and where the majority of media outlets become objectively untrustworthy, citizens are forced to adopt a pragmatic approach to media trust (Schwarzenegger, 2020; Pasitselska, 2022) and use news sources even though they do not find them entirely credible. This is attributable to a combination of factors, ranging from convenience of access and force of habit, to the desire to gain access to a diversity of views, which motivates some citizens to counteract the one-sided coverage found in mainstream media by consulting multiple, ideologically and political diverse sources. Furthermore, we also showed that, in such an environment, the meanings of criteria used to assess trustworthiness can shift considerably. First, even though they frequently referred to recognizable criteria of trustworthiness (i.e. independence, impartiality, neutrality), several of our participants interpreted these criteria in ways that are inconsistent with existing normative models of democratic citizenship and news consumption and led them to trust sources that were objectively untrustworthy. Second, in some cases, the criteria of trustworthiness themselves shifted entirely, with audiences no longer trusting sources because they were believed to provide a reasonably impartial, truthful account of reality, but rather because they offered access to a particular version of that reality—either one consistent with one's ideological or political preferences, or one aligned with official views, promoted by those in power.

Beyond implications for our theory of the illiberal public sphere, these findings also contribute to existing work on media use in heavily polarized and illiberal environments and to wider debates on media trust and news consumption. On a methodological level, the research presented in this chapter confirms the benefits of distinguishing between different levels of media trust, including not just generalized media trust, but also trust in individual news brands and different types of media (cf. Strömbäck et al., 2020; Fawzi et al., 2021). Furthermore, our mixed methods approach also demonstrates the advantages of complementing the more commonly used quantitative methods of examining media trust with qualitative methods (cf. Garusi & Splendore, 2023), showing how such methods can help us better understand the interaction between media trust and other factors influencing news consumption, as well as appreciate the multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings attached to media trust by citizens. The latter are particularly important and should lead us to question the comparability of existing quantitative indicators of media trust globally. If it is the case that people can interpret media trust and assess the trustworthiness of the media in divergent ways, then asking survey questions about general levels of media trust is bound to be of limited value, at least when comparing cases where the normative and epistemological underpinnings of media trust are likely to differ.

Empirically, our findings offer further evidence of the disjunction between media trust and news consumption and contribute to existing work that seeks to explain why people occasionally follow media they distrust (Swart & Broersma, 2021; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005), highlighting the importance of convenience, habit, contextual restrictions, and desire for exposure to a diversity of views. Most of these factors are familiar from existing work that challenges the purely instrumental interpretation of news consumption and emphasizes the importance of other personal and social needs, including diversion and entertainment (Blumler, 1979; Katz et al., 1973), the enduring impact of habits and routines (Rubin, 1984), and the impact of everyday life and its associated networks and patterns (Ytre-Arne, 2023). However, our work draws attention to how these factors can combine to contribute to exposure to counter-attitudinal views and media one distrusts. In addition, we also highlight the desire for accessing a diversity of views, which may be of particular importance in more heavily polarized communication environments where the illiberal public sphere is more advanced.

In relation to existing research on news consumption in heavily polarized and illiberal environments, the material presented here offers further evidence of the 'paradox of (dis)belief' (Szostek, 2017; Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2021; Alyukov, 2023), that is, the tendency of (some) citizens in such environments to distrust and avoid propagandistic outlets while ultimately still believing propagandistic messages. It also further underscores the need to question common assumptions about the beneficial impact of consuming news from a diverse range of sources. Echoing Szostek's (2017) conclusions emerging from her investigation of the engagement with conflicting narratives of the war among Ukrainian audiences, our evidence suggests that exposure to diversity of views is not necessarily normatively beneficial. Rather, it can potentially lead to the reinforcement of existing views, thereby further deepening polarization.

Finally, our findings have implications for how media trust is theorized and judged from a normative perspective. The existence of divergent normative and epistemological foundations of media trust and criteria of trustworthiness suggests that media trust is not always unambiguously positive, contrary to what much writing in the field assumes. Rather, its normative benefits vary with context. In an environment where the media are relatively independent, professional, and able to provide trustworthy information, high levels of media trust are a welcome sign and an indicator of a well-functioning civic culture and democratic environment. In contrast, where mainstream media are unable to function independently and act largely as amplifiers of official narratives, high levels of media trust may indicate the exact opposite—namely, that the media no longer serve democratic ends, but are rather seen as trustworthy sources of official, government-sanctioned views. As we have shown, this kind of interpretation of media trustworthiness is already present among some of our Serbian and Hungarian participants, suggesting that, in these two countries, some citizens have come to accept that to make informed decisions, they need to prioritize obtaining up-to-date information from official outlets, regardless of whether it corresponds to reality. In their view, this requires trusting mainstream media that are most clearly associated with the government in power, seen as providing the most reliable and up-to-date access to official narratives.

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CHAPTER 5

Mainstreaming Illiberalism: The Rise of Immigration and LGBTQ+ Rights as Polarizing Issues

In September 2023, political leaders, NGO representatives, journalists, religious authorities and other opinion leaders from over twenty countries gathered in Budapest for a biennial Demographic Summit. Hosted by the Hungarian government since 2015, the summit provides a forum for like-minded public figures committed to 'family values' and concerned about the demographic prospects of Western societies. Over the years, it has served as a platform for prominent illiberal politicians from across Europe, Northern America, Australia and beyond, including Serbian and Bulgarian Presidents Aleksandar Vučić and Rumen Radev, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, former Czech and Slovenian Prime Ministers Andrej Babiš and Janez Janša, former US Vice-President Mike Pence, and former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, among many others (Antoni et al., 2021, November 24). While different iterations of the summit have approached demographic issues from different vantage points, ranging from security to sustainability, they have all been underpinned by a commitment to ultra-conservative values and by a conviction that such values are under attack by 'liberal global elites' whose support for immigration, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ rights is seen as a threat to the conservative values of family, nation, and Western civilization. These fears often tap into conspiracy theories about 'population replacement' or 'demographic

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jihad', which became increasingly common among far-right circles in recent years and suggest that the white and Christian populations of Europe are being purposefully 'replaced' by non-whites and Muslims (Bracke & Hernandez Aguilar, 2020). During each of the summits, Hungary skilfully used the opportunity to promote its family-friendly policies, introduced in 2010 to combat the country's declining birth rate, presenting them as a 'reference point' for the international implementation of similar conservative policies (Budapest Demographic Summit, 2021).

In his 2023 opening speech, Prime Minister Orbán called for a 'change in the political course' in Europe, arguing that 'family-friendly, conservative powers' should take over in as many European countries as possible' (Euronews, 2023, September 14). Italian Prime Minister Meloni echoed his arguments, emphasizing that 'a great battle is needed to defend families, God, and all things that build our civilization'. In a manner characteristic of illiberal rhetoric across the European continent, Meloni argued that immigration 'is not the solution to the continent's demographic crisis', and instead pledged to boost Italy's birth rates through family-friendly policies modelled on Hungarian legislation (Pascale, 2023, September 15; Reuters, 2023, September 14). The previous summit, held in 2021, charted a similar ideological terrain, with participants railing against 'massive and uncontrolled immigration', as well as against environmentalist concerns over population growth, arguing that, as the former Czech Prime Minister Babiš put it, 'the only truly sustainable solution to Europe's extinction is to increase the birth rate of the indigenous population' (Reuters, 2021, September 23). Each of the guests used the event to address specific concerns that resonated with their own domestic debates. Orbán attacked the 'gender lobby', while Babiš took the opportunity to criticize the EU for supposedly allowing 'illegal immigration'. Vučić presented demography as 'a question of survival' for Serbia and complained about the continuing appeal of 'liberal political Marxism' in his country, while Pence criticized 'liberal global elites' for thinking that the traditional family is an outdated concept (Antoni et al., 2021, November 24).

The summit encapsulates the malleable ideological nature of illiberalism, which can take a variety of forms depending on which of the 'liberal scripts' or 'metanarratives' (Laruelle, 2022, pp. 312–313) it seeks to challenge. As argued in Chap. 2, all manifestations of illiberalism share a hostility to liberalism, and pursue a vision of society that is governed by majority rule and underpinned by ethno-nationalist ideas and traditional

cultural hierarchies. Yet, this shared vision allows for significant variation across different socio-political contexts. Due to this, illiberalism is best seen as a composite 'repertoire' of ideological narratives, values, attitudes, and governance practices that target a wide range of political, economic, and cultural issues—from immigration, LGBTQ+ rights and abortion to economic (neo)liberalism and the geopolitical dominance of 'the West'. As the interventions of political leaders present at the Budapest Demographic Summit illustrate, this repertoire can be adopted selectively to suit diverse national political environments and priorities, while nonetheless providing a basis for transnational alliances among likeminded politicians and public figures globally. The varieties of illiberalism found in different countries can therefore foreground different polarizing issues, and the selection of these issues can also change over time. Despite this diversity, the shared opposition to liberalism provides grounds for transnational ties and cross-border learning, with illiberal leaders often mimicking each other's rhetoric and copying policy and regulatory solutions.

In this chapter, we focus on two polarizing issues—immigration and LGBTQ+ rights[1]—that are central to understanding the mainstreaming of illiberalism in Eastern Europe and globally. Additionally, this focus helps us illustrate the malleable nature of illiberal rhetoric and the extent to which it varies across countries and changes over time. The rise of immigration and LGBTQ+ rights as key polarizing issues was a complex process that involved many actors and was facilitated by several structural factors and long-term developments that exceed the scope of this research. We focus instead on the mainstreaming of hostile rhetoric and attitudes, the key actors involved in it—primarily illiberal politicians, but also church leaders and other opinion leaders—and the extent to which it was either fostered or hindered by the media. We start by providing an overview of public attitudes on the two issues in late 2019 and early 2020, and then trace the key moments at which immigration and LGBTQ+ rights became central to political campaigning and public debate in each of the four countries since the early 2000s. In the second part of the chapter, we zoom in on the role that the media played in the mainstreaming process, paying particular attention to public service media and digital news

[1] In this chapter and elsewhere in this book, the LGBTQ+ acronym is used for consistency, except when presenting our own survey data, which focuses only on same-sex relationships, and when quoting from interview data, where we retain acronyms used by participants (e.g. LGBT).

channels. Building on arguments about the stages of the illiberal public sphere presented in Chap. 2, we seek to establish whether and how their respective roles differ depending on how advanced the illiberal public sphere is in a particular country, at a given point in time.

5.1 Mainstreaming Hostility to Immigration and LGBTQ+ Rights in Eastern Europe

Existing global comparisons rank Eastern European countries among the lowest in the world on migrant acceptance (e.g. Esipova et al., 2020, September 23) and show them to be rather intolerant of homosexuality (Poushter & Kent, 2020, p. 7). It may be tempting to see this as another confirmation of weaker democratic culture in the region, or as evidence of legacies of authoritarianism rooted in the region's communist past. Yet, such an interpretation glosses over the fact that hostility to immigration and opposition to LGBTQ+ rights have intensified only in recent years. Across Eastern Europe, immigration was virtually a non-issue in political terms until well into the twenty-first century. Even though many countries have long had large immigrant communities and ethnic minorities, most of them came from other Eastern European countries and rarely became a matter of political contestation (cf. Wondreys, 2021). Many countries in the region also have a reasonably long history of accommodating sexual diversity, having decriminalized homosexuality at the same time or even earlier than many Western European countries—Poland in 1932, Czech Republic in 1961 and Hungary in 1962 (Mignot, 2022). Even though the lack of consolidated democratic culture and remnants of the authoritarian past may have facilitated the recent rise in homophobia and anti-immigrant racism, these developments have largely been encouraged by illiberal politicians who stoked up fears of immigration and same-sex rights as part of their political campaigns.

In the rest of this section, we provide an overview of key moments at which immigration and LGBTQ+ rights became central to political campaigning and public debate in each of the four countries we examine. However, it is first useful to provide a general overview of public attitudes to immigration and LGBTQ+ in the four countries. To do so, we draw on our population survey, conducted in late 2019 and early 2020, in which we asked respondents about their perceptions of immigration, their support for same-sex marriage and adoption, as well as their attitudes towards

immigrant, gay and lesbian people as neighbours.[2] Our data reveals considerable cross-country variation in levels of negative attitudes to these issues (Fig. 5.1). Although immigration is perceived as a threat by well over half of all respondents in all four countries, percentages range from just over half of the population (54.4%) in Poland, to well over two-thirds (72.8%) in the Czech Republic. Levels of opposition to LGBTQ+ rights vary even more, with 30% and 35.1% of the sample opposed to same-sex marriage and same-sex adoption in the Czech Republic, compared with 74.9% and 82.5% in Serbia.

The countries' profiles also show that the different dimensions of illiberalism can move independently from one another—that is, high levels of opposition to immigration do not necessarily go hand in hand with high levels of prejudice against same-sex relationships. The attitudinal profile of the Czech Republic is particularly remarkable in this respect. The country ranks highest on negative attitudes towards immigration, with 72.8% of respondents seeing immigration as a threat and 57.7% being uncomfortable with having immigrants as neighbours. Conversely, it ranks as the most liberal when it comes to attitudes towards same-sex relationships and rights, with 30% of respondents disagreeing with same-sex marriage and 35.1% with same-sex adoption, and 14% being uncomfortable with having gay and lesbian neighbours. In Hungary, levels of hostility to immigration are also on average higher than levels of hostility to same-sex rights and neighbours, although attitudes on the two issues are not as far apart as in the Czech Republic, with rejection of same-sex marriage (45.7%), same-sex adoption (48.5%) and immigrants as neighbours (44.1%) all ranking rather close.

[2] Perceptions of immigration were measured using an Index of anti-immigrant attitudes (7-point scale; positive 1.0–3.9, neutral 4.0; negative 4.1–7.0), which was based on the extent of agreement with the following three statements: (1) 'immigrants abuse the welfare system', (2) 'immigrants are a threat to our culture', and (3) 'immigrants cause a rise in criminality'. Attitudes to same-sex marriage and adoption were measured based on cumulative percentage of negative responses to the questions 'Some countries have adopted laws that make it possible for same-sex couples to get married. Do you think same-sex couples should have a right to get married in [YOUR COUNTRY] too?', and 'In some countries, same-sex couples have a right to adopt children. Do you think this should be possible for same-sex couples in [YOUR COUNTRY] too?', on 7-point Likert scale. Finally, attitudes to immigrants as well as gay and lesbian people as neighbours were measured based on cumulative percentage of negative responses to the question 'Would you mind having any of the following groups of people as your neighbours?' (Option: immigrants; gays and lesbians), on a 7-point Likert scale (1—would not mind at all; 7—would mind a lot).

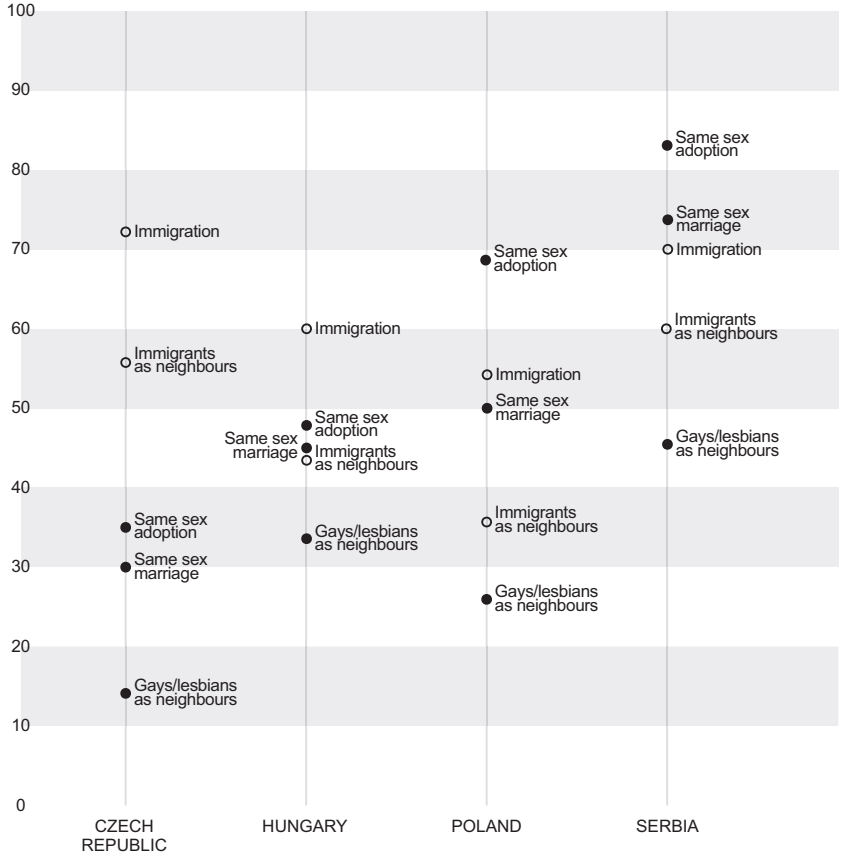

Fig. 5.1 Prevalence of negative attitudes to immigration and same-sex relationships

In Poland and Serbia, it is even more difficult to establish which of the two sets of issues is met with greater public hostility. In Poland, same-sex rights appear more controversial than immigration on average, but this is largely a result of particularly negative attitudes to same-sex adoption, which is opposed by well over two-thirds (69.4%) of the respondents, while levels of opposition to same-sex marriage (50.7%) are similar to levels of negative attitudes to immigration (54.4%). Attitudes to neighbours add further complexity to this picture, revealing that Polish respondents

are more uncomfortable with immigrants as neighbours (36.5%) than with gay and lesbian people as neighbours (27.6%). In Serbia, a similarly complex picture emerges, although attitudes to both issues are considerably more negative than in Poland. At first sight, same-sex relationships are met with greater hostility. While immigration is seen as a threat by 70.4% of respondents, an even greater proportion is opposed to same-sex marriage (74.9%) and same-sex adoption (82.5%). However, just as Polish respondents, Serbians respondents are considerably less comfortable with immigrants as neighbours (60.2%) than they are with gay and lesbian people as neighbours (46.7%).

In the paragraphs that follow we trace some of the key socio-political shifts that have given rise to such attitudes, focusing on key moments when immigration and LGBTQ+ rights became central issues in political rhetoric in each of the countries. Where available, we also note existing research on shifts in public opinion and the role of the media, a subject that we examine more systematically later in the chapter.

5.1.1 The 2015 Refugee Crisis as a Turning Point

The 2015 refugee crisis was a turning point in public attitudes towards immigration across Eastern Europe. In 2015, the leaders of the Visegrád Group—Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia—rejected the proposal to implement a 'quota system' to distribute asylum seekers from war-torn Syria more equally among EU members. The jihadist attacks in Brussels and Paris in 2015 and 2016 provided further arsenal for anti-immigrant fearmongering, offering a pretext for linking immigration with the Islamic threat. In all four Visegrád countries, elite opposition to EU immigration quotas and Islamophobic reactions to terrorist attacks played a central role in political communication, helping to consolidate the popularity of right-wing political leaders or even facilitating their rise to power. This was paralleled by notable shifts in public opinion. In Poland, almost three quarters (72%) of the population agreed that the country should accept refugees from war-torn countries in May 2015, yet this proportion dropped to just one third (33%) by April 2016 (Hargrave et al., 2023, p. 18). In the Czech Republic, less than one-fifth (19%) of respondents believed immigration to be a threat in 2006, compared with almost two-thirds (65%) in 2015 (Wondreys, 2021, p. 728).

As with many other aspects of the illiberal turn, Hungary made the first move and provided a template for others to follow. In January 2015,

immediately after the terrorist attack on the office of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, Orbán gave an interview to the Hungarian public broadcaster in which he put forward the key arguments that would continue to dominate the debate on immigration for years to come. He called for a 'more open and honest' discussion about immigration, arguing that economic immigration 'brings trouble and danger to the European man' and blaming terrorist attacks squarely on Muslim immigrants. He went on to promise that his government '[would] never allow Hungary to become a target country for immigrants', because Hungarians 'do not want to see significantly sized minorities with different cultural characteristics and backgrounds among [them]' (quoted in Melegh, 2016, p. 88). The launch of a National Consultation on 'illegal immigration and terrorism' between April and July 2015, accompanied by a nation-wide billboard campaign and ample promotion of anti-immigrant opinions through public service media, further contributed to the framing of immigration as a cultural and security threat (Kiss, 2016, pp. 48–49). As with several other consultations of this kind organized by Orbán's government, suggestive questions were included, designed to mobilize the right-wing electorate and elicit public support for problematic legislative measures (Bocskor, 2018, p. 552). Apart from framing immigration as a major threat against which 'Hungary should defend itself' and warning citizens about bogus asylum seekers (Kiss, 2016, p. 46), the consultation also drew a sharp contrast between the Hungarian government and the EU, with the latter accused of being too lenient and even partly responsible for terrorist attacks (Bocskor, 2018).

The consultation and associated campaign attracted significant criticism both domestically and internationally. The European Parliament released a joint motion that highlighted its misleading and biased content, and a Hungarian organization launched a satirical counter-campaign using billboards (Kiss, 2016, pp. 50–51). However, as shown by the analysis of domestic coverage at the time, these criticisms had limited capacity to counteract the negative framing of immigration popularized by the government, as even critical outlets fell into the trap of focusing on the 'war of billboards' while unwittingly reproducing negative representations of immigrants through visual and other means (Kiss, 2016, pp. 62–66). Ultimately, even though only 13% of Hungarians responded to the consultation (Bocskor, 2018, p. 564), the government used the result as evidence of overwhelming public support for more stringent measures,

implementing stricter legislation against irregular border crossings and constructing a barbed-wire border fence along the border with Serbia.

In contrast to Hungary, where the anti-immigration campaign served to consolidate the positions of illiberal political actors who were already in power and offered a pretext for further illiberal measures, the intensification of anti-immigration rhetoric in Poland played an important role in bringing about the illiberal takeover. Although largely missing from public debate prior to this point, immigration became a key topic in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in October 2015, when the country's main illiberal player, the Law and Justice party, skilfully deployed various political communication channels to promote anti-immigrant views (Krzyzanowski, 2018). Having observed the Hungarian campaign and sensed the galvanizing potential of anti-immigrant rhetoric during the joint rejection of EU proposals for mandatory immigration quotas at the Visegrád summit in Prague in early September, the Law and Justice party leaders made anti-immigrant rhetoric central to their campaign strategy. The Party Chairman Jarosław Kaczyński set the tone in a speech delivered on September 16, 2015, in which he linked immigration to terrorism, citing vague and untrue examples of 'Sharia law' being introduced in parts of Sweden, Italy, France and Germany, and suggesting that something similar might happen to Poland (Krzyzanowska & Krzyzanowski, 2018, p. 615). Echoing Orbán's rhetoric, he then went on to draw a distinction between economic migrants, who were supposedly a drain on public resources and a threat to the local population, and genuine refugees 'who are really fleeing the war' and therefore deserve to be helped (cited in Krzyzanowski, 2018, p. 87). Kaczyński also blamed Germany for attracting economic migrants, and approvingly referred to Orbán's arguments about economic migrants being 'Germany's problem', confirming once again the extent to which anti-immigrant rhetoric in Poland was inspired by the Hungarian campaign earlier that year.

In the weeks that followed, Kaczyński and other Law and Justice politicians repeatedly voiced concerns about immigration, often blaming the current government for caving into EU demands and exposing Poland to unprecedented threats. In a widely circulated YouTube video, Antoni Macierewicz, then deputy chairman of Law and Justice, reiterated warnings about the immigrant threat and used outlandish claims, arguing that Poland is in danger of being 'flooded' by immigrants 'who openly say they will be combating Polish civilization and culture and also the European security' (cited in Krzyzanowski, 2018, p. 88). The Polish Catholic Church

contributed to fearmongering as well, with many of its media channels and leading figures playing into Islamophobic rhetoric by emphasizing the centrality of Catholicism to Polish national identity (Kratofil & Motak, 2018). This rhetoric drew from a deep-seated belief in Poland as the bulwark of Christianity and presented immigration as a threat to Polish identity and culture (Kratofil & Motak, 2018). Monthly public opinion polls conducted at the time showed that this campaign went hand in hand with a shift in public attitudes. Hostility to immigration increased particularly sharply between October and December 2015, a period that coincided with Poland's parliamentary election campaign and the November terrorist attacks in Paris (Hargrave et al., 2023, p. 18). However, it is important to add that Poland saw a marked softening of public attitudes soon after the refugee crisis (Esipova et al., 2020, September 23), as opposed to Hungary and the Czech Republic where anti-immigrant prejudice remained high (cf. Globsec, 2020). These developments also explain the patterns found in our own data, which likewise reveal Poland to be the most open to immigration among the four countries.

In the Czech Republic, too, the refugee crisis of 2015 served as a catalyst for elite-led fearmongering which brought immigration to the top of the public agenda (Wondreys, 2021, p. 736). The Czech President at the time, Miloš Zeman, was the key propagator of anti-immigrant rhetoric, expressing increasingly xenophobic and Islamophobic views. Like Orbán and Kaczyński, he linked immigration with Islamic terrorism and claimed that by accepting immigrants Europe was helping the expansion of the influence of the Islamic State. He warned of irreconcilable cultural differences that would make it 'practically impossible' for Muslims to integrate and argued that refugees are in fact economic migrants who are merely 'posing' as refugees (Gigitashvili & Sidło, 2019, January 07, pp. 2–3). In an effort to mobilize public opinion, Zeman also lent support to far-right activists and movements. In November 2015, he attended an anti-Islam rally organized in Prague, during which he suggested that Muslim culture is not compatible with European values, and expressed doubts over the true motivations of Syrian refugees coming to Europe, publicly wondering why 'these men [were] not fighting for the freedom of their country against the Islamic State' (Zeman 2015, as cited in Euractiv, 2015, November 18).

As immigration became a more salient issue, other Czech political actors also opportunistically picked up on anti-immigrant rhetoric. Andrej Babiš, who served as deputy Prime Minister at the time and had come to

power on an anti-corruption platform, started presenting himself as a 'fighter against immigration' (Wondreys, 2021, p. 733). Even some of the actors associated with more moderate political positions began talking about the need to defend Czech culture (Gigitashvili & Sidło, 2019, January 07, p. 3). This shift in political rhetoric was paralleled by changes in prevalent framings of immigration in mainstream media, with security frames becoming significantly more common than economic ones, particularly prominently so in tabloids (Kovář, 2020). Public opinion shifted accordingly, with almost two-thirds (65%) of respondents believing immigration to be a threat in 2015 compared with less than one-fifth (19%) in 2006 (Wondreys, 2021, p. 728).

In contrast to Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, where illiberal political actors immediately seized the opportunity to use the refugee crisis to polarize the electorate, developments in Serbia initially took a different course. During the early stages of the refugee crisis, Serbian authorities adopted an empathetic approach, with Prime Minister Vučić emulating the tone of Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel's and emphasizing the need for solidarity and humanitarianism (Mitić, 2018). This approach was reflected in Serbian media coverage at the time. During the early stages of the crisis, humanitarian framings prevailed and Serbian media reports focused primarily on actions aimed at helping refugees, as opposed to media coverage in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the Czech Republic where reporting focused on security measures designed to protect the country and/or Europe (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 10). This approach was largely motivated by Serbia's position as an EU candidate country that saw Germany as a key ally (Mitić, 2018). Serbia's geographic position played an important role as well, as the country was a central node on the so-called Balkan migration route—the major entry point into the EU for refugees at the time—and came under increased pressure after Hungary closed its borders to refugees in September 2015 (Šelo Šabić & Borić, 2016, p. 1). Yet, Serbia was not a destination country for refugees and, unlike the other three countries discussed here that are all EU members, it was never under pressure to accept a refugee quota. Instead, Serbian authorities approached the crisis as temporary, issuing temporary permits to refugees that allowed transit through the country (Župarić-Iljić & Valenta, 2019, p. 373). Arguably, this position made it easier, and indeed advantageous, for Serbian authorities to adopt a welcoming approach to refugees.

However, even in Serbia the situation shifted as the crisis intensified in the autumn and winter of 2015–2016, when key EU destination countries began introducing restrictions on refugee numbers. This had a knock-on effect on countries along the Balkan route, which started adopting increasingly stringent security measures. This gradual securitization of the refugee crisis culminated in February 2016, when Serbia put its security forces on high alert (Šelo Šabić & Borić, 2016, p. 9). Shortly after the agreement between the EU and Turkey, Serbia and other countries closed their borders to refugees, effectively closing the Balkan route. There is some evidence to suggest that these developments went hand in hand with more negative public attitudes to immigration (Župarić-Iljić & Valenta, 2019, pp. 379–380). Research also highlights the presence of negative coverage of immigration on social networking platforms at the time, potentially fuelling negative attitudes (Ilić, 2018). In the following years, a new anti-immigration group appeared on Facebook, attracting over three hundred thousand followers, while coverage of immigration in mainstream media also turned increasingly negative (Buha & Lainović, 2020). These recent changes resonate with our own data, collected in late 2019 and early 2020, which show that levels of anti-immigrant prejudice in Serbia were rather high, second only to the Czech Republic.

5.1.2 LGBTQ+ Rights and 'Gender Ideology'

Shifting the focus from immigration to LGBTQ+ rights, slightly different patterns emerge. If Hungary took a leading role in promoting anti-immigration rhetoric, Poland led the way with regard to homophobic prejudice. The mainstreaming of homophobia in the country went hand in hand with the growing presence of far-right parties in the national parliament. Between 1997 and 2005, when Law and Justice first came to power, the salience of homosexuality in mainstream news increased considerably, with the number of articles containing the word 'homosexual' published in the leading daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* rising from well below 100 in 1995 to close to 350 in 2005 (O'Dwyer, 2018, p. 907). Another key actor in this process was the Polish Catholic Church, which eventually became directly involved in political campaigning against LGBTQ+ rights and the associated ascent of illiberal political elites to power. During the 2005 election campaign of the former Polish President Lech Kaczyński, the Church leadership sent letters to voters asking them to support candidates who 'defend [the] laws of nature' (Ayoub, 2014,

p. 348). The Church was also involved in the politicization of homosexuality in the lead-up to Poland's EU accession in 2004, when both far-right politicians and Church leaders warned that EU adherence to liberal values stood in stark contrast with Polish national values (O'Dwyer, 2018, pp. 904–905). This elite-led campaigning was paralleled by wider public mobilization, with several far-right civil society groups organizing anti-LGBTQ+ marches (Ayoub, 2014, p. 349). Ultra-conservative, catholic media, such as Radio Maryja, also contributed to the mainstreaming of homophobia (Ayoub, 2014, p. 349).

Homophobia also played an important role in the presidential and parliamentary election campaigns in 2015, when Law and Justice returned to power with an overwhelming majority. Once again, the Catholic Church prepared the grounds for public hostility against LGBTQ+ communities. The key villain this time was 'gender ideology', a catch-all label used by ultra-conservative and far-right actors to refer to efforts to advance women's and LGBTQ+ rights. The campaign started gaining ground in 2012 and 2013, and initially coalesced around responses to recommendations on domestic violence and sex education issued by transnational bodies, including the Council of Europe and the World Health Organization (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Catholic leaders picked up on the 'gender ideology' label, with a prominent bishop, Tadeusz Pieronek, stating that this ideology was 'worse than Communism and Nazism put together' (Graff, 2014, p. 432). A pastoral letter read in Polish parishes in December 2013 stated that 'gender ideology' originated from Marxism and was being imposed by foreign bodies without knowledge or consent from parents, threatening family values and leading to depravity (Sroczynski, 2016, p. 89). These arguments were picked up by Law and Justice during presidential and parliamentary election campaigns in 2015. 'Gender ideology' was mentioned in the party programme for the first time in 2014 and presented as being incompatible with Polish national identity and a threat to traditional families (Gwiazda, 2021, p. 586).

The early stages of the Polish war on 'gender ideology' coalesced around issues of sex education and women's rights. LGBTQ+ rights came more firmly to the fore in 2019, when several local municipalities in Poland declared themselves to be 'LGBT-free zones' (Korolczuk, 2020). In August 2019, the Archbishop of Krakow caused consternation with his remarks about the 'rainbow plague' that—in his view—was threatening Poland and compared it to the 'red plague' of communism (Chadwick, 2019, August 02). Opposition to LGBTQ+ rights was also central to Law

and Justice campaigning in the run-up to elections in 2019 and 2020. In his leader statement during the 2019 parliamentary election campaign, Jarosław Kaczyński emphasized that members of his party 'object to same-sex unions, their marriage, and their right to adopt children' adding that 'there are only two sexes: men and women' (Gwiazda, 2023, p. 650). LGBTQ+ issues remained at the forefront of public debate during the 2020 presidential elections, narrowly won by the Law and Justice incumbent Andrzej Duda who used 'LGBTQ ideology' as a central tenet of his re-election campaign (Gorska & Tausch, 2022, p. 1049). Anti-LGBTQ+ campaigning successfully polarized the Polish electorate, contributing to an increase in anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice while also provoking some public resistance (Gorska & Tausch, 2022, p. 1054).

In Hungary, the early attacks on 'gender ideology' and the first moves towards dismantling gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights coincided with Orbán's rise to power in 2010. As soon as the Fidesz government took office, it removed a recent amendment to the preschool curriculum that required teachers to avoid gender stereotyping, arguing that it was incompatible with Hungarian social norms (Takács et al., 2022, p. 42). This was followed by changes to the legal definition of marriage. The country's controversial Fundamental Law, which replaced the constitution in 2012, defined marriage in explicitly heteronormative terms and foregrounded the traditional family as 'the basis of the survival of the nation' (Takács et al., 2022, p. 42). This laid the groundwork for extensive family policies designed to support the traditional family and contributed to spread the perception of LGBTQ+ rights as a threat to national survival. In 2018, the attack on 'gender ideology' extended to universities, with the Hungarian government revoking permission to teach gender studies programmes (Pető, 2018, September 18).

The dismantling of LGBTQ+ rights accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the Hungarian parliament passed a law that prescribed 'sex at birth' as a category that cannot be changed, and later also banned adoption by single, gay and lesbian parents (Takács et al., 2022, p. 42). Anti-LGBTQ+ campaigning became particularly intense from October 2020, when Orbán attacked a recently published anthology of fairy tales that included adapted classic tales featuring LGBTQ+ characters (Gera, 2023, p. 109). In 2021, despite warnings from European human rights officials and some of the domestic opposition, the Hungarian parliament passed a law banning LGBTQ+ people from appearing in schools or in TV programmes, films, adverts, and other cultural products aimed at children

(Guardian, 2021, June 15). The law framed the ban as a matter of child protection against paedophiles, closely resembling a similar piece of legislation passed in Russia in 2013 (Persson, 2015). According to some observers, developments in Russia also played an important role in fuelling homophobic prejudice in the country at the time (Guardian, 2021, June 15). In April 2022, the campaign culminated in a referendum on 'LGBTQ issues', which coincided with the general elections at which Fidesz secured a supermajority in the parliament for the fourth time running. Thanks to a campaign coordinated by several civil society organizations, over half of those voting—more than 1.7 million people—spoiled their ballots (Takács et al., 2022, p. 44). Nonetheless, most valid votes were in favour of the government's position, which was enough for Fidesz to proclaim the referendum a success (Freedom House, 2023).

In the Czech Republic, attempts to politicize LGBTQ+ rights have a shorter history, and escalated only in 2018, during the parliamentary debate on same-sex marriage, when the then President Miloš Zeman started mimicking the anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric seen in Poland and Hungary, seeking to present LGBTQ+ rights as a threat to the traditional way of life (Guasti & Buštíková, 2020, p. 232). The politicization of LGBTQ+ rights continued in 2019, when the Archbishop of Prague, Cardinal Duka, started criticizing the use of rainbow flags by the Prague Magistrate and warned of the impending demographic catastrophe that would purportedly affect the Czech Republic if it continued to support LGBTQ+ rights. Much like the Cardinal of Cracow in Poland earlier that year, the archbishop spoke of the 'rainbow plague' and drew a contrast between 'rainbow activities', which supposedly lead into depopulation, and traditional families who 'raise and care for their offspring' and 'without whom the future of the nation [would] not exist' (Guasti & Buštíková, 2020, p. 226).

In contrast to Poland and Hungary, this campaign has so far only had limited impact on Czech public opinion, which remains overwhelmingly supportive of LGBTQ+ rights. The early debates on registered partnerships in the 1990s and early 2000s went hand in hand with a remarkable increase in public support, with the proportion of respondents in favour rising from 35% in 1998, before the proposal for a law on registered partnership was first debated in parliament, to 75% in 2008, two years after the law was adopted (Guasti & Buštíková, 2020, p. 235). A similarly positive impact of public debate can be seen in relation to public support for same-sex adoption, which rose from only 19% in 2005 to 51% in 2017 (Guasti & Buštíková, 2020, p. 235). This is consistent with our own data from

2019 and 2020, which shows the Czech Republic to be considerably more open to LGBTQ+ rights than the other three examined countries. Whether this is likely to endure is an open question. With the bill on same-sex marriage tabled again in 2022, along with a counter proposal to constitutionally define marriage as the union of a man and a woman (cf. Křičková, 2023, p. 7), the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights is on the rise, with uncertain consequences for public opinion.

Unlike in the Czech Republic, where elite support lags behind public opinion, elites in Serbia seem more supportive of LGBTQ+ rights than the general public. This misalignment between elite and public views can be traced back to the early 2000s. The first signs of positive shifts in elite acceptance of LGBTQ+ minorities started appearing after the fall of Milošević in 2000, when the country underwent several legislative and regulatory changes that increased the effectiveness of democratic institutions. However, Serbia's first ever Pride Parade, organized in 2001, was met with fierce resistance from right-wing extremists and several of the participants were injured (Bilić, 2016). The political elite interpreted these reactions as a sign that Serbian society was not yet ready for embracing non-normative sexualities, as exemplified by the then Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić's statement, claiming that 'it was too early to stand this test of tolerance in a country that has been isolated for so long, and which has had a repressive patriarchal culture' (Slootmaeckers & Bosia, 2023, p. 13).

Nonetheless, activists continued to put pressure on the government, linking LGBTQ+ rights to Serbia's aspirations for EU integration, and pressing for anti-discrimination legislation (Slootmaeckers & Bosia, 2023, p. 13). These efforts came to fruition in 2009, when the Serbian parliament passed a new law that prohibited discrimination on several grounds, including sexual orientation (Stakić, 2011, p. 44). Empowered by this development, activist groups sought to organize a Pride Parade later the same year. However, owing to opposition from far-right groups, some political parties, and the Serbian Orthodox Church, the authorities cancelled the event on the grounds of security concerns (Stakić, 2011, p. 43). The move prompted public outcry, both domestically and internationally. The EU made clear that Serbia would not be able to progress on its path to EU integration unless it managed to enforce the new antidiscrimination legislation. As the analysis of public discourses at the time shows, right-wing groups succeeded in framing the parade as an 'anti-Serbian' event and as a threat to public safety. At the same time, discourses of 'public

security risk' and 'mayhem' were also amplified by mainstream media, with little opposition from the elites (Johnson, 2012).

Criticism from international organizations, and especially pressure from the EU, prompted Serbian authorities to change their approach and allow the Pride Parade to occur a year later, albeit with heavy police presence and several clashes with far-right activists (Stakić, 2011, p. 44). This time, official support for the event was much more prominent, and discourses that presented the parade as a symbol of Serbia's Europeanness overshadowed concerns over security risks (Johnson, 2012). In the following year, however, the situation shifted again, and the parade was banned. In 2013, the Constitutional Court declared the ban to be in violation of the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of assembly. Thus, in 2014, the parade took place, however heavily presided by the police, and the then Prime Minister Vučić used it as a tool to promote himself internationally as a proponent of Europeanization (Slootmaeckers & Bosia, 2023, p. 14). In 2017, in a further move to instrumentalize LGBTQ+ rights to demonstrate Serbia's readiness to join the EU, Vučić appointed an openly lesbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić—a move that stirred homophobic prejudice across the political spectrum and sowed division among LGBTQ+ groups (Bilić, 2020). As our survey data suggest, these instrumental and, arguably, half-hearted gestures in favour of LGBTQ+ rights had little impact on public opinion, which remained overwhelmingly homophobic.

5.2 The Illiberal Public Sphere as an Amplifier of Illiberalism

The account provided in the previous section focused primarily on the role that political elites and, to some extent, religious figures played in the mainstreaming of illiberalism, but also offered some insights into the role of media. Examples included the impact of alternative, mostly Catholic, outlets in the early stages of mainstreaming of homophobia in Poland in the 1990s and early 2000s; the involvement of social media in the more recent mobilization of anti-immigration discourses in Serbia; and the potential of mainstream media—including public service broadcasters—to amplify anti-immigrant prejudice as tools in the hands of illiberal elites, as seen in Hungary. In this section, we develop a more systematic investigation of the role that media can play in either facilitating or resisting the rise of illiberalism. Specifically, we ask how the illiberal public sphere

contributed to the amplification of prejudice promoted by the elites, and whether its role changed as the hold of illiberalism over the public sphere increased.

Existing literature offers limited insights into these issues. This is partially due to the fact that available research on the topic has largely focused on countries in Western Europe and Northern America where the illiberal public sphere is at the incipient stage. Growing hostility against immigration during the 2015 refugee crisis and recent backlashes against LGBTQ+ rights in Eastern Europe prompted an increase in scholarly research on the region. However, only a small minority of this work investigates the link between media and attitudes. Instead, this work mostly focuses on media coverage, usually in the form of single country studies (e.g. Krzyzanowski, 2018; Kovář, 2020) with occasional studies adopting a comparative approach (Radovanović Felberg & Šarić, 2017; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). In relation to LGBTQ+ issues and the media, a similar trend is evident, with a growing range of studies investigating the role of media in spreading homophobia, especially in relation to Pride Parades. However, most studies examine media coverage (e.g. Johnson, 2012; Rédai, 2012; Stakić, 2011) or investigate the use and impact of the media among LGBTQ+ minorities (e.g. Szulc, 2018), rather than focusing on the link between media coverage and public opinion.

Another pitfall in existing research on the relationship between media and LGBTQ+ rights is the dominance of an optimistic narrative that associates greater visibility with greater acceptance. Existing research evidencing media's ability to inform social norms on sexuality is primarily concerned with how media foster more positive attitudes, acting as an important instrument of visibility, and thereby enabling public acceptance of sexual minorities' rights (e.g. Ayoub & Garretson, 2017; Chen & Pain, 2018). Yet, as Ayoub (2016, pp. 45–46) reminds us, greater visibility does not necessarily lead to greater public acceptance but can also amplify hostility and prejudice (e.g. Edenborg, 2020; Kerrigan, 2022). In contrast to studies of media coverage and public attitudes to LGBTQ+ rights, research on media coverage and immigration attitudes already acknowledges the ambiguous impact of visibility. For instance, a study focused on Belgium that combined content analysis of Belgian newspapers and television news with election polling data between 1991 and 2000 showed that the electoral growth of the right-wing party Vlaams Blok was paralleled by a growth in immigration coverage. These findings led the authors to

conclude that media were one of the factors fostering growing popular support for right-wing politics (Walgrave & De Swert, 2004). More recent research paints an even more complex picture, revealing that mainstream media coverage of immigration in the United States, France, and Norway displays a more positive attitude towards immigration than public opinion on the topic, while public service media exposure is not consistently linked with more positive attitudes (Beyer & Matthes, 2015). These results arguably indicate a weaker link between mainstream coverage and public opinion formation, especially in countries where elite debates have become more polarized, while mainstream media maintain a more liberal approach.

We argue that conceptualizing the relationship between news coverage and public opinion on immigration and LGBTQ+ through the prism of the illiberal public sphere offers a promising avenue to understand the disparate patterns observed in different countries, including those where illiberalism is more advanced. We seek to demonstrate this by drawing on the analysis of the population survey and interviews we conducted in late 2019 and early 2020. In line with the discussion in the previous section which pointed to the key role that elites play in shaping public opinion over time, we now pay attention to the extent of elite-led politicization of immigration and/or LGBTQ+ rights in each of the examined countries at the time of data collection. To put it differently, we expect the link between public attitudes and news consumption to differ depending on the stage of the illiberal public sphere and the extent of elite politicization. Finally, we assume that different types of media will play different roles, depending on their position vis-à-vis the illiberal public sphere in its different stages of development.

Our analysis focuses on two media types that, as shown in preceding chapters, are particularly interesting in this context: public service media (PSM), including radio and television broadcasting, and digital media, comprising both online news outlets and social media. As explained in Chap. 2, the illiberal capture of key mainstream media channels—including PSM where these play a prominent role in the media system, and this is the case in our four countries—is a key factor in the transition of the illiberal public sphere from the incipient to the ascendant stage. It is feasible to expect that the capture of PSM, which typically happens when the illiberal public sphere reaches the ascendant stage, will turn them into mouthpieces of the governing elites that can help entrench polarization and spread hostility. Conversely, the role of digital media is likely to change in the opposite direction. In a context where the illiberal public sphere is

at the incipient stage, digital media are more likely to support the proliferation of illiberal attitudes, while countries where the illiberal sphere is more advanced are more likely to see digital media act as channels of liberal resistance.

Table 5.1 summarizes the main traits of each of the countries across these dimensions. Of the four, at the time of data collection, the Czech Republic was the closest to the incipient stage of the illiberal public sphere, with its PSM maintaining independence. The country also has a long history of elite promotion of anti-immigrant views, and, since 2018, saw an uptick in LGBTQ+ politicization. Poland offers the example of an ascendant illiberal public sphere with captured PSM. This is combined with a long history of politicization surrounding LGBTQ+ rights, but a shorter history of politicization of immigration, which was declining at the time. In Hungary and Serbia, the illiberal public sphere is at a hegemonic stage, with captured PSM. However, while Hungary had a long history of elite politicization on both issues at the time, Serbian elites held a more ambiguous position. They avoided the politicization of immigration at the time, but showed some support for LGBTQ+ rights, with the country's first openly gay Prime Minister participating in several recent Pride parades (Bilić, 2020). Government instrumentalization of PSM in relation to the two issues also differed. While Hungarian elites made extensive use of

Table 5.1 The illiberal public sphere and elite stances on immigration and LGBTQ+ rights

	Czech Republic	*Poland*	*Hungary*	*Serbia*
Illiberal Public Sphere	Between incipient and ascendant stage; PSM independent	Ascendant stage, PSM captured	Hegemonic stage, PSM captured	Hegemonic stage, PSM captured
Elite stances on immigration	Long history of elite promotion of negative attitudes	Recent decline in politicization of immigration	Long history of elite promotion of negative attitudes	Recent history of elite promotion of positive attitudes
Elite stances on LGBTQ+ rights	Recent history of elite promotion of negative attitudes	Long history of elite promotion of negative attitudes	Long history of elite promotion of negative attitudes	Partial elite support for LGBTQ+ rights

PSM channels to promote an anti-immigration and anti-LGBTQ+ agenda, Serbian PSM maintained a more moderate tone (Kondor et al., 2022, p. 4141; Mihelj et al., 2023).

5.2.1 Public Service Media

The results of regressions for PSM (Table 5.2) show diverse patterns across the four countries. In Hungary and Poland, where PSM have been captured and where the governing elites have been hostile to both immigration and LGBTQ+ rights (albeit less so to immigration recently in Poland), the consumption of PSM is linked with more negative attitudes to both same-sex relationships and immigration. In contrast, in the Czech Republic, where PSM remain independent, PSM consumption is linked with more positive attitudes to immigration, despite elite-promoted hostility on the issue, while no effect is evident with regard to attitudes to same-sex relationships, possibly because elite promotion of homophobia is rather recent. In Serbia, where PSM was never fully independent and where the illiberal public sphere is well entrenched, PSM consumption has no effect on either type of attitudes, despite elite attempts to instrumentalize more positive attitudes.

These results suggest that the role of PSM is particularly influential in reinforcing illiberal attitudes in countries where the illiberal public sphere has reached at least the ascendant stage and colonized several key mainstream channels, including PSM, and where specific issues such as

Table 5.2 Public service media consumption and attitudes to immigration and same-sex relationships

	Czech Republic	*Hungary*	*Poland*	*Serbia*
Attitudes to immigration	+**	−**	−**	*n.s.*
Attitudes to immigrants as neighbours	+**	−**	−**	*n.s.*
Attitudes to same-sex marriage	*n.s.*	−**	−**	*n.s.*
Attitudes to same-sex adoption	*n.s.*	−**	−**	*n.s.*
Attitudes to gays and lesbians as neighbours	*n.s.*	−**	−**	*n.s.*

Note: Data from population survey ($N = 4{,}092$), analysis based on OLS linear regressions (controlled for age, gender, education, domicile size and religiosity), with frequency of public service media news consumption (TV & radio) as independent variable. '+' indicates positive effect on the dependent variable (i.e. PSM use is associated with more liberal attitudes), '−' indicates negative effect. Statistical significance $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, n.s. = effect not significant. See the Electronic Supplementary Material for complete regression data tables

immigration and same-sex relationships have been politicized by the elites—as is the case in Hungary and Poland. Furthermore, PSM can continue to perpetuate illiberal attitudes even when elites stop their hostility campaign, as is the case recently with immigration in Poland. Conversely, in cases where the illiberal public sphere is closer to the incipient stage and where PSM still retain independence, they have the capacity to act as a bulwark against illiberal attitudes. In such a context, even when an issue is mobilized by illiberal political elites and majority opinion on the issue is rather illiberal, PSM can resist the further advance of illiberal attitudes. This is exemplified by attitudes to immigration in the Czech Republic.

Finally, there are circumstances under which PSM appear to make little if any difference. As the case of LGBTQ+ rights in the Czech Republic suggests, this may occur in contexts where public opinion on an issue is largely homogeneous (in this case, overwhelmingly positive) and where the issue has not been politicized (or at least not for long). In such a context, PMS have perhaps not been drawn into the spiral of polarization and are, thus, less likely to affect public opinion. The Serbian case, on the other hand, may be seen as an indicator of how the interaction between news and public attitudes changes when the illiberal public sphere has advanced to such a degree that illiberal attitudes are widely shared among the population and most media outlets (i.e. not only state-controlled public broadcasters, but also commercial channels and tabloids) are contributing to the spreading of hostility. In such a context, any temporary changes in elite opinion or shifts in state-controlled PSM coverage may well have little capacity to affect public attitudes. No longer fully controlled by the governing elites and rather reliant on illiberal impulses from below, the illiberal public sphere appears as a semi-autonomous force, capable—to an extent—of reproducing illiberal attitudes irrespective of government behaviour and of the stance adopted by PSM.

Our interviews with participants in the four countries likewise reflect the shifting role of PSM at different stages of development of the illiberal public sphere. When asked where they encountered news about sexual minorities, several Polish and Hungarian participants mentioned PSM and noted their negative bias. For instance, Polish participant Pol-13 (female, 38) explained that Polish PSM channels do cover same-sex relationships, 'but they present them in a bad light, showing that same-sex couples are against ethics and religion'. Similar patterns appeared when talking to participants about immigration coverage, with several participants from across the political and ideological spectrum singling out PSM as key sources of

negative coverage. One of our Hungarian participants with anti-immigrant views explained that she often heard on PSM TV channel M1 'about the problems they [immigrants] cause in terms of public safety' (Hun-14, female, 56); while a pro-immigration participant became very agitated discussing Hungarian PSM coverage, arguing that it constantly promotes exaggerated stories about criminal acts committed by immigrants (Hun-12, female, 59).

In Poland, several participants also commented on the polarized coverage on mainstream channels, specifically on the stark contrast between reporting provided by PSM and commercial broadcast channels. Comparing the coverage on the commercial TV channel TVN with the coverage provided by PSM channel TVP, participant Pol-17 (female, 24) claimed: 'of course TVN will be more in favour of these people [i.e. LGBTQ+ people], while TVP will be more against them'. For another Polish participant, who is opposed to same-sex marriage and adoption, this polarization was also a reason for avoiding TVN, because 'they promote LGBT and other things that I don't approve of' (Pol-08, female, 36). Such experiences are consistent with the ascendant stage of the illiberal public sphere found in Poland and the almost symmetric polarization of the country's media landscape discussed in Chap. 3. As one might expect, given the more advanced stage of the illiberal public sphere and the asymmetric polarization of the media system in Hungary, Hungarian participants typically associated negative coverage on the two issues not only with PSM channels, but also with commercial channels (especially Hír TV) and right-wing websites, such as *Origo*. Conversely, participants linked more positive or at least balanced coverage only with a small group of online outlets, principally *Index* and *444* news websites. The experience of one of our anti-government, pro-immigration participants from Hungary is characteristic in this respect. He explained:

> Both *Index* and *444* reported on the riots in Greece and mentioned, for example, how they would like to create a refugee camp there. […] Meanwhile on Origo, […] they started counting again how many thousands, billions of migrants are coming to knock on Europe's gates. (Hun-18, male, 32)

It is telling to compare these responses to those seen in the Czech Republic. Here, only one participant explicitly mentioned seeing coverage of same-sex relationships in mainstream news, and even in this case, she felt that this is not a particularly prominent issue: 'I do not think this is a

topic that is being spoken about now […] Maybe when it used to be discussed here from a legal point of view there were some articles […] There are always some activists who bring it to the table, but it is not a big issue' (Cze-22, female, 32). The near absence of recollections of news coverage of same-sex relationships in the Czech Republic is consistent with more accepting public attitudes and a relatively short history of political polarization on the topic.

In Serbia, on the other hand, several participants mentioned media coverage of same-sex relationships and immigration, but—unlike Hungarian and Polish participants—did not single out PSM channels as particularly negative. Rather, negative coverage was associated primarily with tabloids, commercial broadcasters, and social media. For instance, participant Srb-09 (male, 48) mentioned coming across negative news on same-sex relationships in the tabloid *Informer*, where news items about LGBTQ+ people reportedly appeared together with sensationalist titles referring to rape and harassment, indicating that same-sex relationships were framed as a crime or as deviant. He explained: 'Usually, a certain page—I'm not sure which one—is reserved for news, such as "Girls grabbed", "Boys raped", "People requesting abortion are worse than paedophiles". It looks like that page is reserved for that—it's full of such news'. Similarly, in relation to immigration news, Serbian participants mentioned a whole range of sources, including PSM but also commercial channels and tabloids, as well as the pro-Russian radio station and news website Sputnik. For example, an anti-immigration participant (Srb-13, female, 28) mentioned seeing negative news about immigrants, linked with 'robberies, assaults on women, burglaries' on the public service TV channel RTS but also on the pro-government commercial TV channel Pink. These answers are consistent with the more advanced stage of the illiberal public sphere in the country, where illiberal attitudes continue to be promoted across a range of outlets regardless of occasionally more moderate opinions among elites.

5.2.2 Digital Media

In contrast to the results of regressions for PSM news, the results of regressions for digital news (Table 5.3) are less clearly aligned with our expectations. The link between the advancement of the illiberal public sphere and the changing role of online news channels is clearest in Poland and Hungary where the illiberal public sphere has reached the ascendant and hegemonic stages, respectively. In both countries, more frequent use of

Table 5.3 Digital news consumption and attitudes to immigration and same-sex relationships

	Czech Republic	*Hungary*	*Poland*	*Serbia*
Attitudes to immigration	$+^{**}$	$+^{**}$	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
Attitudes to immigrants as neighbours	$+^{**}$	*n.s.*	$+^{**}$	*n.s.*
Attitudes to same-sex marriage	*n.s.*	$+^{**}$	$+^{**}$	*n.s.*
Attitudes to same-sex adoption	*n.s.*	$+^{**}$	$+^{**}$	*n.s.*
Attitudes to gays and lesbians as neighbours	$+^{**}$	$+^{**}$	*n.s.*	*n.s.*

Note: Data from population survey ($N = 4{,}092$), analysis based on OLS linear regressions (controlled for age, gender, education, domicile size and religiosity), with frequency of digital news consumption (news websites and social media) as independent variable. '+' indicates positive effect on the dependent variable (i.e. digital news use is associated with more liberal attitudes), '–' indicates negative effect. Statistical significance $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, n.s. = effect not significant. See the Electronic Supplementary Material for complete regression data tables

digital channels for news is correlated with more positive attitudes to same-sex relationships and immigration, particularly in Hungary where strong positive correlations exist for all three measures of attitudes to same-sex relationships, namely acceptance of same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, and gay and lesbian neighbours, as well as for perceptions of immigration. In Poland, positive correlations are also evident, but are weaker than in Hungary, as they appear only in relation to two out of three measures of attitudes towards same-sex relationships, and one measure of attitudes towards immigration. This difference between the two countries is consistent with the relative strength of the illiberal public sphere.

The results for the Czech Republic and Serbia, however, do not conform to our expectations. Although the Czech Republic is closest to the incipient stage of the public sphere—where we would expect digital media to act as sources of illiberalism—regressions are pointing in the opposite direction. More frequent use of digital channels for news correlates with more liberal attitudes, especially in relation to immigration (both measures) but also, to some extent, in relation to same-sex relationships (one of three measures). By contrast, results for Serbia show no significant correlations for any of the measures even though the country's illiberal public sphere has long been at the hegemonic stage. It is quite possible, however, that these counterintuitive results are due to the specific dimensions of illiberalism examined here, namely hostility to immigration and same-sex relationships. In Serbia, illiberal views on immigration and LGBTQ+

rights are widespread, and the illiberal public sphere is, as argued earlier, deeply entrenched, creating an environment in which even digital channels may have difficulty acting as promoters of more positive opinions. In contrast, in the Czech Republic, levels of anti-immigration sentiments are likewise very high, ever higher than in Serbia, yet the illiberal public sphere is still relatively close to its incipient stage, meaning that it may be easier for digital channels to serve as important sources for more neutral or positive depictions of immigration.

Qualitative material adds further nuance to this picture. One notable pattern we observed was that digital sources of information, especially social media, were frequently mentioned as sources of both liberal and illiberal views. Furthermore, several answers suggested that participants interpreted information found online in one of two ways: they either criticized it if they disagreed with it or took it for granted if it was aligned with their own opinions. For instance, one pro-immigration Serbian participant described coming across posts about migrants on Facebook and getting involved in the discussion to counter hostile opinions and being attacked in return:

> I was reading ads for car sales, and I came across posts about migrants. Is there a place on Facebook where you can avoid running into opponents of immigration? I saw a post full of hatred, fuelled even more by the COVID pandemic. I could tell from the comments that if the conversation continues like this it won't end well. So I try to soften the comments a bit by telling my opinion, and I'd better not, I'm becoming a target of the crowd. (Srb-18, male, 42)

In contrast, an anti-immigrant Serbian participant likewise described finding information about migrants on Facebook, but without being particularly concerned about its veracity:

> Well, I was reading about how a migrant had stabbed a kid with a knife. First, he had asked some boy for directions and then, when the boy tried to tie his shoes, he attacked him with a knife. I didn't really have the time to check whether it was true or not.
> *Interviewer: Where did you find that?*
> On Facebook.
> *Interviewer: Do you often find news on migrants on social networks?*

> Yes, I keep reading about how they did this and that… How they broke into someone's home, and so on… and I don't like that. Now they're saying how they're going to let them live in smaller towns and villages, but I think that won't really solve anything, since they don't want to live in smaller environments. (Srb-14, female, 42)

A similar trend is visible with regard to LGBTQ+ communities. For participants holding negative attitudes, negative representations confirmed their views. For instance, one of our Polish participants (Pol-29, female, 47) argued that gay and lesbian people are associated with paedophiles, mentioning social media as a source. In a similar manner, a Hungarian participant (Hun-14, female, 56) who watches the right-wing Hír TV channel and follows the website and newsletter of the transnational, far-right organization CitizenGo mentioned coming across news on US studies about children adopted by same-sex couples who suffered negative consequences as a result. In contrast, participants with more positive views were not persuaded by negative depictions and were also more inclined to mention positive coverage online or describe heated arguments over same-sex relationships on social media. For instance, a Serbian participant (Srb-19, female, 62) mentioned coming across uplifting coverage on social media: 'I saw something on Twitter, about a girl whose father has finally accepted her for who she is, and when you see that immense joy, you realize how little we need to be happy'. On the other hand, Polish participant Pol-15 (male, 38, rural) mentioned discussions about same-sex relationships on their Facebook newsfeed, and noted that in these discussions, LGBTQ+ people were 'strongly criticized', but then also added that in the comments section, he came across 'a lot of comments [that] say that gay people are good, and so on'.

Taken together, these qualitative examples suggest that even in cases where political elites successfully appropriate mainstream media as means of spreading illiberal attitudes, social media can retain the capacity to sustain a more diverse set of discourses. This does not mean that digital media do not act as channels of negative attitudes—they do—but rather that the actual impact of visibility is not uniform and is shaped by pre-existing convictions.

5.3 Conclusions

This chapter delved deeper into two dimensions of illiberalism prominent in the four examined countries, but also globally, to take a closer look at the way in which illiberalism becomes part of mainstream discussions and participates in the rise of illiberalism. Focusing on immigration at LGBTQ+ rights, the chapter first highlighted the diverse patterns of public attitudes on these two issues across the four countries, using this to illustrate the multifaceted and malleable nature of illiberalism, which can adopt different forms depending on socio-political contexts, as well as changes over time. We then traced the rise in polarization surrounding these two issues in the four countries, paying particular attention to the role of political elites and the media, while also noting cases of transnational learning and borrowing of anti-immigrant and homophobic rhetoric and significant cross-country differences. We showed how both anti-immigrant hostility and homophobia were successfully mobilized by illiberal actors to either aid their rise to power or consolidate their existing power positions and provide legitimacy for controversial legislative measures. We also pointed out that the mainstreaming of illiberalism did not follow the same pattern everywhere. Different political leaders drew selectively on the illiberal repertoire, with some focusing on immigration, while others focused on LGBTQ+ rights and some avoided politicizing either of the two issues in favour of other polarizing topics.

Finally, we looked at whether the role of the media in either fostering or resisting the advance of illiberalism changes depending on how advanced the illiberal public sphere is. Building on arguments outlined in Chap. 2, we paid particular attention to two news channels: PSM and digital media. The results for PSM largely conformed to our expectations. When the illiberal public sphere is at an incipient stage, independent PSM are still able to instil more liberal attitudes, as seen in the Czech Republic. As the illiberal public sphere gains in strength, PSM become co-opted by the governing elites and turn into important channels for promoting illiberal views, a situation found in Poland and especially Hungary. Finally, once the illiberal public sphere is fully entrenched and supported by widespread illiberal attitudes among the electorate, it has the capacity to operate as a powerful actor in its own right. At this stage, the illiberal public sphere is able to sustain itself to some extent independently of elite support and of PSM coverage, as evidenced by the case of Serbia.

The results for digital media were less clear-cut. The results for Hungary and Poland appeared to confirm that, at more advanced stages of the illiberal public sphere, digital media can act as important channels for liberal attitudes. However, the results for the Czech Republic and Serbia did not follow the same pattern. In the Czech Republic, where the illiberal public sphere is closest to the incipient stage, we expected online channels to foster illiberalism. However, digital news consumption appeared to be associated with more liberal attitudes, albeit less extensively than in Hungary and Poland. In Serbia, on the other hand, where we expected digital media to act as vehicles of liberalism, online news consumption made no difference to participants' attitudes.

It is possible that these results are in part affected by the particular focus and type of measurements adopted in this chapter, namely the fact that we examined only two dimensions of illiberalism and that we used a rather crude measure of digital news consumption, which lumped together news websites and social media news. In the next chapter, we look at the relationship between digital news and illiberalism more comprehensively, investigating a wider range of dimensions of illiberalism and allowing for the possibility of differential impact of social networking as opposed to messaging apps.

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CHAPTER 6

Social Media: Vectors of Illiberalism or Sources of Resistance?

In this chapter we temporarily step aside from the holistic examination of news consumption across all news media types and focus instead on social media, considering both social networking sites and messaging applications. Across the world, digital platforms have been increasingly criticized for facilitating the rise of populist as well as illiberal actors, aiding the growth of political extremism, societal polarization, and illiberal attitudes. Moreover, digital platforms have been denounced for spreading misinformation and harmful content. The tone of both academic and public discourse on the matter has changed considerably in recent years, shifting away from the optimistic perspective that hailed the potential of social media to enhance democracy (Tucker et al., 2017) to ever-louder calls for stricter regulation of digital platforms (Tambini & Moore, 2021). However, studies have largely focused on developments in established Western democracies where the illiberal public sphere is either negligible or in an incipient phase. Little consideration has been given to the role that digital platforms might play in societies with comparatively shorter histories of democratic governance where the illiberal public sphere plays a more prominent role in shaping citizens' participation in public life.

This chapter addresses this notable knowledge gap by investigating the role social media and messaging services play within the wider information ecosystem in Eastern Europe, drawing on a combination of survey data

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and secondary sources. Following a brief overview of Internet and social media penetration in the region, and their adoption by key political actors (with a particular focus on illiberal actors), the chapter maps out the key patterns of social media use across the four examined countries. We present the socio-demographic characteristics of social media users who employ these platforms as news sources, and then consider how social media use relates to illiberal attitudes. We consider whether people who rely on social media as information sources are markedly different from the rest of the population in age, education or domicile size, or with respect to their opinions about democracy and politically contentious, polarizing issues. Finally, we examine the prevalence of social media use for online political participation, and ask how being politically active online relates to political beliefs. Are people who are most politically engaged online more likely to be supportive of democracy and liberal values? Or are they rather using social media to oppose them? More broadly, we investigate whether social media in Eastern Europe function as instruments of the illiberal public sphere, or whether they can be thought of as channels of resistance.

6.1 Equalization Gone Wrong? The Role of Social Media in the Rise of the Illiberal Public Sphere

The pace of the digital revolution in Eastern Europe was significantly slower than in most Western democracies, largely owing to differences in economic development and technological infrastructure, especially in rural areas. Even after EU accession in 2004, the level of Internet penetration in the new member states lagged far behind its Western counterparts. In 2008, the best performing Eastern European country in terms of Internet access (Slovenia) had a lower rate of online households (57%) than the average of the fifteen EU countries (64%), while the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary were all below 50% (Eurostat, 2021). This digital gap started to close only in recent years, with differences between Eastern Europe and the rest of the EU becoming close to negligible on a national level, and especially when looking at metropolitan areas. In rural areas, however, the digital gap persists. In Hungary, only 82% of rural households were connected to the Internet in 2020, compared with 92% in cities, and the gap is even wider in Bulgaria where only 65% of rural

households had an Internet connection in 2020, against a national average of 79% (Eurostat, 2021).

Social media penetration in the region followed a slightly different route, which was not determined solely by Internet penetration rates. In some countries, including the Czech Republic and Poland, social networking sites became widely used only in the mid-2010s (Macková et al., 2018; Surowiec & Kania-Lundholm, 2018). By contrast, countries such as Lithuania, Slovakia, and Hungary, which—as noted earlier—lagged behind in terms of Internet penetration, were among the early adopters of social media. In Hungary, in 2011, 51% of the population was using social media, one of the highest rates not only in Eastern Europe, but in the whole of the EU (Eurostat, 2021).

An interesting phenomenon that marked the early history of social media in Central and Eastern Europe was the success of local social networking sites, which were able to resist the appeal of global platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. In the Czech Republic, the community server *Spoluzaci.cz* (Classmates), founded in 1999 as a platform for communication among former classmates, still had 1.5 million users in 2009. At that point, it was the second most popular social media platform in the country, ranking below another national platform, the dating site *Lide.cz*, with Facebook following as a distant third (Kasík, 2018, April 4). The Polish social networking site *Nasza-klasa.pl* (Our Class), founded in 2006 by a group of students from Wroclaw University, quickly became one of the most visited platforms in Poland, with 7.6 million users in 2008 (Małachowski, 2009), rivalling the ascending Facebook well into the mid-2010s. In most post-Soviet countries, the Russian-language social networking sites VKontakte/VK and Odonoklassniki—both eventually owned by the Russian Internet company Mail.ru, rebranded as VK in October 2021—have remained very popular throughout the 2010s despite the challenges posed by Western platforms (Reyaz, 2020). In some of these countries, including Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, VKontakte/VK still held the leading position at the start of 2020s. Even more successful has been the instant messaging service Telegram, launched in 2013 by the creators of VKontakte, the brothers Nikolai and Pavel Durov. Today, Telegram is among the most popular messaging platforms not just within Eastern Europe but worldwide, especially following the recent mass-migration of users from Facebook and WhatsApp owing to concerns over privacy and growing power of the big tech (Nicas et al., 2021).

The growth in social media use went hand in hand with their rising influence in political communication. As is the case for most democratic countries, social media in Eastern Europe have evolved from alternative to mainstream channels of political communication. However, the patterns of their adoption have been far from uniform. In some countries, social media were initially mainly adopted by fringe and anti-system parties that took advantage of the affordances of this new communication technology to increase direct engagement with voters and make electoral mobilization both cheaper and more effective. Other countries saw established parties and leaders jumping on the social media wagon from the very beginning. In both cases, however, some of the political actors who were quickest to embrace social media would later become key actors in the rise of the illiberal public sphere in the region.

In the Czech Republic, the first party to have seriously explored the potential of social media for political communication was Public Affairs—a minor, business-driven populist party that shook up the Czech party system by making a surprising breakthrough in the 2010 parliamentary election in which they received 11% of votes (Hanley, 2012). During the next parliamentary election campaign in 2013, Facebook was likewise used more intensely by new challengers than by traditional mainstream parties, including the surprise runner-up ANO 2011 (Štětka et al., 2019). The decisive victory of ANO 2011 in the following election in 2017, when it captured 30% of the votes and received three times as many mandates as the runner-up, conservative party ODS (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018), has also been attributed to the party's highly professionalized social media campaign, centred around the party's leader, the billionaire Andrej Babiš (Cirhan & Kopecký, 2017).

In Hungary, the first use of social media for election purposes relates to the 2010 parliamentary election, which saw the two anti-system parties—the far-right Jobbik, which was an influential early promoter of illiberal discourse in the country, and the Hungarian Green Party (LMP)—enter the Parliament for the first time, having both relied on social media in their respective campaigns (Bene & Szabó, 2021). While many minor and opposition parties have continued to exploit digital platforms as their primary tools for campaigning and mobilization throughout the 2010s, the Leader of the Fidesz party, Viktor Orbán, secured a dominant position not just in the Hungarian political scene but also online. By the early 2010s, he claimed the largest following on Facebook, the most important social

media platform in the country (Bene & Szabó, 2021), which he then successfully exploited during the 2014 and 2018 elections.

In Poland, the largest traditional parties—including those that continue to be prominent drivers of the illiberal turn in the country—initially had a more active presence and greater reach on social media, successfully exploiting this advantage during both the 2011 and 2015 parliamentary elections (Koc-Michalska et al., 2014; Štětka et al., 2019). However, some newcomers and fringe political actors have capitalized on the potential of social media for electoral mobilization as well. Among the pioneers was the far-right politician Janusz Korwin-Mikke, who first led his party Congress of the New Right (KNP) to a surprising fourth place (and four seats) in the 2014 European Parliament elections. His success was largely the result of a successful social media campaign. A year later, he launched his own party, KORWiN, and contested the 2015 parliamentary and presidential elections (Lipiński & Stępińska, 2019). Even more telling is the success story of the former rock-star-turned-populist-politician Paweł Kukiz, who finished third in the 2015 presidential election and gained the same result with his party, Kukiz'15, in the 2015 parliamentary election. In both cases, he benefited from having mobilized young voters on social media (Lipiński & Stępińska, 2019; Chmielewska-Szlajfer, 2018). Nevertheless, neither of these parties—nor anyone else—managed to seriously challenge the position of the two dominant parties, Law and Justice (PiS) and Civic Platform (PO) in subsequent years.

The penetration of social media within the political system in Serbia resembles the pattern seen in the Czech Republic. As in the case of ANO 2011, the dramatic shake-up of the political landscape in the early 2010s was spearheaded by a party that was among the first ones to have adopted a systematic, professionalized approach to social media, the right-wing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) that continues to be at the forefront of Serbia's illiberal turn to this day. SNS won the 2012 parliamentary election and its leader, Tomislav Nikolić, was elected President of Serbia in the same year (Atlagić & Vučićević, 2019). Before the 2014 snap election, SNS was already a dominant party on Facebook, having the largest following and the biggest reach with its posts (Krunic, 2015). After winning the election by a landslide and becoming Prime Minister, the new party leader Aleksandar Vučić (since 2017 President of Serbia) has continued to pursue aggressive social media campaigns, often relying on negative campaigning and the use of fake profiles and bots (Spasojević, 2020), as he steered the

party further towards populism and illiberalism in the second half of the decade.

Notwithstanding the differences among the countries, it is clear that social media played an important role in strengthening the illiberal public sphere during the first half of the 2010s. In all the examined countries, digital platforms facilitated the rise of parties that challenged the status quo by mobilizing a mostly right-wing, ethno-nationalist and anti-elitist agenda. While these developments lend some support to the 'equalization hypothesis' (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; cf. Gibson & McAllister, 2015), which predicted that new media would primarily help political outsiders and level up the playing field in the contest against resource-rich and incumbent parties, it is clear that this process did not have an equal effect across the political spectrum. In contrast to countries such as Spain (Podemos), Germany (Green Party), and Greece (Syriza), alternative left-wing, progressive and liberal parties, although occasionally also benefiting from the early adoption of social media, have not really been able to match the success of their right-wing populist competitors. A rare exception is the Czech Pirate Party, arguably the closest to what Gerbaudo (2018) has called a 'digital party', which finished close third in the 2017 parliamentary election. Yet, as we shall see later on, the success of right-wing populist actors in exploiting the affordances of social media platforms does not mean that these channels are completely dominated by illiberal actors and agendas.

6.2 Citizens as Users of Social Media for Political News

While the adoption of social media among political actors in Eastern Europe has attracted significant scholarly attention, little is known about social media use for political communication among the general population and about how such use relates to political attitudes, behaviours and political participation. Does the fact that social networking sites have aided the rise of right-wing populist actors to power, or helped them turn their countries towards illiberalism, mean that digital platform users mostly share illiberal attitudes? Should social media be considered as instruments of illiberalism, or is there any indication that they may be utilized to counter illiberal trends and support democracy?

Before we start looking for answers to these questions, we first need to map out the basic determinants and patterns of political usage of social media in the four countries we examine. The data from our population survey, carried out between December 2019 and January 2020 (see Methodological Appendix for further details), indicate that the share of people who use social media as a source of political news varies across the sample, from 57% in Poland and 50% in Serbia, to 45% in Hungary and 40% in the Czech Republic. Likewise, the share of those who can be classified as heavy users of social media for news—namely, those using them at least once a day—is also highest in Poland, closely followed by Serbia, while heavy users in Hungary and the Czech Republic are considerably less prominent. These figures are complemented by the perceived importance of social media as political news sources. The highest percentage of users for whom social media are important sources of news is by far observed in Serbia (55%), followed by Poland (36%), Hungary (29%), and the Czech Republic (24%).

In general, the socio-demographic profile of those who use social media as news sources is, unsurprisingly, tilted towards those who are younger and better educated, which is in line with recent data about social media demographics in countries such as the United States (Greenwood et al., 2016; Wojcik & Hughes, 2019) or the UK (Mellon & Prosser, 2017). However, there are notable differences among the examined countries in relation to both variables (see Fig. 6.1). In the Czech Republic and Poland, the younger generations use social media for news more frequently than their counterparts in Hungary and Serbia where around one-third of people under the age of 35 does not consume news from social media more than once in a week. Among those who get their news from social media most frequently (i.e. at least once a day), middle-aged and older people account for 69% in Hungary and for 60% in Serbia, while their proportion in Poland and the Czech Republic is 51% and 45%, respectively. In other words, even though the probability of looking for news on social media is higher for younger users (under 35) across all four countries, in Hungary and Serbia the majority of those who make social media part of their daily news diet tend to be above that age (with one-third of them being over 56 years old in Hungary).

As for education, a moderate positive correlation with social media use for news is apparent in Serbia ($\rho = 0.4$, $p < 0.01$), but only a weak one can be observed in Hungary and Poland, and there appears to be no correlation in the Czech Republic where only 54% of people with a university

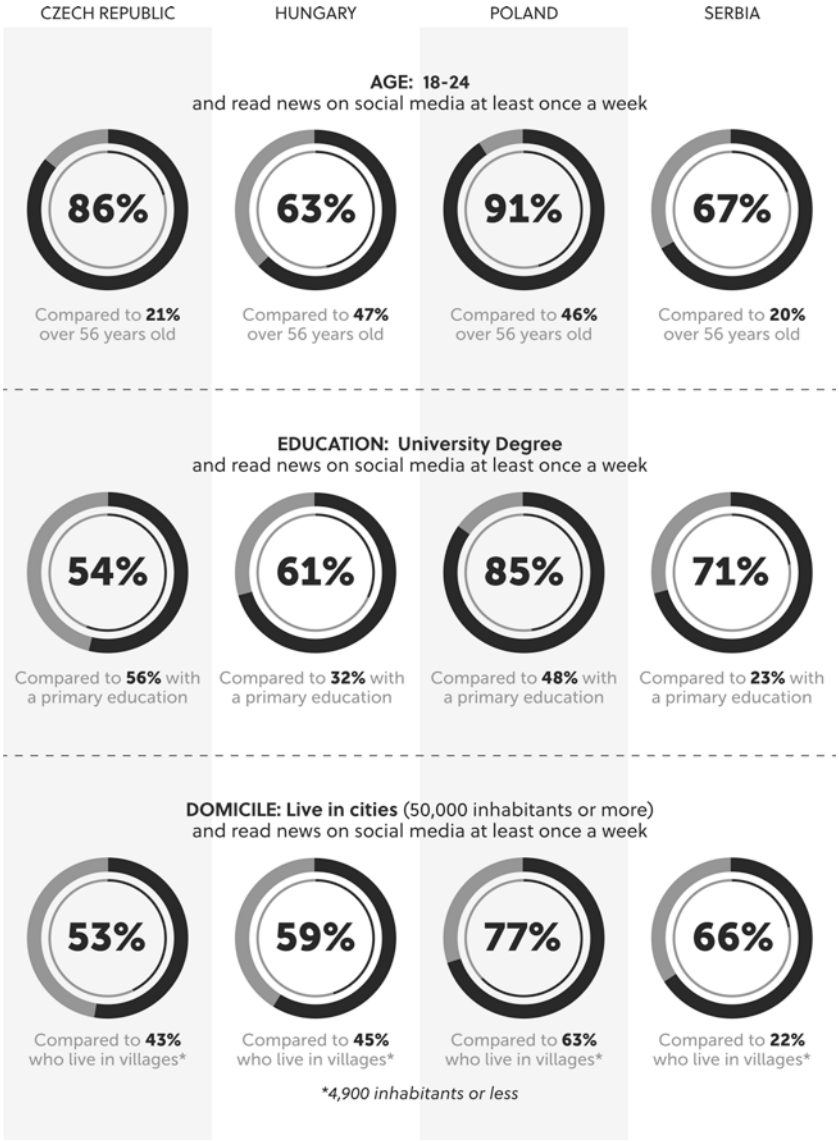

Fig. 6.1 Socio-demographic profiles of social media news users

degree consume news from social media on a regular basis, compared with 85% in Poland (Fig. 6.1). Nevertheless, in all four countries the majority of people who consume news from social media at least once a week have either the highest or second-highest level of education.

Domicile size is also moderately positively correlated with social media use in Serbia ($\rho = 0.4$, $p < 0.01$), but only weakly so in Poland and not at all in Hungary and the Czech Republic where the rural/urban divide is not particularly visible. In Serbia, there are prominent gaps in this respect, as 73% of Serbians living in villages with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants do not use social media for news at all (compared with only 24% of those living in cities with over 50,000 inhabitants). Conversely, over a half (53%) of those Serbians who daily read news on social media live in cities with over 50,000 inhabitants. In Hungary and Poland, the same figure is 40.5%, and only 29% in the Czech Republic, which somehow disputes the common stereotype about the political use of social media being associated with the lifestyle of the 'metropolitan elite'. Overall, these figures demonstrate that the extent to which the use of digital platforms for news is driven by socio-demographic factors varies considerably across the four countries, indicating important differences in the role of social media in these countries' political information ecosystems.

To complete the mapping of the patterns of political usage of digital platforms, we also need to look at the role and relative importance of individual social media brands for political news consumption. As Fig. 6.2 shows, Facebook is still the most widely used social media brand for political news in all four countries. The share of its users is highest in Poland (67% of those who use the Internet), followed by Hungary (50%), Serbia (44.8%), and the Czech Republic (43%). YouTube is the second most popular platform, closely followed by Facebook Messenger in all countries but Serbia as the third most popular platform, with nearly half of the Polish Internet users using it for political news. A sizeable minority of the online population in Poland and Serbia uses Instagram to access political news (30.4% and 22.4%, respectively), thereby adding to the evidence about the growing attractiveness of this platform for political communication already noted elsewhere in Europe (Larsson, 2023). Among alternatives to Facebook products, Viber is the most popular in Serbia (20.1% of online users), but very marginal in the Czech Republic (4.5%, similar to Telegram). Overall, while the new platforms are clearly contributing to the

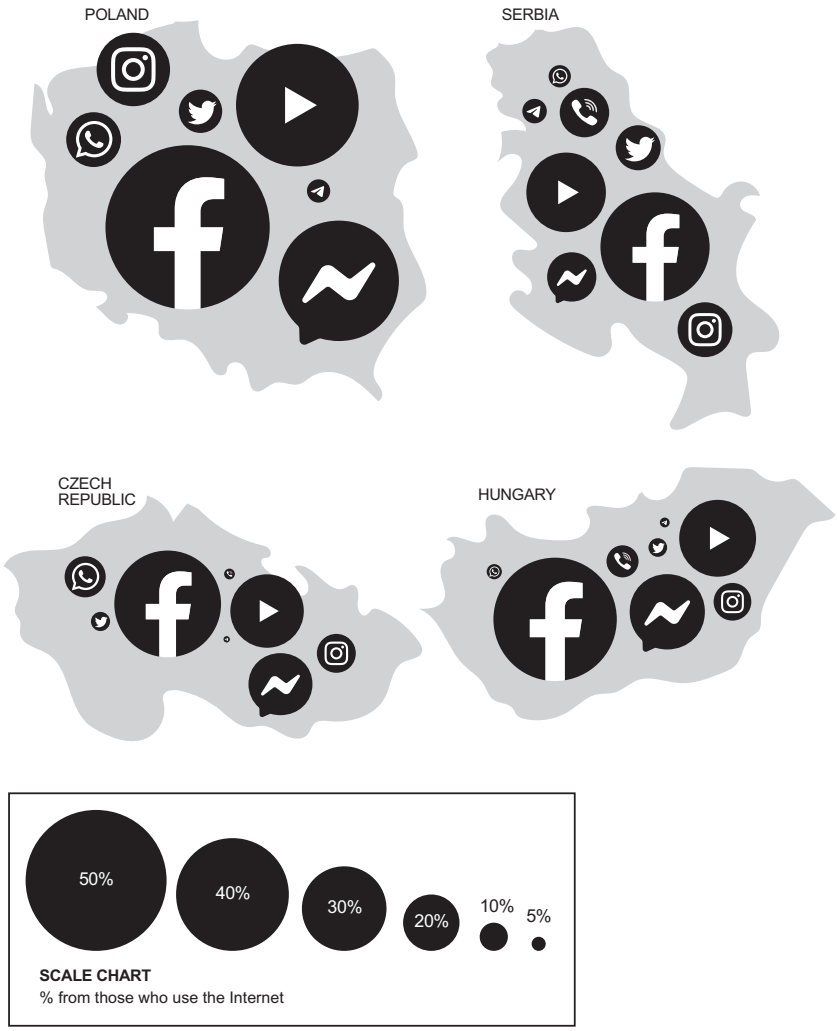

Fig. 6.2 Use of social media for political news

diversification of platform-based news sources, the dominance of the 'digital duopoly'—i.e. Facebook and Google (represented by YouTube)—is not challenged in any of the four countries. Importantly, Twitter, which is widely considered as one of the most important platforms for political communication in Western scholarship, is lagging behind most other social media, ranking 6th in all four countries.

In sum, we have established that while social media—particularly Facebook, YouTube, and Facebook Messenger—play a significant role in the political information ecosystem of all four countries, there are also notable differences in both the overall intensity of use and the perceived importance of social media as news sources, as well as in the socio-demographic profiles of their users. In terms of usage and importance, the Czech Republic is at the bottom of the list, a finding possibly explained by the relatively higher level of plurality and media freedom compared with the other three countries, which means that people might be less compelled to seek alternative sources of political news outside of the realm of professional journalism (whether online or offline). This interpretation is corroborated by the age profile of social media news seekers, as those in the Czech Republic tend to be younger than their Hungarian and Serbian counterparts. In other words, it is plausible to argue that in countries with more constrained choices of free and quality media, getting political information from social media is not necessarily prevalent only among so-called digital natives, but is rather commonplace among all citizens interested in politics. This is confirmed by our data. Of those who say that they are 'very interested' in politics, 68% consume social media as news sources at least once a day in Poland. The percentage drops to 60% in Serbia and 55% in Hungary, and only to 40% in the Czech Republic. Going back to our discussion about the illiberal public sphere, as presented in Chap. 2, this could indicate that in countries where the illiberal public sphere is more advanced and incorporates a larger proportion of mainstream news media, the relative importance of social media as sources of information is greater. Furthermore, in such a context, socio-demographic factors also play a more significant role, with a higher proportion of citizens who are relatively older, more educated and living in larger cities using social media to access political news. In the next section, we shall explore whether and how these differences across social media use relate to differences in political attitudes.

6.3 Support for Democracy and (Il)liberal Attitudes Among Social Media Users

What is the relationship between social media use and people's political orientation? Existing data from Western countries are limited and fragmented, but they suggest that social media users tend to be more liberal and left-wing. According to a survey by Pew Research Centre (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019), 36% of US adult Twitter users identify as Democrats (6 percentage points above all US adults), while 21% identify as Republicans. Comparing political affiliations across different platforms, another survey from 2021 found out that more Democrats are using social media platforms than Republicans (77% vs. 68%), and that this gap is the largest for Instagram (+19% difference), followed by Twitter (+15%), and WhatsApp (+14%), and is much smaller in the case of YouTube (+6%), finally disappearing in the case of Facebook (Vogels et al., 2021). A UK survey from 2015 found that Twitter and Facebook over-represent Labour Party voters and both Twitter and Facebook users self-identified as more liberal than non-users, with Facebook users also more likely to self-identify as left-wing (Mellon & Prosser, 2017).

As for the relationship between social media use and people's attitudes towards democracy, existing research does not paint a clear picture. Scholarship in this area is rather fragmented and studies empirically addressing the question of the potential of social media to nurture the attitudinal base for democracy are rare. A rare exception is Salzman's (2019) survey, based on the 2012 Americas Barometer data set, which found a strong and positive relationship between social media use and democratic attitudes in Latin America. Focusing specifically on Central and Eastern Europe, Placek (2017) found that the use of social networking sites is associated with higher personal support for democratic norms and a democratic regime.

Other studies have been assessing the potential of social media for democratization more indirectly. In their review study, Zhuravskaya et al. (2020) argued that:

> [I]n places where the main public grievances are related to corruption, subversion of power, and control of traditional media by autocrats, free Internet and social media do improve accountability by informing the public and facilitating the organization of protests. This is exactly why autocrats increasingly resort to censoring the Internet, banning those social media that they

> cannot monitor and flooding with misinformation the social media networks that they cannot ban. (p. 433)

Adopting a more nuanced approach and systematizing evidence from a broader range of countries and political systems, Guy Schleffer and Benjamin Miller (2021) argue that social media can have different types of impact depending on the type, as well as strength of the political system. Their typology outlines four types of political systems, as a combination of weak vs. strong and democratic vs. authoritarian regimes. In weak authoritarian regimes, social media can have a destabilizing effect, by mobilizing opposition, connecting citizens, and organizing protest actions. Their effects can even lead to the toppling of the regime, as observed in Tunisia (2010) and Egypt (2011) during the 'Arab Spring' revolutions. In weak democratic regimes, such as those found in Eastern Europe, East Asia, and Latin America, social media can be exploited by populist actors to spread polarizing narratives and help erode democratic pillars, thereby exerting what Schleffer and Miller call a 'radicalizing effect' that can potentially 'turn a liberal democratic regime into an illiberal regime, or even an autocratic one' (p. 90). The authors provide the example of Brazil, where the campaign of Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 presidential election relied significantly on social media. In countries where authoritarianism is already firmly rooted, such as China or Russia, social media might help governments intensify their power by becoming part of their domestic 'surveillance machine', while simultaneously being utilized for propaganda and the spreading of disinformation abroad. Finally, in what the authors call strong liberal democratic regimes, social media may be used to weaken democratic institutions and undermine people's trust in democracy by means of orchestrated disinformation campaigns—either domestic or foreign—such as those that the United States experienced during the 2016 presidential election.

While this typology subsumes Eastern Europe rather simplistically under the 'weak democratic regime' type (citing Hungary under Viktor Orbán as an example), it is possible to draw inspiration from it even when applying a more nuanced approach towards the state and quality of democracies in Eastern Europe, including the four countries in our sample. The typology provides a useful reminder that political effects of social media are far from uniform and stable, and depend on a number of systemic factors. In democratic regimes, these factors include the extent of polarization, as well as the balance of powers between the opposition and the

government. In other words, social media might indeed provide a valuable service for authoritarian populists and illiberal political actors on their way to power (i.e. the incipient stage of the illiberal public sphere). However, once they are in power, the very tools that facilitated their success might, in turn, be used to overthrow them, presumably as long as the regime is not (yet) a fully authoritarian one and does not have these channels under its control.

However, one of the limitations of Schleffer and Miller's typology is that it treats all social media as a homogeneous entity, assuming an equal impact on political regimes regardless of the specific affordances of individual platforms in an ever more complex social media environment. Growing evidence from the field of disinformation studies suggests a need for a more differentiated approach when it comes to assessing the potential impact of platforms on democracy, especially given the widening gap between major social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) and messaging platforms (e.g. WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger) in the extent of moderation practices that limit the spreading of misinformation and conspiracy theories. Namely, as open, unencrypted platforms are adopting stricter content moderation policies, messaging platforms are increasingly turning into key channels of misinformation (Tandoc, 2021; Theocharis et al., 2023). Moreover, by taking a bird's-eye view, Schleffer and Miller's theory also fails to provide much insight into the role of social media in the formation of citizens' political attitudes and the changing modes of their engagement with politics. Yet, both attitudes and modes of engagement arguably have important implications for the stability and prospects of the political regime, especially in the context of what Schleffer and Miller define as weak democratic regimes, i.e. those on the cusp of transformation from a democratic into an illiberal regime.

The rest of this chapter seeks to tackle these important gaps in Schleffer and Miller's typology. To investigate the links between social media consumption and political attitudes, including support for democracy, we use the same three dependent variables as those introduced already in Chap. 3: the cultural liberalism index (based on the mean of eleven questions, measuring respondents' attitudes towards various minorities, including immigrants, same-sex couples, Muslims, Roma, Jewish and Black people); the constitutional liberalism index (measuring the importance that respondents assign to the key institutions and components of liberal democracy) and support for democracy. The latter variable was measured by using a question in which respondents had to choose whether they agreed that (1)

democracy is preferable to any other form of political system, or (2) under some circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one, or (3) for them, it did not matter whether a government was democratic or authoritarian.

Alongside these three dependent variables, two sets of independent variables were used in the OLS regression analysis. The first two variables measured the average frequency of using social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube) and messaging apps (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Telegram, Viber) 'for accessing news' on a 0–4 scale, ranging from never to at least once a day. The other two variable measured diversity of social networking sites and messaging apps, respectively, counting the number of platforms each respondent used at least once a week.

Contrary to expectations that dominate scholarly and popular writing on social media, regression analysis reveals few significant correlations with illiberalism. There are no significant correlations between the frequency of social networking sites use and cultural liberalism (Table 6.1), and the only correlation with higher scores for constitutional liberalism is observed in Serbia. It is worth noting that with regards to constitutional liberalism, the direction of the relationship with social media is positive also in the Czech Republic and Poland, but the coefficients are beyond the 0.05 significance threshold.

Testing the attitudes to democracy, we see that there is no significant relationship between social media use and support for democracy in the three EU member states either. However, Serbia is again an outlier, showing a significant positive correlation, meaning that more frequent use of social media for news is associated with higher support for democracy.

The analysis of the impact of the diversity of peoples' use of social networking sites use on attitudes is similarly surprising. When it comes to liberalism, the only significant link is between diversity of social media use and constitutional liberalism in Hungary. However, the relationship is actually a negative one: for Hungarian social networking sites users, increasing the diversity of platforms leads to lower support for democracy as a system of governance. At the same time, there is a positive link between diversity of social networking sites and support for democracy in Serbia.

Moving to a messaging apps, we can observe some interesting patterns which confirm significant differences not only between the types of social media platforms, but also across countries. In two of the four countries in the sample—the Czech Republic and Hungary—heavy users of messaging apps display significantly more illiberal attitudes. In the case of Czech

Table 6.1 Impact of social media use on cultural and constitutional liberalism, and support for democracy

		Social networking sites (SNS)	*Messaging apps*	*SNS diversity*	*Messaging apps diversity*
CZE	Cultural liberalism	*n.s.*	$-^{**}$	*n.s.*	$-^{**}$
	Constitutional liberalism	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	$-^{*}$
	Support for democracy	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
HUN	Cultural liberalism	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
	Constitutional liberalism	*n.s.*	$-^{*}$	*n.s.*	$-^{**}$
	Support for democracy	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
POL	Cultural liberalism	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
	Constitutional liberalism	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
	Support for democracy	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
SRB	Cultural liberalism	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
	Constitutional liberalism	$+^{**}$	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
	Support for democracy	$+^{**}$	$+^{**}$	$+^{**}$	*n.s.*

Note: Data from population survey (N = 4,082), analysis based on OLS regressions (controlled for age, gender, education, domicile size and religiosity), with cultural liberalism index (1–7 scale), constitutional liberalism index (1–7 scale), and support for democracy (democracy vs authoritarian system, 1–3 scale) as dependent variables. '+' indicates positive effect on dependent variable (i.e. increasing liberalism / support for democracy), '-' indicates negative effect, n.s. = effect not significant. Statistical significance $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$. See the Electronic Supplementary Material for complete regression data tables

users, this is related to cultural liberalism, while in Hungary this concerns constitutional liberalism. A very similar pattern is found with regard to the diversity of messaging apps. More diversity (i.e. a higher number of apps used for accessing news) is associated with lower support for constitutional liberalism in both the Czech Republic and Hungary, and with lower identification with cultural liberalism in the Czech Republic. In Serbia, there is a strong positive impact of using social networking sites on constitutional liberalism, as opposed to messaging apps, which show no correlation. Both social networking sites and messaging apps are positively associated with support for democracy in terms of frequency, and in case of social networking sites also with diversity of their use.

Even with a relatively limited amount of statistically significant correlations, our data allow us to draw some tentative conclusions about the

relationship of social media platforms with the attitudinal base for illiberalism, which point to the impact of both the type and nature of digital platforms and the character of political systems. The analysis clearly underscores the need to question general claims about the impact of 'social media use', and instead acknowledge considerable differences in the impact of social networking sites as opposed to messaging apps. At the same time, our data also suggest that the precise nature of the distinction between the two types of platforms will differ depending on the political system. This is clearest with regard to the impact of messaging apps, which are associated with illiberal attitudes in the Czech Republic and Hungary (and to some extent in Serbia, though the correlations are below the threshold for significance), suggesting that the closed, 'private' platforms are indeed more likely to serve as channels for illiberal narratives. These results are congruent with previous research from (mostly) Western countries that examined the role of messaging apps in disseminating disinformation. This pattern is exacerbated by the amount of messaging apps an individual uses for news: the greater the diversity of apps, the more illiberal attitudes are displayed by the users.

The position of Serbia deserves further elaboration, given that the country stands out as a demonstrable outlier. In Serbia, in fact, the consumption of news via social networking sites is demonstrably related to pro-liberal and pro-democracy attitudes. We have already established that Serbian participants perceive social media as far more important sources of news than participants from the other three countries, and are using them more intensely for this purpose (apart from Polish participants). Given the poor state of democracy and media freedom in the country, it is possible to assume that social networking sites are being used as alternative news sources more often by those who are dissatisfied with the current (illiberal) political regime, than those supporting it.

Going back to the theoretical arguments examined at the start of this section, we can conclude that our data provide some support for Schleffer and Miller's thesis about the 'radicalizing effect' of social media in weak democratic countries. Findings about the attitudes of Czech users of messaging apps' stand out as particularly revealing in this context. At the same time, our data also indicate that opposite tendencies might be at work in countries where democracy is under more strain or has been replaced by a hybrid (though not fully authoritarian) regime, as is the case in Serbia. However, to explore this further, we need to move beyond looking at social media as mere sources of political information and examine more broadly how people use them to engage with politics.

6.4 Online Political Participation and Political Attitudes

While existing scholarship about the links between social media use and attitudes towards democracy or towards polarizing societal issues has not led to any unanimous outcome, there is widespread consensus when it comes to assessing social media's impact on civic engagement and political participation (Boulianne, 2019). Here, meta-analyses suggest that the relationship is not only positive but increasing in strength in recent years (Boulianne, 2020). This trend is arguably driven by new forms of online participation that the affordances of social networking sites enable and encourage, namely engaging with political content via 'social buttons' (liking, sharing, retweeting, etc.). Although often classified as a 'low-effort' or 'thin' form of participation (Knoll et al., 2020; Tufekci, 2014) or even dismissed by some as 'slacktivism' (Morozov, 2009), this type of online engagement is increasingly considered as a legitimate form of political action (Halupka, 2014). Research also demonstrates that it is positively linked to offline forms of participation, such as voting, taking part in demonstrations, signing petitions, etc. (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Štětka & Mazák, 2014). The popularity of political expression through social media received a further boost in recent years, thanks to social justice movements such as #MeToo or Black Lives Matter that have successfully utilized social media for raising awareness, mobilization, and the organization of direct actions. The global spread of climate change protests, such as Greta Thunberg's #FridaysForFuture movement is also unthinkable without the engagement of millions of supporters on social media.

In Eastern Europe, social media platforms are likewise increasingly used as crucial tools of mobilization for various civic protests and digitally networked political action (cf. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Most of these protests and movements have an openly anti-government focus and are centred on issues of corruption. Examples include the Bulgarian movement 'Dance with Me' (#ДАНСwithme), which spanned across two years (2013–2014) and led to the resignation of Plamen Orecharski's government (Dimova, 2019), and the 'Rezist' protest movement in Romania in 2017 (#rezist). This movement was started by Romanian expats on social media and sparked anti-government demonstrations in over 100 cities around the world (Mercea, 2022). Corruption was also a focal point of anti-government demonstrations that took place in Slovakia in March

2018, the largest demonstrations in the country since 1989. These protests were prompted by the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and people mobilized on social media by using the hashtag #AllForJan (Školkay, 2019). In Poland, the women's rights movement 'All-Poland Women's Strike' (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, OSK), launched in 2016 in response to the proposed tightening of the abortion law, likewise widely used social media for communication and networking (Korolczuk, 2016). The popular hashtag #StrajkKobiet was utilized again in 2020 and 2021, during protests prompted by the Constitutional Court ruling that banned almost all forms of abortion.

These are just some of the most prominent examples of recent civic protests in Eastern Europe that have been significantly aided by digital platforms, and it is safe to assume that they have all been driven by a strong support for democracy and liberal causes. Does this mean that online political participation in the region is intrinsically linked with pro-democracy and liberal attitudes?

Before we try to answer this question, let us first look at the prevalence of the main types of political expression on social media platforms in the four countries in our sample. We asked respondents whether they had engaged in the following activities over the past month, namely whether they (a) 'liked' a message with political content on social media; (b) shared or retweeted a message with political content on social media; (c) commented on a message with political content on social media; (d) posted political statuses or tweeted messages with political content on their social media timeline; (e) became a 'fan' or 'friend' of a candidate or a political party. As we can see from Fig. 6.3, 'liking' a message on social media is by far the most common form of online political expression across all four countries, consistent with previous research (Štětka & Mazák, 2014). In all countries except Poland, commenting is the second most common activity; in Poland, it is sharing or retweeting a post.

Overall, the differences among the countries are not too pronounced and the resulting index of online political expression, composed of all five aforementioned items, also shows similarities rather than differences. Hungary displays the highest mean score (2.63), followed by Poland (2.52), Serbia (2.47), and the Czech Republic (2.33). This suggests that—just as with the use social media for political news—Czech social media users are less engaged in online political expression compared with their counterparts in the other three countries.

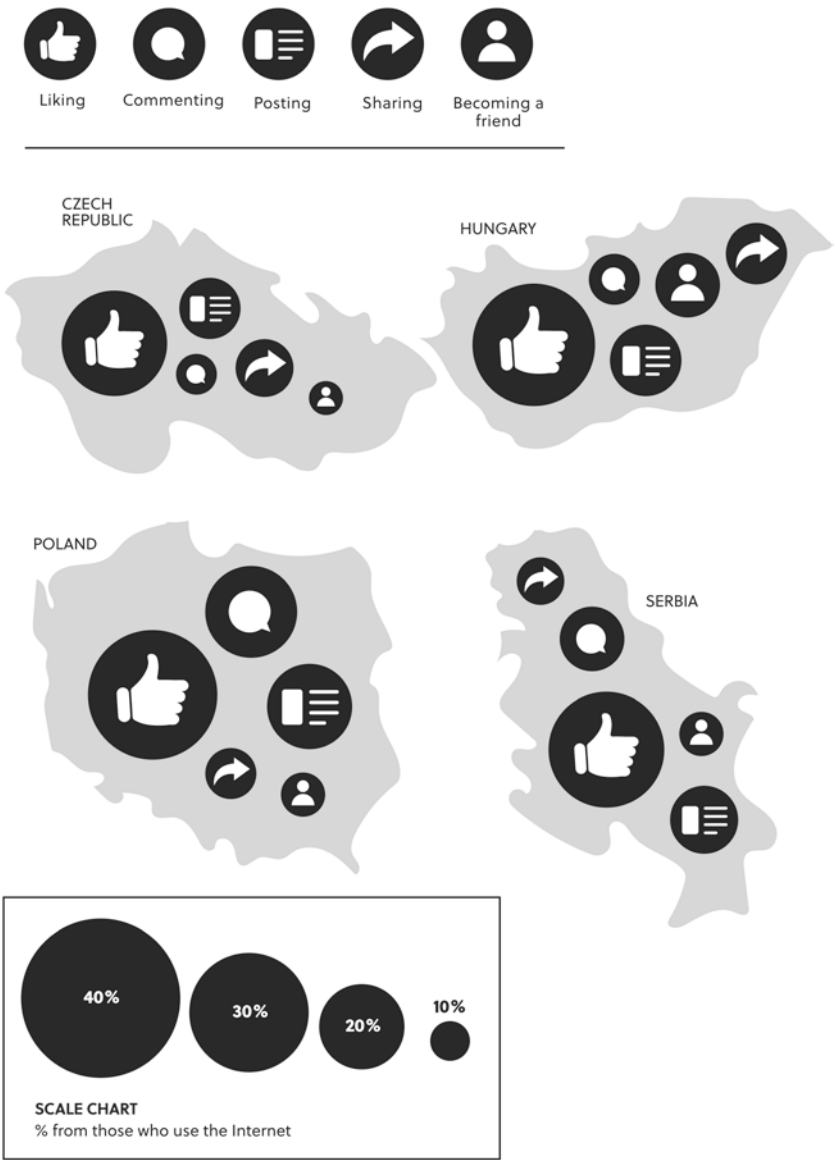

Fig. 6.3 Prevalence of different types of political expression on social media

Table 6.2 Impact of political expression via social media on political attitudes

	Cultural liberalism index	*Constitutional liberalism index*	*Support for democracy*
Czech Republic	$+^{*}$	$+^{*}$	$+^{*}$
Hungary	$+^{**}$	*n.s.*	$+^{**}$
Poland	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
Serbia	*n.s.*	$+^{**}$	$+^{**}$

Note: Data from population survey ($N = 4{,}092$), analysis based on OLS regressions (controlled for age, gender, education, domicile size and religiosity), with cultural liberalism index (1–7 scale), constitutional liberalism index (1–7 scale), and support for democracy (democracy vs authoritarian system, 1–3 scale) as dependent variables. '+' indicates positive effect on dependent variable (i.e. increasing liberalism / support for democracy), '–' indicates negative effect, n.s. = effect not significant. Statistical significance $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$. See the Electronic Supplementary Material for complete regression data tables

Table 6.2 clearly shows the positive impact of online political expression on pro-democracy and liberal attitudes. These links are strongest in Serbia and Hungary. In both countries, people who are more politically active on social media tend to be more pro-democracy oriented and display more liberal attitudes. However, there is a difference in the type of liberalism that people adhere to. In Hungary, cultural liberalism that shows a significant effect, while in Serbia online political expression is associated with support for constitutional liberalism (for cultural liberalism, the correlation is only significant for liking, not for the entire index, even if the direction of correlations for the other types of expression is the same). In the Czech Republic, we observe similar patterns to Hungary and Serbia, only slightly weaker. However, they are present on both dimensions of liberalism (constitutional and cultural). The only country where social media expression does not seem to have a significant impact is Poland.

Although we need to be mindful of drawing any strong conclusions based on such a small number of cases, these results further support our argument about the importance of considering the impact of political systems when ascertaining the effects of social media on illiberalism and democratic support. Particularly when it comes to social media as an avenue of political expression, our data suggest that digital platforms provide and important avenue for the liberal-minded, pro-democratic opposition, particularly so in countries with a hegemonic illiberal public sphere where mainstream communication channels have been monopolized by illiberal elites, as is especially the case in Hungary in Serbia.

6.5 Conclusions

This chapter has focused on the relationship between social media use, political participation, and selected attitudes related to democracy and its liberal foundations in the context of a region that has been grappling with rising illiberalism and authoritarian tendencies. We have explored to what extent social media are associated with democratic support and liberal attitudes, focusing on users who regularly employ them for accessing news, as well as those who utilize them for online political expression.

The outcomes from the quantitative part of the study allow for several preliminary interpretations. First of all, and contrary to assumptions common among much of public debate and scholarly writing on the topic, we have not been able to confirm the existence of a consistent link between social media and either pro- or anti-democratic and liberal attitudes across our sample. Instead, we have observed some differences between users in Serbia and those in the other three countries, which (unlike Serbia) have all been members of the European Union and have generally ranked higher in democracy and media freedom surveys. It is therefore possible to argue that social media occupy a different place and serve a different function in the Serbian information ecosystem, given that their use is associated with displaying liberal views and support for democracy—a correlation we have not found in any of the other countries. In light of the state of democracy and media in Serbia, it seems plausible to infer that social media in Serbia serve as independent information channels, used by the more liberal-minded part of the population whose information needs are poorly served by the predominantly government-affiliated and/or oligarchy-controlled mainstream news channels.

Our results also point to the need to distinguish more carefully between social networking sites and messaging apps. We have clearly confirmed that messaging apps are linked with more illiberal attitudes in at least two countries from our sample—the Czech Republic and Hungary—suggesting that these types of platforms might indeed be used for political information by people with more authoritarian preferences. The results are even more significant given how skewed the distribution of answers regarding constitutional liberalism is. In other words, only a minority of people lacks enthusiasm for the basic principles of constitutional liberalism (i.e. free and fair elections, freedom of speech, equal rights for women,

etc.) but this minority seems to be relying disproportionately on news from messaging apps.

Findings concerning online political participation are more unanimous, pointing in a similar direction for all the countries involved. These results demonstrate that people who use social media to express their opinions and engage with political content online tend to be rather decisively pro-democracy and liberally oriented. This relationship seems to be particularly strong in Hungary and Serbia, suggesting that in these two countries (with the Czech Republic following not far behind) online political participation is indeed more likely the domain of those who are opposing illiberal tendencies, rather than those who are supporting them. This does not mean that the pro-democracy and pro-liberal impact of political expression on social media necessarily outweighs the opposing effect of messaging apps that our data indicates in some of the countries. Neither does it outweigh the influence of concentrated, professionalized social media campaigns of illiberal political parties and leaders, especially during the election periods. Nevertheless, it does call for a more nuanced view on the role of social media in Eastern European democracies, a view that challenges Schleffer's and Miller's (2021) thesis about the 'radicalizing effect' of social media in the region. While we agree that digital platforms played a key role during the incipient stage of the illiberal public sphere, our data suggest that once illiberalism takes hold, social media might turn out to be an important channel for mobilizing opposition, both within the political system and among the civil society more widely.

While focused on Eastern Europe, these findings have important implications for our understanding of the role of social media in advancing the illiberal turn at a global scale. Even though the small number of countries investigated here means that our propositions will need further empirical testing, the data we presented nonetheless lead to the conclusion that the impact of social media on the quality of our democracies cannot be assessed without a close consideration of a number of factors, including the nature of the political system within which they operate, the relative influence of illiberal actors, and the overall advancement of the illiberal public sphere.

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CHAPTER 7

Information Disorder and the Illiberal Public Sphere

On 1 July, 2018, a Czech Facebook account 'Josef Vyskočil' posted a short video showing a crowd of passengers standing on the platform of a train station. The video was accompanied by the caption: 'Masaryk Station in Prague today after lunch time. 1500 migrants from Germany… And the media are silent, share before they delete it'. The second sentence was written in all caps and followed by a puking emoticon. Within half a day, the video was shared by nearly ten thousand Facebook users, and would have been certainly shared by more, had Facebook not taken it down only thirteen hours after it had been posted because the video was, in fact, a recording of a rush hour at the train station in Brighton in southern England (Zelenka & Wirnitzer, 2018, July 7). Still, the hoax managed to reach hundreds of thousands of users, including in Slovakia, where it was shared for example in the Facebook group 'Slovak nation', affiliated with the far-right neo-Nazi People's Party Our Slovakia (Šnídl, 2018, July 2). It remains unclear whether the post was created as a joke or as a genuine attempt to spread disinformation, as the phrase 'share before they delete it' has been used as a meme to both mobilize and ridicule those likely to share such messages. Nevertheless, the rapid viral spread of the video, which became one of the most 'successful' anti-immigration Facebook posts published that year in the Czech Republic, illustrates the strong appeal that manipulated online content can have to people's irrational

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fears, also demonstrating how easily these fears can be fuelled and exploited by illiberal political actors.

Although the mass-spreading of false information is a phenomenon that precedes the advent of the digital age (Burkhardt, 2017), in recent years it has arguably become one of the most debated issues both in the academic and in the public domain. Scholarship exploring the production, dissemination and impact of various forms of falsehoods and manipulation online—differently labelled as 'disinformation', 'misinformation', 'fake news', 'online propaganda', or 'inauthentic communication'—has been blossoming, especially since after the 2016 US presidential election (e.g. Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023; Kapantai et al., 2021; Humprecht et al., 2020). With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the discourse of mis/disinformation has expanded into the sphere of health communication, as a consequence of the global proliferation of misleading or outright false information and conspiracy theories concerning the origin of the virus, containment measures, remedies against it, and the effects of vaccination, causing what WHO President Tedros Ghebreyesus famously termed an 'infodemic' (The Lancet, 2020). At the time of writing, the Russian military aggression against Ukraine provides one of the most recent examples of information warfare, spread both online and via traditional media platforms (Alyukov, 2022; Yablokov, 2022). This has added further impetus to the growing calls for the strengthening of societal resilience towards disinformation and hybrid interference, two factors that, according to many observers, pose significant threats to democracy. This is true particularly for those countries and regions where democracy has already been weakened by the rise of illiberalism and growing polarization (Humprecht et al., 2020).

Despite the global attention recently paid to Ukraine, the majority of research on the contemporary 'information disorder' (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) has, however, largely focused on how false information spreads and operates in well-established liberal democracies, while much less is known about how it operates in other political systems and regimes. This chapter aims to fill this gap by examining the ways in which different stages of the illiberal public sphere are linked with the dissemination and reception of fabricated or manipulated information and false or misleading narratives. Utilizing data from our population and expert surveys, we first explore people's exposure to misinformation, before mapping the information ecosystems across the four countries and examining specific channels and brands that play a major role in the dissemination of

misinformation. After that, and drawing also on qualitative interviews, we examine the prevalence of beliefs that are rooted in two of the most popular conspiracy narratives in the region, which serve to mobilize support for illiberal political actors, and to stir antagonism against their liberal opponents. We then zoom in on a specific—and almost completely overlooked—communication channel which appears to be an important instrument for disinformation campaigns, the so-called 'chain emails', which are often shared across networks of family members, friends and acquaintances, especially among the elderly. We conclude the chapter by considering the implications of the observed patterns for media literacy initiatives in the region and beyond, and for the prospects of combating mis/disinformation in the context of polarization and illiberalism more generally.

Given the substantial level of conceptual plurality within this field, it is important to clarify that we are focusing on the broad phenomenon of spreading and consuming false information (including conspiracy theories) without analytically distinguishing between intentionally and unintentionally spread falsehoods, as captured by the commonly applied dichotomy of disinformation vs. misinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). While there are areas covered by the chapter where the term disinformation, understood as false information that 'is strategically shared to cause harm' (Humprecht et al., 2020, p. 495), is more relevant (e.g. when discussing the supply side of disinformation, including Russian propaganda or government-spread conspiracy theories), the original empirical data we present do not make it possible to gauge the level of intentionality with which false information content is being spread.

7.1 The Prevalence of Disinformation in Eastern Europe

While disinformation is a global phenomenon, there are good reasons to believe that Eastern Europe has been among the regions most affected by its rise over the past decade. This is largely due to the intensification of Russian disinformation campaigns following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which emboldened the Kremlin to shift towards more aggressive information warfare tactics (Bokša, 2019; Krekó, 2020). Subsequently, disinformation originating from Russia exploited the 2015 European migration crisis (Juhász & Szicherle, 2017; Braghiroli & Makarychev,

2018), spreading rumours and fake news about alleged threats posed to Europe by refugees, especially those coming from predominantly Muslim countries (see Chap. 5). Designed to increase tensions and bolster anti-immigrant sentiments, this disinformation has also contributed to a decline in EU popularity in the region in subsequent years (Bokša, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic presented another opportunity to target the region with disinformation and conspiracy theories (Moy & Gradon, 2020; Hajdu et al., 2020; Mölder & Sazonov, 2020; Gregor & Mlejnková, 2021; Magdin, 2020). This time, however, disinformation originated from both Russia and China (Győri et al., 2020; Foster, 2021). Most recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has unleashed another wave of state-sponsored propaganda and information manipulation, aimed at stoking up fears of refugees and of an economic crisis, while simultaneously undermining popular support for aid to Ukraine (Takácsy, 2023; VOA, 2022, July 16). Although disinformation about the war in Ukraine has been circulating globally, available comparative research indicates that Eastern European citizens might be particularly susceptible to false information about the war, more so than their citizens of Western Europe (Hameleers et al., 2023).

It is important to acknowledge that the widespread circulation and appeal of Russian disinformation in the region is not driven solely by Russia, but also facilitated by local actors and structural factors that make Eastern Europe particularly vulnerable to Russian information warfare. According to Bokša (2019), these factors include both the 'usual suspects', meaning the relative weakness of local civil society, media, and political structures, as well as historical, ethnic and linguistic proximity of many countries to Russia, which makes it easier to for the Kremlin to disseminate narratives that appeal specifically to concepts such as 'Slavic unity' or nostalgia after the communist regime. For Krekó (2020), the spread of disinformation among Eastern European populations is enhanced by four specific 'drivers'. First, feelings of insecurity and inferiority that provide a fertile ground for critiques of the West; second, the mystification of Russia, which makes the country appear stronger than it actually is; third, tribalism understood as 'an extreme form of polarization' that incentivizes Russia to exploit existing societal divides; and fourth, territorial disputes from the past, which nurture both xenophobic nationalism and revisionist expansionism (such as in Hungary). Finally, as the discussion of the mainstreaming of homophobia and anti-immigrant racism in Chap. 5 suggests, disinformation is often appropriated by local actors,

including illiberal leaders who use false information and rumours to polarize the electorate. As might be expected, not all these factors are equally relevant for all countries in the region. For instance, narratives emphasizing Slavic unity are much more engrained in Serbia than in the Czech Republic and Poland, given Serbia's stronger linguistic and religious ties to Russia.

Finally, we should note that there are other foreign actors besides Russia that are engaging in influence operations across Eastern Europe. Alongside China that has increasingly been expanding its 'sharp power' in the region (see, e.g. Karásková et al., 2020), there is evidence of influence campaigns by Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf states. These are carried out especially in South-eastern Europe, both via traditional (broadcast) media and social media channels (Filipova & Shopov, 2022). Furthermore, the circulation of disinformation is also facilitated by non-state international actors, which are particularly active in promoting false information related to topics, such as LGBTQ minorities, abortion, or immigration. One such actor is *The Epoch Times*, a US-based global media empire running its news outlets in over 30 countries, including the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania (Loucaides & Perrone, 2022, March 10). Linked to the religious movement Falun Gong, *The Epoch Times* has been known for pushing an ultra-conservative agenda and various conspiracy theories, including during the 2016 US presidential election (Žabka, 2020, December 3). Another example of a far-right international actor that is part of the Eastern European disinformation ecosystem is CitizenGO, a Catholic conservative advocacy group founded in Spain in 2013 that engages in online activism against 'gender ideology', abortion, and LGBTQ rights, and has been particularly influential in Hungary and Poland (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

Whether stemming from Russia or elsewhere, there is widespread consensus among observers that Eastern Europe is heavily exposed to disinformation campaigns aimed at subverting the democratic political system, as well as at destabilizing the geopolitical orientation of the region. This assessment is supported by the results of our expert survey, carried out among selected academics, media professionals and civil society representatives with proficient knowledge of the respective country's media and communication systems. As Table 7.1 shows, experts in all four countries see the problem of disinformation as significant, with Serbia receiving the highest score (an average of 6.54 on a 7-point scale), followed by Hungary (6.31), Poland (6.06), and the Czech Republic (5.41).

Table 7.1 Threat of disinformation in selected countries (expert survey)

	Significance of disinformation		*Threat of Russian disinformation*	
	Mean	*St. Dev.*	*Mean*	*St. Dev.*
Czech Republic	5.41	0.939	5.29	0.849
Hungary	6.31	0.855	5.77	1.235
Poland	6.06	0.966	5.59	1.873
Serbia	6.54	0.660	4.54	1.266

Note: Data from expert survey (N=60). Experts were answering questions 'How significant is the problem of disinformation in your country?' (1, not significant at all; 7, very significant) and 'How big is the threat of Russian disinformation in your country?' (1, no threat at all; 7, very big threat). See the Methodological Appendix for further details on the expert survey

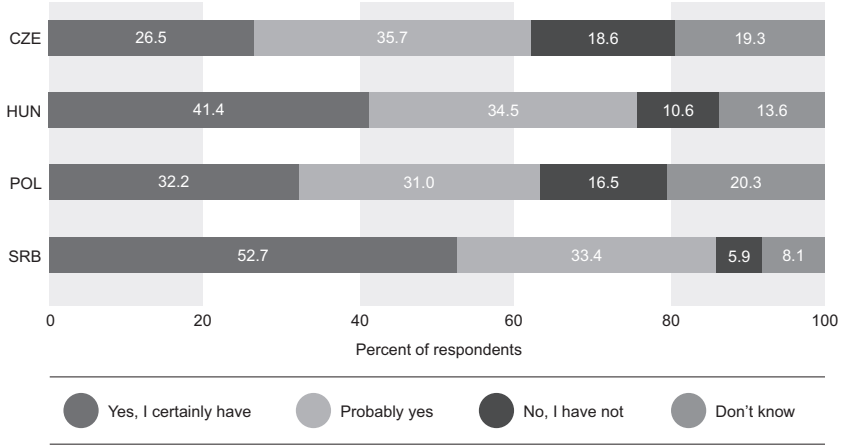

Fig. 7.1 Encountering false information ('over the last month')

The experts' evaluation is closely aligned with the data from our population survey (see Fig. 7.1). The proportion of people who believe they have encountered false information on the Internet or social media 'during the last month' is the highest in Serbia (86%), where over half of the respondents (53%) were 'certain' to have come across information they believed was false, and a further 33% thought they 'probably' encountered it. In Hungary, 76% of people indicated that they had seen or read false information online, with 41.4% being certain about it. The prevalence of self-perceived encounters with mis/disinformation is lower in Poland and the Czech Republic (63% and 62%, respectively), with the Czech

respondents being less certain about it (26.5%) than the Polish ones (32%). Overall, it is apparent that the prevalence and presumed societal impact of mis/disinformation—as estimated by experts and perceived by the public—is notably higher in Serbia and Hungary than in Poland and the Czech Republic. This is consistent with the level of expansion of the illiberal public sphere, which has reached the hegemonic stage in the former two countries, as argued in Chap. 2.

Apart from asking about the significance of the problem of disinformation in general, our expert survey also included a question about the threat of Russian disinformation. The comparison across responses to the two questions (Table 7.1) is particularly telling and offers further support to our earlier arguments about the relative importance of Russian and other actors (including domestic politicians and media) in the proliferation of disinformation. In the Czech Republic, the mean scores for both questions nearly overlap (5.41 vs. 5.29), indicating that the issue of disinformation is, to a large extent, synonymous with the problem of Russian propaganda. There is a greater discrepancy between these scores in Poland (0.47 difference) and in Hungary (0.54), and especially in Serbia, where the gap between the perceived magnitude of disinformation and the perceived threat of Russian disinformation is by far the widest (2 points). This suggests that Russian influence is only one of many factors contributing to the information disorder in the three countries, and that the production and dissemination of disinformation might be attributed to other actors, including domestic ones.

This interpretation is consistent with arguments developed in Chap. 5, specifically with evidence suggesting that false information concerning the 2015 refugee crisis was actively promoted by domestic illiberal leaders. Finally, the role of non-Russian actors was also highlighted in responses to open-ended questions in our expert survey, with one of the Serbian experts commenting: 'A more important issue [than Russian disinformation] is that Russian influence is part of the official narrative carried out by high-level officials and, as such, is easily spread via mainstream media' (Serbian expert, journalist). In other words, it is plausible that narratives aligning with Russian geopolitical interests have gradually become an integral part of domestic public conversations in the three countries—especially in Serbia—and are no longer reliant solely on foreign disinformation campaigns, but increasingly amplified by domestic political elites and mainstream media. Data presented in the following section, which focuses on mapping disinformation news ecosystems in the four countries, supports this argument.

7.2 Channels of Disinformation: Mapping Disinformation News Ecosystems

In order to better understand the scope and depth of mis/disinformation in the region—whether originating from Russia, from other foreign powers, or from domestic actors—we need to take a closer look at the broader news media landscape in each of the four countries, and examine the role that specific news media types and brands play in the local disinformation ecosystem. Given the scarcity of empirical research on the presence of false information in news media content in these countries (for exceptions, see e.g. Jovanović, 2018; Rosińska, 2021), this mapping draws on our expert survey, aimed at identifying media known for disseminating disinformation (see Methodological Appendix for further details on the expert survey).[1] However, it has to be emphasized that the purpose of this exercise is not to produce a complete overview of the disinformation ecosystem, but rather to point out some of its key features in order to highlight the similarities and differences across the four countries in our study and reflect on how different disinformation ecosystems interact with different stages of evolution of the illiberal public sphere.

The findings display notable differences in the types of news media that, according to local experts, contribute to the spreading of disinformation. In the Czech Republic, the disinformation news ecosystem is mostly composed of fringe, 'alternative' online news projects, such as *AC24*, *Aeronet*, and *Protiproud*,[2] which often promote pro-Russian narratives and conspiracy theories focusing on immigration, LGBTQ issues, the EU and Ukraine, but have a limited reach. In 2020, none of them was consumed by more than 4% of the online population (Newman et al., 2020). The only exception is *Parlamentní listy* (parlamentnilisty.cz), a tabloid-style political news outlet with a sizeable audience that, according to

[1] For the purposes of expert survey, the following definition of disinformation was used in the questionnaire, coined by the European Commission's High Level Expert Group's Report, namely 'all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit' (European Commission, 2018, p. 3). While this is a broader definition of disinformation than the one by Humprecht et al. (2020), cited in the introduction to this chapter, they share a core focus on the intentionality of harm that is sought by those who produce or disseminate such information.

[2] Until its EU-wide ban by the European Commission on 2 March 2022, in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, *Sputnik*—the Russian government-controlled online news service—also counted among the main disinformation websites in the Czech Republic, as well as in Poland and Hungary.

analysts, occupies a 'grey zone' between disinformation and mainstream news websites, as it 'combines genuine news coverage based on credible sources with conspiracy theories' (Syrovátka & Štěpánek, 2019; see also Štětka et al., 2021). A handful of mainstream commercial media, both online news and television stations, have also been associated with occasional spreading of disinformation (*iDnes.cz*, *Novinky.cz*, TV Barrandov, TV Prima), but are not perceived as a stable part of the Czech disinformation ecosystem.

In Poland, the range of media seen by experts as frequently disseminating disinformation is more diverse. As in the Czech Republic, there is a segment of alternative online portals, such as *Niezalezna*, *Wrealu24*, and *Kresy*, linked with pro-Russian and anti-Western conspiracies and propaganda, but attracting a relatively limited readership. However, unlike in the Czech Republic, there is also a sizeable segment of right-wing conservative media outlets, including both online and traditional media, which are considered by the experts to be engaged in the production and dissemination of disinformation, such as the weeklies *Do Rzeczy* and *Sieci*, the daily *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, or *wPolityce* (wPolityce.pl), a right-wing online news portal closely tied to the party Law and Justice, and considered as 'one of the most opinion-forming internet portals' in Poland (Winiarska-Brodowska et al., 2022, p. 26). Another important outlet in this segment is the ultra-conservative *Radio Maryja*, founded and headed by the controversial Catholic priest Tadeusz Rydzyk (Krzemiński, 2017). What arguably distinguishes the Czech and Polish cases the most, however, is the inclusion of the public service broadcaster *TVP* in the Polish disinformation news ecosystem. In fact, the expert survey (see Appendix) places *TVP* at the top of the disinformation-prone mainstream outlets, right next to *Radio Maryja*.

In Hungary, too, experts agree that government-controlled public service television broadcasters (MTV, TV2) and the radio station Kossuth Radio are among the news organizations spreading disinformation. According to some of the experts, the entire MTVA conglomerate—the organization operating all public media channels, as well as the news agency MTI—is repeatedly spreading disinformation originating from Russian sources. One expert even extended this assessment to commercial outlets whose ownership was transferred in 2018 to the government-controlled Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), arguing that 'pro-government outlets are the most important sources of disinformation and they often follow the lead of Russia Today or Sputnik

on topics, such as EU, migration, Ukraine, and liberal democracy' (Hungarian expert, journalist). Beyond KESMA, the spectrum of Hungarian outlets participating in the diffusion of disinformation also includes high-ranking news websites (*Origo.hu*) and conservative print outlets (*Magyar Nemzet*, *Magyar Hírlap*).[3]

In Serbia, the disinformation news ecosystem appears to be driven primarily by tabloid papers, led by the dailies *Informer*, *Alo!*, and *Srpski Telegraf* (both print and online editions). In particular, *Informer*—the most-circulated Serbian daily—has been defined as a 'champion of disinformation' by one of the experts in our survey, a label supported by empirical analysis which concluded that the newspaper has been systematically employing 'discursive strategies of deception and falsehoods' in creating and sustaining a positive image of Aleksandar Vučić (Jovanović, 2018, p. 34). Alongside tabloids, leading commercial TV stations such as Prva or TV Happy are also viewed by our survey's experts as frequently disseminating disinformation. This, however, is not the case for the public service Radio-televizija Serbia (RTS), which—even if not completely immune to disinformation—sets it apart from its Hungarian and Polish counterparts. Another feature of the Serbian disinformation news ecosystem that stands out in comparison to the other three countries is the continuing strong presence of the Russian government-controlled news agency Sputnik, operating both as a website and radio station (Radio Sputnik Serbia), and regarded as the main Russian propaganda channel not just in Serbia, but also across the Western Balkans (Duffy & Samuel, 2020).

In sum, it is apparent that differences in the scope and composition of disinformation news ecosystems in the four countries are determined by the extent of involvement of mainstream media. While in the Czech Republic, such involvement is relatively modest and the primary channels of disinformation are found among alternative, pro-Russian but mostly fringe websites, the scope of the disinformation ecosystem in the other three countries is significantly greater and involves mainstream media. Especially in Hungary and Serbia, mainstream media clearly serve as the main pillars of the disinformation ecosystem. Together with the active involvement of government-controlled public service media in Hungary and Poland, this finding problematizes the assumption that disinformation in the region is primarily imported from outside and driven by external

[3] The Hungarian daily newspaper *Magyar Hírlap* ceased to be published in print in July 2022, operating only online since then.

actors. Rather, it can be argued that especially in countries at an advanced stage of the illiberal public sphere, domestic channels of production and dissemination of disinformation are just as prominent and gradually overshadow the influence of foreign outlets. Arguably, the growing involvement of domestic media in the spreading of disinformation is closely linked with, and partly driven by, the rise of illiberal political actors to power. In their bid to polarize the electorate and boost public support for illiberal policies, illiberal politicians and other opinion makers draw on disinformation—including from foreign sources—thereby turning it into an integral part of domestic political debates. As a result, the rise of the illiberal sphere goes hand in hand with the expansion of the disinformation news ecosystem, facilitating the transition of falsehoods from alternative, fringe outlets to mainstream media channels.

7.3 Captivating Conspiracies: George Soros and the Smolensk Disaster

So far, this chapter has examined information disorder in Eastern Europe mainly in relation to the perceived prevalence of disinformation and the mapping of disinformation news ecosystems in each of the examined countries. In this chapter, we turn to the specific narratives that circulate through these ecosystems, focusing on one particular type of disinformation: conspiracy theories (cf. Engelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Defined as 'explanations of events or circumstances that involve a group of powerful people acting in secret for their own benefit' (Strömback et al., 2022, p. 55), conspiracy theories often combine elements of correct and false content (Engelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Owing to this, they are notoriously difficult to verify as true or false (Kapantai et al., 2021, p. 1325), making them both appealing and pervasive.

Of the various conspiracy theories currently circulating in post-socialist Eastern Europe (see e.g. Astapova et al., 2020), those concerning the Hungarian-born US investor and philanthropist George Soros have been among the most popular and the most frequently exploited by illiberal actors across the region and beyond (Benková, 2018). Soros has been the subject of conspiracy theories since the early 1990s, when he became actively involved in the process of rebuilding democracy and civil society in post-communist Europe through the Open Society Foundation, which funded a range of civil society initiatives in the region (Langer, 2021).

However, these conspiracy theories received a new boost in the mid-2010s, especially following the 2015 European migration crisis. The entanglement of the migration crisis with an already existing anti-Soros sentiment has been most visible in Hungary where it 'emerged as the dominant conspiratorial narrative within the Hungarian public sphere after 2015' (Pintilescu & Magyari, 2020, p. 207). The conspiracy story alleging that Soros has been orchestrating the inflow of migrants from Muslim and African countries into Europe in order to undermine 'the European way of life'—and, more explicitly, 'Islamise' and 'de-Christianise' Europe (Langer, 2021)—has been actively promoted by Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party and spread by their allied media. Such conspiracy narratives were furthered in 2017 by the 'national consultation' on the so-called 'Soros plan' which, according to the government, involved enforcing EU-wide distribution of immigrants across the member states. This systematic smear campaign, led via billboards, leaflets, and television ads, and costing over 250 million dollars in 2017 only (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018), cemented the portrayal of George Soros as number one public enemy in Hungary (Bárd, 2020). The anti-Soros rhetoric, underpinned by conspiracy theories, has been a key part of Viktor Orbán's communication strategy ever since, and has been used to legitimize his continuing attacks on NGOs, academia, and the LGBTQ+ community, depicting Soros 'as an arch-enemy linked to almost anyone who opposes his government' (Plenta, 2020, p. 522).

In Serbia, George Soros has been a popular target of political actors and (mostly tabloid) media too, though the conspiracy theories surrounding him have focused less on migration and more on his alleged attempts to undermine sovereignty and integrity of Serbia via the civil society sector. The anti-Soros sentiments, already present since the times of Slobodan Milošević who banned OSF operations in Serbia in 1996 (see Stubbs, 2013), have been significantly bolstered by the so-called 'Stop Operation Soros' campaign in 2017, first started by the Macedonian government a year earlier. The campaign targeted NGOs and human rights activists accused of undermining the national governments of Macedonia and Serbia by siding with ethnic Albanians (Kisić, 2017). While the campaign against Soros has primarily been waged by far-right actors, especially the SNP Naši, rather than by the leading government party as in Hungary, the government-allied media have been amplifying the anti-Soros rhetoric and keeping the conspiratorial tropes of Soros as the enemy of independent Serbia afloat in subsequent years as well (European Western Balkans, 2022).

In the Czech Republic, conspiracy theories invoking the name of George Soros have been peddled primarily by far-right and far-left political subjects (mainly SPD and the Communist Party) as well as by alternative and social media (Břešťan, 2023, August 21), without having a notable presence in mainstream political or media discourse. Nevertheless, this certainly does not mean their societal impact has been negligible. Possibly, the most successful Soros-related conspiracy theory has been one that alleged the 2019 anti-government protests that took place in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary to have been funded by Soros. 56% of Czechs agreed with this theory according to a poll by the opinion research company STEM (Syrovátka & Pinkas, 2020). Recently, Soros has been part of disinformation circulating around the COVID-19 pandemic, asserting that he had been the mastermind behind the pandemic, alongside with Bill Gates (Mejzrová, 2021, December 9). Even the former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš jumped on the bandwagon of Soros conspiracies in 2022 when he shared a hoax about the investigative journalist Pavla Holcová allegedly collaborating with Soros to smear him ahead of the 2023 presidential election—a lie he was ordered to apologize for by the court in Prague (iRozhlas.cz, 2023, August 15).

In Poland, anti-Soros conspiracy theories have also been relatively less prominent in the public domain than in Hungary, Serbia, and elsewhere in the region, including Slovakia (Plenta, 2020), Romania (Pintilescu & Magyari, 2020), and Macedonia (Kisić, 2017). However, they have been promoted not just by far-right actors and fringe media but occasionally also by politicians from the ruling Law and Justice party, including its leader Jarosław Kaczyński, who repeatedly accused Soros for allegedly promoting of multiculturalism and attempting to undermine 'traditional values' and the nation-state (Mergler & McLaughlin, 2019, May 27). These claims resonate with deep-seated antisemitic conspiracies that have long been an established part of the Polish political discourse (Astapova et al., 2020). Nevertheless, when it comes to popularity and political impact of conspiracy theories in Poland, the ones related to Soros pale in comparison with those surrounding the plane crash in Smolensk in April 2010. The crash cost the lives of President Lech Kaczyński, his wife, and ninety-four other people, most of whom were high-ranked government officials, politicians, and military officers travelling to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the massacre in Katyń. Widely perceived as the most tragic event in Poland's post-WWII history, the disaster quickly became 'a breeding ground for conspiracy explanations' (Bilewicz et al., 2019, p. 84),

accusing Russia of a deliberate sabotage that led to the crash. Even though official investigation by Polish authorities did not corroborate these speculations and concluded that the plane crash was an accident, the narratives blaming Russia and/or Polish authorities for the crash have been instrumentalized by the Law and Justice party, for which the tragic event—and its subsequent ritual commemorations—became 'a turning point in [its] political ideology' (Przybylski, 2018, p. 56). Combined with the attacks on the government for its alleged 'collusion' with Russia to conceal the 'truth about Smolensk', the conspiracy played an important role in the electoral victory of Law and Justice in 2015 (Stanley & Cześnik, 2019, p. 75) and has been used ever since to mobilize the party's electorate and fuel societal divisions (Bilewicz et al., 2019). In the words of Timothy Snyder (2018), the 'Smolensk catastrophe united Poland for a day and then polarized it for years' (p. 5).

It is apparent that the above reviewed conspiracy narratives, whether concerning George Soros or the Smolensk plane crash, have become an established part of the disinformation ecosystems across the four countries in our study and have been woven into the rhetoric of illiberal political actors to rally against their opponents and bolster support among voters. However, beyond mostly anecdotal evidence, there is limited knowledge about people's views on these conspiracies, as well as about the relationship with their media consumption habits. The data from our survey, as well as qualitative interviews, help to fill this gap and. By using these two specific cases as examples, we hope to shed more light on the ways people's conspiracy beliefs are intertwined with broader patterns observed in the illiberal public sphere.

With regard to George Soros, we asked our survey respondents to give their 'general opinion about his activities'—a question we used as a proxy for believing in conspiracy theories concerning him (Table 7.2). The most unfavourable opinions are found in Serbia, where almost half of the people (45%) saw the activities of George Soros in a negative light and only 8% evaluated them positively; at the same time, almost one-fifth of respondents had never heard of him. In Hungary, the name of George Soros is clearly polarizing (30% favourable vs. 37% unfavourable opinions) and almost everybody knew who he was. In the Czech Republic, on the contrary, 43% of respondents did not recall having heard of Soros, and a further 11% did not have any opinion on him; and while the balance among the rest is slightly tilted towards a negative view (with the majority of those

Table 7.2 Opinions on George Soros and the Smolensk plane crash (% of answers)

	Opinion on George Soros' activities				
	Unfavourable	*Neutral*	*Favourable*	*Don't know*	*Never heard of him*
Czech Republic	20.5	11.1	14.2	11.4	42.8
Hungary	36.6	16.0	29.7	14.1	3.5
Serbia	45.0	13.6	8.0	14.6	18.9
	Smolensk plane crash—deliberately caused or accident				
	Deliberate	*Neutral*	*Accident*	*Don't know*	*Never heard about it*
Poland	31.3	10.3	46.2	11.8	0.4

Note: Data from population survey ($N = 4092$), weighted by socio-demographics. For further details on the data collection, see the Methodological Appendix. For survey questions, see the Electronic Supplementary Material

people over 55 years of age), the figures overall indicate a relatively low presence of Soros-related conspiracies in the public sphere.

With regard to Smolensk, almost half of Polish respondents (46%) did *not* believe that the Smolensk plane crash had been deliberately caused by someone, compared with only 31% who did. This suggests that while the disaster is still a polarizing issue to some extent, the conspiracy theory about the crash being deliberately caused has a relatively limited appeal among the general population.

Having established the susceptibility to these two specific conspiracy narratives, we can now explore their links to people's news consumption habits. The data (see Table 7.3) show several clear patterns, including a stark contrast between audiences in the Czech Republic and those in Hungary and Poland, pointing to different roles of specific media types in the disinformation ecosystem of these countries. First, controlling for age and education, heavy consumption of public service media is linked with significantly more negative opinions about George Soros in Hungary, and with believing in the Smolensk conspiracy in Poland. In contrast, Czech audiences relying heavily on PSM for news display, are characterized by significantly more favourable views about Soros than those who do not follow public service television and/or radio.

The opposite pattern is observed when it comes to the online domain, constituted by news websites and social media. Heavy consumption of selected news websites is associated with unfavourable views on Soros in the Czech Republic, but with more positive views in Hungary. In Hungary,

Table 7.3 Impact of different news channels on conspiracy beliefs

	Czech Republic (Soros)	*Hungary (Soros)*	*Poland (Smolensk)*	*Serbia (Soros)*
PSM (TV+radio)	-**	+**	+**	*n.s.*
News websites	+	-**	-**	*n.s.*
Social networking sites	*n.s.*	-**	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
Messaging platforms	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
WhatsApp	*n.s.*	-**	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
FB Messenger	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
Telegram	*n.s.*	-**	+**	*n.s.*
Viber	-**	-**	+**	*n.s.*
Pro-government media diet	+**	+**	+**	*n.s.*
Anti-government media diet	-**	-**	-**	-**

Note: Data from population survey ($N = 4082$), analysis based on OLS regressions (controlled for age, education, gender and domicile size), with conspiracy beliefs as dependent variable. '+' indicates positive effect on dependent variable (i.e. increasing probability of believing in the particular conspiracy theory) '-' indicates negative effect; n.s. = effect not significant. Statistical significance * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. See the Electronic Supplementary Material for complete regression data tables.

the same pattern of relationship is also true for consuming news on social media, as it is in Serbia. Likewise, news websites' consumption is correlated with lower inclination towards believing in the Smolensk conspiracy by audiences in Poland. Messaging apps do not show significant effects when combined as a group, but on the level of individual apps—which we have decided to consider individually based on some of the findings discussed in Chap. 6—it appears that Hungarian users of WhatsApp, Telegram and Viber are notably more resistant to Soros-related conspiracies, while the users of the latter two platforms in Poland are more likely to believe in the Smolensk conspiracy. These results reveal interesting differences in the role that these (still relatively new) platforms play as potential vehicles of disinformation in these two countries. When it comes to overall news diets with regard to political-ideological bias of specific news brands (as discussed in Chap. 3), the analysis shows that susceptibility to conspiracies correlates strongly with having a pro-government media diet. Conversely, people who consume predominantly anti-government media have a positive view on George Soros (in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Serbia) and do not believe in the Smolensk conspiracy (in Poland).

Some of these survey findings are further supported by our interviews, especially with regard to the role of public service media. In Hungary, those interviewees who believed in conspiracy narrative about Soros were

generally pro-government oriented, and most of them consumed news from PSM and pro-government media in general. One such example is provided by a respondent (Hun-14, female, 56) who criticized Soros for his alleged attempts to 'influence the world' without having been 'democratically elected', and for financing NGOs which, according to her, were undermining society's values. She appears to have come across these narratives mostly from the public service television channel *M1*:

> *Interviewer: But does he [Soros] influence people in some way?*
> Well, um… Those NGOs that he finances try to enforce values on society that most people do not agree with. For example…on how they treat migrants, claiming that they should be paid compensation… […] I hear about this every day.
> *Interviewer: In HírTV and M1?*
> I hear it on *M1* as well…On *M1*, this is always mentioned in the news. (Hun-14 female, 56)

In the Czech Republic, an elderly interviewee (Cze-03, male, 65) who voted in favour of the government quoted *Novinky.cz*—one of the leading news websites, known for tabloid-style coverage—as a source of information on Soros. His opinion had clearly been influenced by the allegations of Soros' support for the 2019 anti-government protests organized by the civic movement Million Moments for Democracy:

> *Interviewer: What is your opinion on George Soros?*
> In line with what I read.
> *Interviewer: Rather positive?*
> Rather negative…Because what I read is about dirty tricks he is supporting…The 'Milion chvilek' demonstration [Million Moments for Democracy], well… He is just involved in all the bad things that happen around here.
> *Interviewer: I see. And is this something your read on Novinky?*
> Not only on *Novinky*, also on other websites. (Cze-03, male, 65)

7.4 Chain Emails as Channels of Mis/Disinformation: An Eastern European Specialty?

While the above quoted examples illustrate the potential effects of disinformation spread via traditional media, those are obviously not the only channels through which conspiracy narratives and other forms of

disinformation are being disseminated in the region. Social networking sites and messaging platforms are, of course, the usual suspects in this area. The data presented in the previous section indicate that they certainly play a part, even if their impact might differ depending on the type of platform. However, amidst concern about the role that the latest digital technologies play in the proliferation of disinformation, the influence of some of the older technologies has been largely overlooked. One such channel is old-school email communication. According to anecdotal evidence, emails are getting out of fashion among the younger generation (Milmo & Packham, 2023), but appear to be holding ground among those who grew up before the social media revolution. Although emails have long been used in election campaign communication (Dommett & Temple, 2018; Baldwin-Philippi, 2017; Lilleker et al., 2015), especially for grassroots fundraising and mobilization (Magleby et al., 2018), academic research exploring political emails is limited, mostly owing to their semi-private nature (Mathur et al., 2023).

Despite the lack of systematic scrutiny of email communication, it is no secret that political emails have been used for strategic deception, propaganda, and manipulation. In their study of 300,000 political emails sent by thousands of political campaigns and organizations during the 2020 US election cycle, Mathur et al. (2023) identified a significant amount of manipulative tactics, including 'some level of deception or clickbait' (p. 1). Yet, scholars have rarely included emails into the repertoire of channels used for political misinformation research, possibly because the issue was not considered serious enough (Burroughs, 2013). The underestimation of email communication occurred in spite of the fact that, in the United States, anonymized emails have been known to serve as key instruments for sharing information among audiences of prominent right-wing bloggers, Conservative Talk Radio, and Fox News (Frum, 2012, August 8; Burroughs, 2013). For instance, in his reflection on conspiracy theories about President Obama during the 2012 presidential election campaign, political commentator David Frum referred to 'chain emails', arguing that they formed part of an 'alternative reality' and 'shape[d] the worldview of Fox News' (Frum, 2012, August 8; see also Duffy et al., 2012 who make a similar point in their analysis of chain emails about Barack Obama).

With the ascent of social media as the primary channel of networked political communication, research on chain emails never took off. However, that does not mean that the phenomenon disappeared. Curiously, the only empirical evidence of chain emails being used as

instruments for spreading misinformation in recent years comes from Central Europe, and from the Czech Republic in particular, where emails have become an established part of the local disinformation ecosystem (Filipec, 2023; Štětka et al., 2021). While the exact time of the emergence of political chain emails remains unknown, they came to the fore during the 2015 migration crisis, and especially during the 2018 presidential election campaign, which saw an 'extensive disinformation campaign […] organized by unknown entities through direct-email chains' in support of the incumbent President Miloš Zeman (European Values, 2018, February 1). The emails contained various conspiracy theories about Zeman's challenger Jiří Drahoš, including allegations that he was a former collaborator of the Czechoslovak secret police before 1989, a promoter of unrestricted immigration, or even a paedophile. The fact that Zeman won the election by a margin of only 3% ignited speculations about the extent to which his victory might have been facilitated by the effect of chain emails (Syrovátka & Hroch, 2018). Further waves of chain emails were subsequently encouraged by the COVID-19 pandemic (Filipec, 2023), the war in Ukraine (European Values, 2022), and the 2023 presidential election campaign (Žabka, 2022, December 7). The latter contributed to spread falsehoods and manipulative narratives about the candidate of the liberal-democratic bloc Petr Pavel (Plevák, 2023, January 27).

There is no reliable information about the overall volume or exact origin of chain emails circulating in the Czech Republic. However, a non-profit citizen organization Czech Elves (cesti-elfove.cz) has been maintaining an online database of chain emails and gathered over 24,000 unique emails over a five-year span (2018–2023), with over ten thousand collected in 2022 only (Filipec, 2023). According to the members of Czech Elves who analyse, classify, and seek to debunk chain emails, their content is characterized by a tabloid style of writing that appealing to emotions and often contains 'demagogically manipulative' or outright false information, including conspiracy theories (Czech Elves, 2023). An in-depth analysis of chain emails concerning the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that 'disinformation contained in chain emails is supportive of illiberal tendencies' and concluded that chain emails 'enhanced the illiberal forces in the country and undermined the trust of citizens in public institutions, scientific authorities, and elites in general' (Filipec, 2023). Nevertheless, although the narratives of chain emails are largely in line with Russian geopolitical interests, often copied or adapted from pro-Kremlin news channels and 'alternative' websites (Czech Elves, 2023;

Filipec, 2023), journalistic investigations revealed that not all of them can be ascribed to professional campaigners or foreign interference agents. Rather, at least some of their creators and 'super-spreaders' appear to be ordinary Czech citizens, most often pensioners driven by anti-system convictions and prone to conspiracy beliefs (Jandourek, 2023, January 31).

As pointed out earlier, research on political chain emails outside of the Czech Republic is scarce. A rare exception is found in a report on pro-Kremlin disinformation in Hungary, which acknowledges the presence of chain emails among the elderly and claims that 'their efficiency is much higher than any news portal' (Bartha et al., 2017, p. 12). To shed more light on chain emails and their audiences across the four countries in our sample, we included relevant questions also in our own investigation, both in the population survey and in qualitative interviews and media diaries. As expected, political chain emails are most prevalent in the Czech Republic, where they are received by 39% of the adult population. In Poland, the share is 31%, followed by Hungary at 24% and Serbia at 21%. Most citizens who receive such emails also engage in their dissemination by forwarding them to other people. This is the case for 53% of recipients of political chain emails in the Czech Republic, 66% in Serbia, and 69% in Poland. The proportion is slightly lower only in Hungary, where slightly less than half (49%) of the recipients of chain emails forward them on. However, perhaps more revealing than the overall prevalence of chain emails is the breakdown by age categories (see Fig. 6.3), which clearly indicates that in most countries, receiving chain emails is clearly associated with age. In the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, the eldest age group (above 55 years of age) has by far the highest proportion of chain email recipients, making up 49% of the entire cohort in both the Czech Republic and Poland. Zooming in on those aged 65 and above, the survey suggests that 56.5% of them receive political chain emails in the Czech Republic, the highest proportion of all four countries. In other words, it is safe to say that more than half of Czech pensioners are targeted by this type of communication, and more than half of those participate on their circulation, forwarding them further (Fig. 7.2).

In other countries, age differences affecting the forwarding of emails are much less apparent, which suggests that people's active participation in these communication networks is driven by various factors and might not necessarily be linked with disinformation. This tentative assumption is supported by the ideological profile of respondents who said they forwarded political chain emails. In the Czech Republic, those who forward

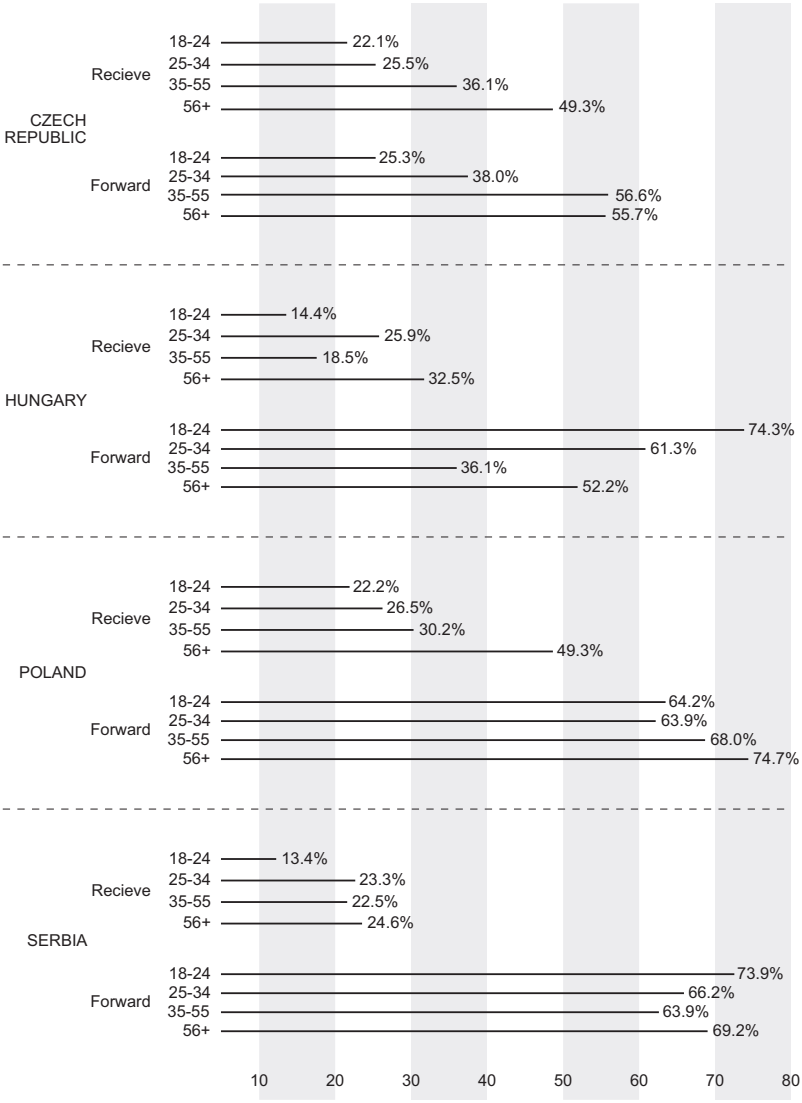

Fig. 7.2 Share of people receiving and forwarding political chain emails. (Note: The graph shows a total % of people who responded positively to the survey questions: 'Do you receive from your friends, acquaintances or family members emails addressed to multiple recipients that are related to politics?' and 'If you receive such emails, do you forward them to other people?' The percentage of people forwarding chain emails is calculates from those who receive them)

chain emails are significantly more likely to be hostile to immigration (85% vs. 64% of those who do not engage in forwarding such emails) and same-sex adoption (45% vs. 30%). They also believe that Russia has 'little influence' over the Czech Republic (42% vs. 27% of those who do not forward emails) and that the EU integration went 'too far' (58% vs. 40%). These patterns are not observed in any of the other three countries where there are either no marked differences or an inverse relationship. For example, the approval of same-sex adoption is visibly higher among those who do engage in forwarding chain emails in Hungary, Poland, and Serbia. This suggests that the use of chain emails in interpersonal political communication not only varies in its scope and significance across different Eastern European countries, but also has a different function in their respective online political communication environments. In the Czech Republic, it is clearly associated with the spreading of illiberal attitudes and can be seen as an important instrument of the illiberal public sphere. In the other three countries, it is either insignificant, or it might even be utilized by networks of liberal-minded people, rather than by actors attempting to spread pro-Kremlin propaganda and bolster illiberal attitudes.

The qualitative interviews with the recipients of chain emails (carried out in spring 2019 in the Czech Republic, and again in the first half of 2020 in all the four countries) provide further confirmation of these patterns. First, the topic of chain emails turned out to be relevant only for interviewees in the Czech Republic, demonstrating the specific position of this channel in the Czech disinformation ecosystem compared with the other countries. Second, most of the interviewees with an experience in receiving and forwarding political emails conform to the expectations regarding their ideological profiles, as outlined above. In most cases, the content of chain emails that the interviewees mentioned concerned migration, which they were themselves critical of. The most common type was an email warning against the threat of 'Islamization' by sharing a picture allegedly portraying Muslim immigrants in a Western European city that could either have been Vienna, Paris or Berlin (often, such pictures come from completely different locations). This is the case with the following participant, who recalled receiving an email with such content. He admitted: 'I got this email that they were in France, recently—that there Arabs [*sic*] pray out in the streets, blocking them so that people can't even go through' (Cze-05, 42, male).

Another common pattern found in the interviews points to a link between consumption of chain emails and distrust in mainstream media,

particularly with regard to their coverage of migration. In the words of one of the interviewees (Cze-09, 45, male), media explain immigration by referring to 'war, people starving, economic reasons, but there are a lot of young pals who are nicely dressed and they all have cell phone … I read horrible things. And I believe in them'. This statement clearly suggests that the participant distrusts mainstream coverage of immigration and instead believes alternative accounts that cast immigrants in a less sympathetic light, presenting them as a threat. When prompted to explain where he had read such 'horrible things' about immigrants, he immediately pointed to digital media, and specifically to emails.

Some participants also mentioned receiving chain emails about immigration during the 2019 European Parliament election campaign, thereby confirming the adoption of this channel for electoral mobilization (even though they operate on a non-transparent basis, making it impossible to attribute them to specific political actors). The following transcript from an interview allows for a more detailed understanding of the dynamics and complexity of the networks within which the emails are being shared. The interviewee, in fact, mentioned receiving chain emails daily, while sometimes he would receive the same email multiple times from different people. Moreover, this exchange also reveals the importance of the connection between mediated and interpersonal communication in the process of reception and dissemination of mis/disinformation:

> *Interviewer: Do you talk about these emails with someone?*
> Yes, also.
> *Interviewer: With your wife?*
> Yes.
> *Interviewer: With anyone else?*
> With acquaintances that I meet. For example, I say that I got an email and they react saying that they would like it too, so I forward it on. (Cze-09, 45, male)

In sum, this evidence confirms the importance of chain emails as potential vehicles of disinformation and, therefore, as another communication channel that can be co-opted into the illiberal public sphere, depending on political context.

7.5 Conclusions

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the issue of mis/disinformation in Eastern Europe is highly prevalent and highly complex. Both the channels used to spread mis/disinformation and the levels of receptiveness of audiences are far from homogeneous across the region. Despite our analysis focusing only on selected aspects of the information disorder, rather than providing an all-encompassing inquiry, we nevertheless believe that the data presented reveal distinct patterns of dissemination and consumption of false information across the four examined countries that can be linked to different stages of the illiberal public sphere.

Based on the outline of the supply side of the mis/disinformation chain in each of these countries, one of the key observations from our comparative analysis is that the more advanced the illiberal public sphere, the higher the proportion of mainstream media that take an active and regular part in the spreading of false information. In the incipient stage, the disinformation news ecosystem is primarily composed of alternative, fringe media, mostly situated online but without notable audience reach. As the illiberal public sphere progresses towards the advanced stage, the channels of disinformation diversify, and incorporate some of the mainstream outlets, especially public service media, if captured by the illiberal government, as we have observed in case of Poland. Finally, when the illiberal public sphere reaches the hegemonic stage, as observed in Hungary and Serbia, mainstream media assume the central role in the disinformation news ecosystem, both as amplifiers, as well as producers of propaganda and false narratives, including conspiracy theories.

Apart from helping us better understand the dynamics of the illiberal public sphere and its close relationship with the expansion of disinformation, the pattern discussed above also has implications for scholarship on mis/disinformation. Having predominantly focused on Western democracies, existing scholarship has primarily emphasized the central position of social media in this phenomenon. However, by looking at Eastern Europe, we can see that digital platforms are not necessarily the only—or even the most important—part of the local disinformation ecosystems. This does not wish to diminish their significance as channels of disinformation and the risks that they pose to the fragile democracies in the region, especially when they are instrumentalized by foreign powers for hostile influence campaigns. We instead argue that, while acknowledging these threats, initiatives and policies aimed at countering disinformation and building resilience to social media need to broaden their scope to also include channels

operated by legacy news organizations, particularly in countries with an advanced or hegemonic illiberal public sphere, where their combined impact might prove to be more detrimental than the effects of social media. At the same time, our explorations highlight the urgency of expanding the demographic focus of projects combating disinformation and increasing digital literacy, which have so far been mostly aimed at younger segments of the population. The findings regarding political chain emails clearly point to the need to pay more attention to the information habits of elderly cohorts who are specifically targeted by illiberal actors and manipulated via narratives of fear and division—an oft proven recipe for electoral successes.

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CHAPTER 8

News Consumption and the Illiberal Public Sphere During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unforeseen levels of disruption, derailing established political, economic, and everyday life routines for millions of citizens around the globe. Established practices of news production and consumption were no exception. The imposition of social distancing measures forced media professionals to find new ways of producing content remotely, while facing an upsurge in audience demand amidst an uncertain and fast-changing environment, a deluge of conflicting and often misleading information, and dwindling advertising revenue (Olsen et al., 2020). Conventional patterns of journalistic storytelling were also upended. Routine news schedules gave way to live government briefings and the news agenda was suddenly overwhelmed by an almost exclusive focus on the new virus, a trend mirrored by the equally sudden rise in online searches for information on COVID-19 (Bento et al., 2020). Media use and news consumption routines also changed. Research revealed a sharp rise in the volume and frequency of news consumption, a notable reliance on digital sources and worrying levels of exposure to misinformation, but also a 'return' of legacy media and especially television as a key source of information (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2021).

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This disruption came at a point when several societies around the globe—including parts of Eastern Europe examined in this book—were already in turmoil owing to the growing prominence of illiberalism and deepening political polarization in several countries, aided by structural changes in the communication environment. In several countries, most notably in the United States and Brazil, the pandemic quickly evolved into a vehicle of political polarization, with populist leaders such as Bolsonaro and Trump mobilizing distrust of expertise and hostility to government regulation to argue against preventative measures suggested by medical experts and health authorities (Mihelj et al., 2024, p. 6–8). Existing research on media and COVID-19 highlights the detrimental impact of political polarization, which is seen as an important obstacle to successful implementation of preventative measures in public health crises, particularly if combined with a polarized news diet (Van Bavel et al., 2020, p. 464). Studies based on US data lend support to such concerns, showing that both online and offline debate on COVID-19 was polarized along partisan lines. People consuming right-leaning TV channels, such as Fox News, were shown to be more likely to endorse misinformation and believe that health authorities exaggerated risks, while also being less likely to comply with home confinement (Jiang et al., 2020; Motta et al., 2020; Simonov et al., 2020). In the long run, the politicization of the pandemic and the resulting polarization had a detrimental effect on public compliance with preventative measures and arguably contributed to Trump's electoral defeat.

Not all populist leaders, however, adopted the same approach to the pandemic (Meyer, 2020). In the four countries examined in this book, governments initially took the public health threat seriously and were quick to impose national lockdowns, thereby preventing the spread of the virus during the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020. Indeed, countries across Eastern Europe, including those governed by populist leaders, attracted praise for their effective management of the pandemic at the time (Löblová et al., 2021). The situation changed dramatically during the second wave in autumn, when several countries from the region experienced a sharp rise in infections and parallel decline in public support for preventative measures (Sirotnikova et al., 2020, October 15). Yet, as we show in this chapter, trouble was brewing already during the first wave. At that point, several East European countries under populist leadership used the crisis as an opportunity to advance an illiberal agenda, pushing through controversial pieces of legislation at a time when pandemic restrictions limited opportunities for protest.

In this chapter, we use qualitative interview and media diaries data to explore how the combined effects of disruption caused by the pandemic and attempts to abuse the crisis for political gain affected citizens' engagement with COVID-19 news, responses to government communication, trust in experts, and vulnerability to misinformation. Contrary to the superficial impression of success during the first wave, we argue that countries where the illiberal public sphere was more entrenched at the time were at a distinct disadvantage when dealing with the crisis, particularly if governing elites abused the situation to further expand their control over public life. Even though leaders in all four examined countries initially avoided politicizing the crisis in the manner that Trump and Bolsonaro did in the United States and Brazil, the more advanced state of the illiberal public sphere in two of the countries—Hungary and Serbia—arguably contributed to turning the public health emergency into a divisive event, sowing distrust in the government and its messages, as well as in experts, while simultaneously making citizens more vulnerable to misinformation.

8.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic as an Accelerator of the Illiberal Turn?

In the winter of 2020, as news of the appearance of a new virus in the Chinese province of Hunan suddenly exploded onto the global stage, several commentators speculated that the epidemic might spell the demise of communist rule in China and, thereby, potentially diminish the appeal of authoritarianism and illiberalism globally. In early February 2020, the death of Li Wenliang, the Chinese doctor from Wuhan who was officially reprimanded for 'making false comments' after warning his compatriots about the virus (Tebarge, 2020, February 08) sparked outrage both among domestic audiences in China and commentators abroad. Several Chinese professors and lawyers demanded a public apology and denounced China's attempt to hide the extent of the epidemic from the public, also calling on the government to review its freedom of speech legislation (Yang, 2020, February 14). Yet, in the months that followed, China quickly sought to position itself as 'the global leader in the pandemic response', prompting numerous Western commentators to voice concerns about the country's attempt to use the pandemic to its geopolitical advantage (Campbell & Doshi, 2020, March 18). In several parts of the world—including parts of Europe, Latin America, and Africa—China's offers of

help with personal protection equipment, ventilators, and vaccines fell on fertile grounds. Soon, the other foremost global exporter of illiberal governance—Russia—launched a similar geopolitical effort, using its COVID-19 vaccine to demonstrate the capacity of an authoritarian power to tackle a global health crisis.

In three of the four East European countries examined here, these global efforts to promote the appeal of authoritarian powers have been paralleled by local efforts to use the pandemic as a pretext for illiberal legislative changes targeting LGBTQ+ rights, abortion, and freedom of expression. In March 2020, the Hungarian parliament passed a new Coronavirus Law, giving Prime Minister Orbán the power to rule by decree and imposing further limitations on media freedom in the country (Walker & Rankin, 2020, March 30). The following day, the Hungarian government banned gender change in the country and announced that disseminating 'fake news' about the pandemic was punishable by up to five years in prison (Beauchamp, 2020, April 15). In Poland, the right-wing government caused significant controversy with its handling of presidential elections, originally scheduled for May 10, 2020, then moved to the end of June owing to the pandemic. In early April 2020, the Polish government pushed through a controversial bill allowing for elections to take place fully by postal voting, prompting accusations of narrow political self-interest from the opposition (Vashchanka, 2020, p. 7). While elections were eventually postponed to late June the same year, President Andrzej Duda used anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric as an ideological driver in his campaign, further deepening divisions over LGBTQ+ rights in the country (Walker, 2020, June 12). In October 2020, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal ruled that abortions in cases of foetal defects are unconstitutional, effectively introducing an almost total ban on abortions in a country where abortion laws were already very strict (Krajewska, 2020). Finally, in February 2021, the Polish government proposed a new law that would introduce a levy on advertising revenues. The proposal sparked an outcry among the country's news media organizations that argued that the new bill would disproportionally affect smaller news providers and further diminish their capacity to compete against large digital platforms (Kość, 2021, February 10).

In Serbia, measures implemented during the first wave of the pandemic were particularly drastic and were also policed more heavily than in the other countries examined here. Following the introduction of the State of Emergency in mid-March 2020, the army was dispatched to guard national

borders and important buildings, and several hundreds of people were arrested for flouting the new rules. A controversial police curfew was introduced later in March, followed by weekend-long curfews until early May. Although parliamentary elections, originally planned for April 2020, were postponed until June, the government nonetheless attracted criticism for abusing the pandemic for political gain, with opposition parties calling for civil disobedience in face of harsh curfew measures. Media freedom was curtailed as well, with a journalist arrested for publishing a story about the lack of protective equipment for medical staff but later released (Stojanović, 2020, April 02). In Serbia and Hungary, the erosion of liberal democratic freedoms also went hand in hand with pronounced elite sympathies for China. In April 2020, after China sent medical supplies to Serbia, giant billboards thanking 'Brother Xi' (referring to the Chinese president Xi Jinping) and professing 'eternal brotherhood' of Serb and Chinese populations appeared across the Serbian capital of Belgrade, some sponsored by pro-government newspapers and others by local authorities (Chapple, 2020, May 27). Later in the pandemic, both Serbia and Hungary accepted Chinese as well as Russian vaccines and used them to gain a competitive advantage in vaccination over EU member states (Lau, 2020).

In contrast to Hungary, Poland, and Serbia, the Czech Republic weathered the first wave of the pandemic without seeking to push the illiberal agenda. The Czech government initially attempted to limit access to press briefings for some oppositional journalists and President Zeman caused a stir with his promotion of aid received from the Chinese government in March (Stojanović, 2020, April 02). However, by and large, Czech authorities steered clear of using the crisis to push through controversial legislation. As we show later on in this chapter, these cross-country differences in handling the pandemic, combined with structural differences in media systems and the relative prominence of the illiberal public sphere, arguably resulted in marked differences in citizens' engagement with government communication, perceptions of experts guiding the pandemic response, as well as exposure to misinformation. We should also note that the material presented here relates to March and April 2020. This time preceded the controversies surrounding elections in Poland and also the implementation of controversial legal changes associated with LGBTQ+ and abortion rights, which—in addition to differences in the stage of the illiberal public sphere—helps explain the key contrast we observed between

audience reactions in Serbia and Hungary, on the one hand, and in Poland and Czech Republic, on the other hand.

8.2 News Consumption and Crisis Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Because of its profound impact on people's everyday lives, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered significant changes in news consumption routines. Faced with a fast-changing situation, people in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Serbia—much as citizens elsewhere in the world (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2021)—turned to the media to find up-to-date information about the virus and about preventative measures, leading to a rise in news consumption. At the same time, the introduction of lockdown measures forced people to spend considerably more time at home, an important factor that played a contributing role in the sharp spike in the amount of time spent following news (Mihelj et al., 2022a). The following excerpt, taken from an interview with a participant from the Czech Republic, is illustrative of this wider trend that was apparent in all four examined countries:

> If I had gone to work, I certainly would not have followed the news so much because I wouldn't have had enough time for it. But as I was at home more or less over the whole pandemic period, I had a lot of time. However, I didn't have enough time to read anything because the children were home and I had to take care of them, so I listened to news a lot. (Cze-12, male, 44)

The enforced confinement to the domestic space mentioned by the respondent constitutes one of the explanations for the reliance on domestic media technologies, and especially for the remarkable increase in TV viewing evident in our data, which mirrors trends noticed in other parts of the world (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2021).

Although levels of online news consumption surged as well, legacy media and especially television were in the lead as the most important sources of information on COVID-19. Several of our participants specifically mentioned consuming more television, or even having their television on most of the time and checking news coverage across several television channels. For instance, one of our Serbian participants reported

following the pro-government public service broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) more often than she used to, while also comparing its coverage with that provided by the oppositional cable news channel N1, and even occasionally checking the commercial pro-government channel Pink:

> I started watching RTS more than I used to. I was comparing the information I heard on RTS with those I heard on N1. Sometimes I would also watch Pink in the morning just to see what nonsense they decided to talk about that day. (Srb-19, female, 62)

Given the widespread reliance on television it is not a surprise that this medium also acted as the most widely used means of accessing government crisis communication. Across all four countries, most of our interview participants—around two-thirds on average—mentioned keeping up to date with government communication through live briefings or press conferences. Many also stated that these live events were the most effective means of reaching the public during the crisis. As one of our Polish participants argued, these live broadcasts were of central importance not only in and of themselves, but also because they were mentioned across a range of other news forms and platforms:

> Press conferences. All broadcasters showed them, then there were highlights in the news bulletins. They were writing about them on the Internet as well. That was the most successful way to reach people. Willingly or not, any media user had to come across some mention of it somewhere. (Pol-09, male)

Along with lockdown measures, government's reliance on live briefings and press conferences as a means of engaging with citizens constituted another key reason for reliance on television.

Our participants often made clear that a key reason for watching television, and especially for following public service broadcasting, was that these channels provided a convenient means of accessing live updates from the government and public health authorities. The following example, taken from an interview with one of our Hungarian participants who watched both the pro-government public service broadcaster M1 and the right-leaning, pro-government commercial channel Hír TV, offers a good illustration of this. She usually avoided these TV channels, but was

attracted to them during the pandemic because they provided a means of accessing government updates:

> I would consume everything. I watched TV—which is something that I usually do much less—and I watched M1 and HírTV, two channels that I usually never watched … Because that's where the governmental information was broadcasted. They started those broadcasts [i.e. live government briefings] at that time, and I was curious about that. (Hun-27, female, 46)

These live events played a central role in turning the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic into a 'media event' (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Mihelj et al., 2022a)—an extraordinary, history-defining event, organized outside of the media but broadcast live, which interrupts the normal flow of daily life and invites collective viewing.

Across all four countries, live government briefings were a central element of news consumption in the early phase of the lockdown. These broadcasts typically interrupted the routine flow of the day and often involved collective viewing or listening with family members or, before lockdown, with colleagues at work. However, it is important to note that television was not the only means of engaging with live briefings and press conferences. A significant number of our participants—especially those in the youngest age group—preferred to follow these live events through digital media, either through a live feed streamed via a news website, or directly through government's social media channels. The following excerpt, taken from one of our Hungarian interviewees, offers a case in point:

> Of course, and at the beginning, my god… even at work, we sometimes gathered up, and everyone would say 'My god! Viktor Orbán's speech is coming, let's watch the live on Facebook. What will he announce now? My god, what happened now?'… And of course, a lot of people panicked about the possibility of a complete lockdown. (Hun-08, female, 28)

This extract also suggests that such digitally enabled participation could generate a similar experience as the one typically associated with media events watched on television—namely, they were perceived as extraordinary occasion, and involved collective viewing, in this case with colleagues at work.

While live briefings were, by far, the most wide-reaching and effective channel of government communication during the crisis, our participants also mentioned a range of other channels, including dedicated government websites, public service adverts appearing on television, radio, and on social networking platforms, as well as emails and text messages sent by either national or local authorities. Of these, government or health authorities' websites were most frequently and widely used, although not equally so across all countries. They were most often mentioned among Polish participants, where 14 out of 29 reported using them, typically as means of gaining additional information about specific preventative measures. The following extract from a participant who consulted the website to check whether she could visit a public garden is illustrative of this tendency:

> I consulted this website again recently to confirm whether or not you are allowed to visit your city's vegetable garden. Whether you can go there or not. And still, I don't know, it's not so clear. (Pol-04, female, 62)

8.3 Wide Reach, Low Trust?

Widespread use of government communication channels did not necessarily mean that such channels were trusted. In two of the countries—Hungary and Serbia—several participants mentioned following live briefings or government websites on a regular basis, but also emphasized that they distrusted the information provided. Replicating trends examined in Chap. 4, patterns of trust and distrust were tied to political orientations, with pro-government participants trusting the information provided and anti-government participants expressing distrust and frustration. For instance, one of our Hungarian participants described watching the government public service channel M1 to follow the live briefings organized by the Operational Task Force—a body set up by to tackle the health crisis—but started doubting the veracity of information once he heard that some of the journalists' questions raised during the event went unanswered:

> In the beginning, the reason I watched M1 was that the Operational Task Force's information session was there, and I watched it a few times, you know? This was around 11 a.m.… or 3 p.m.? This is why I wrote it in the diary, I watched that. But… damn it […] then it was revealed that they do not answer certain journalists' questions, and I thought 'Damn it! Are you

> still only giving us biased information? So, I stopped watching that, too, I simply didn't turn on the TV to watch it. Now… it's the same thing. Poor RTL journalists can't say everything, because they don't get the answers to the questions that they asked—or at least not to all of them, maybe only one or two. (Hun-26, male, 64)

Another Hungarian participant continued to follow daily briefings, but because he was distrustful of the information provided, he felt the need to compare it to reports from other news sources:

> So, I read the summary of [the briefings] and I know that this is one version of reality, I compare it to other versions, and I try to figure out the truth. But I don't think the Operational Task Force is enough of a reliable source to only watch that. It reflects one point of view, of course there must be a lot of truth in it, but… But I try to read other things, too. (Hun-24, male, 42)

The government website provoked a similar reaction among our anti-government participants in Hungary, many of whom started questioning the numbers of cases reported on the website and suggested that official figures underestimated actual numbers of deaths:

> I look at the official coronavirus website too and I check what illnesses those people had who had passed away, and um … Well, I know about one person who died who is definitely not on this list, and … they very probably died because of coronavirus…And because of this, it's quite strange to me … how credible this is. They had all kinds of illnesses, and last week when I was a little unwell, I was thinking about what kind of illnesses they'd come up with for me, if I died … So, this is simply a lie. (Hun-12, female, 59)

One of our Hungarian participants found the behaviour of the ruling party Fidesz during the crisis so frustrating that he ended up noting the following in his diary after one of the daily briefings: 'Zoltán Kovács' arrogance was deeply upsetting, Fidesz' incompetence and government communication is currently more dangerous for me than the virus, at least that's how I feel' (Hun-21, male 31, Media Diary, 15 March 2020). For some participants, distrust led to almost complete avoidance of government communication. One participant, for instance, reported watching only one of Prime Minister Orbán's speeches, streamed through his Facebook channel, after he heard him being ridiculed owing to a technical glitch that meant the stream initially had no sound: 'No. I watched the

video of when they couldn't get the sound to work, because that was funny…But either way I don't really watch him because he never says anything… I am not used to him saying anything that is true' (Hun-18, male, 32).

In Serbia, too, government briefings provoked similarly negative responses among anti-government participants. As in Hungary, some of our participants were irritated by the way the briefings were conducted, distrustful of the information provided, and even scared. Alternatively, they would poke fun at the government and the experts. For instance, as with one of the Hungarian participants quoted earlier, one of our Serbian interviewees was appalled by the treatment of journalists during live briefings, which led her to distrust the ability of the government to inspire public support and compliance with preventative measures:

> The way journalists from certain media outlets were treated when asking questions about the opposition and elections provoked a deluge of negative reactions. The president answered that he would not be wasting his time on this and then nonetheless spent the next fifteen minutes talking negatively about them [journalists]. Most people took the virus seriously, but with the head of state putting on such a charade it will be difficult to establish public compliance. (Srb-7, female, Media Diary, 23 March 2020)

As in Hungary, some of our anti-government participants in Serbia also resorted to comparing the information provided in government briefings with the commentary offered by opposition leaders. Yet, as evident from the diary extract below, which contrasts the Prime Minister with one of the most prominent opposition leaders (Dragan Đilas), such comparisons did not imply that opposition leaders were necessarily more trusted, as they too could be perceived as abusing the crisis for political gain:

> Vučić's press conference about Corona, then Đilas on *360 Degrees* [weekly political talk show on N1), criticising the government because of Corona. The former seemed amateurish and boorish to me […] while the latter was opportunistic, as Đilas was trying to score political points. (Srb-30, male, 26, Media Diary, 14 March 2020)

By contrast, all pro-government participants were entirely satisfied with government communication, and clearly trusted all the guidance and information provided. The two extracts below, taken from our Serbian sample, illustrate the contrast well. While the pro-government participant

Srb-23 'completely trusted' the information provided during live briefings (*Extract 1*), the anti-government participant Srb-09 felt that these events were used to 'brainwash' people and made him feel scared (*Extract 2*).

Extract 1
I found those conferences at 3 p.m. extremely significant. I would listen to what the doctors were saying while checking online what had happened in the last 24 hours. I completely trusted what they were saying on those conferences, even though people were saying different things about them, but I found them completely acceptable. (Srb-23, female, 60+)

Extract 2
I think that the government was using those conferences to brainwash us.
Interviewer: Do you think that the government was using the conferences to manipulate the people?]
Yes, I do.
Interviewer: Did the presence of those doctors make you feel safer?
No, they made me feel scared, especially when they were talking about the number of the deceased. And especially about the number of the deceased in the gerontological centres and in the rest of the world. I was really scared to be honest.
(Srb-09, male, 48)

In Poland and especially in the Czech Republic, participants were far less divided in their responses to government communication, and trusted the information provided. Even though some participants were occasionally critical of some of the measures introduced or resented the constant presence of government officials in the media, they turned to official briefings, the government website, or to the public service broadcaster to find trustworthy information about the pandemic or keep up to date on latest measures. The absence of distrust was particularly remarkable in Poland, where one may expect that the combination of a starkly polarized media landscape and government control over the public broadcaster would have provided ripe grounds for doubting government's crisis messaging. And yet, several of our anti-government participants reported consuming more public service media than prior to the pandemic, despite avoiding them prior to the pandemic because they found them politically biased. They also made it clear that the main reason for greater reliance on public service media during the pandemic was access to government

communication, and that they found the information provided in the briefings trustworthy. At the same time, they also drew a clear line between the trustworthiness of crisis communication, and the trustworthiness of public service media as a source for other news, where their attitudes remained negative. The following excerpt from an anti-government participant illustrates this attitude very clearly (see Guzek et al., 2021 for further evidence):

> *TVP Info* was the easiest to access, it's one of the main channels and that's why I started watching it. At some point, it was all beginning to look the same to me. But I turned to *TVP Info* to get coronavirus information. When it comes to political news, I turned mainly to the Internet and online discussion boards. (Pol-09 male, 30)

The contrasting public responses to government communication in the four countries—with notable distrust among anti-government participants in two of the countries where the illiberal public sphere has reached the hegemonic stage—highlights one of the challenges faced by illiberal governments during a crisis. In a context where the illiberal public sphere has advanced to such a degree that independent media and balanced coverage have virtually disappeared from the mainstream, government communication may be effective in reaching the public, but not necessarily in inspiring trust. Accustomed to both elite behaviour hostile to an open debate and to politically biased coverage, citizens operating in such an environment are likely to respond to crisis communication in a polarized manner, aligned with their political preferences. As a result, a significant part of the public is likely to distrust the information provided through government communication channels. As the following section shows, these patterns of trust and distrust in the government also shaped public trust in experts and science.

8.4 Trust in Experts in the Illiberal Public Sphere

Public trust in experts and science, and the availability of trustworthy information based on expert knowledge, are essential prerequisites for the efficacy of public health measures, especially during a public health crisis. Yet, we still know relatively little about how public trust in experts is established. Existing research suggests that perceptions of competence, adherence to scientific standards, and good intentions play a key role (Besley

et al., 2021; Hendricks et al., 2015). Studies have also shown that trust can be affected by the presence or absence of expert consensus on the topic and by experts' choice of language and channel of communication (e.g. Gustafson & Rice, 2019; König & Jucks, 2019). However, scholarly understanding of how these factors interact remains limited, and the lack of cross-country comparisons makes it difficult to establish how perceptions of trustworthiness may be moderated by the political and media environment. For instance, how are experts perceived in countries marked by low standards of democracy, lack of independent media, or the presence of prominent populist or illiberal leaders and parties? More specifically, how is trust in experts established in an environment in which an illiberal public sphere provides the dominant realm for public communication?

A key trait of populism is anti-elitism, which typically extends to hostility to intellectual elites and hence hostility to expert knowledge. During the COVID-19 pandemic, several prominent populist leaders around the world have fuelled this pre-existing hostility by downplaying, or outright dismissing, scientific findings about COVID-19, and by challenging advice provided by public health authorities (Gonsalves & Yamey, 2020). In the United States, Trump infamously refused to wear a mask, hosted several meetings where few participants obeyed social distancing guidance, and downplayed the seriousness of the virus in several of his tweets. In Brazil, Bolsonaro dismissed his health minister after he recommended following social distancing measures, and repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as a 'little flu'. In India, Modi ignored scientific evidence that suggested social distancing as a key preventative measure and attacked the media for being too negative about the development of the pandemic.

Yet, this hostile treatment of scientific knowledge and advice was not shared by all populist leaders worldwide. In all four examined countries, a different approach prevailed, with populist leaders quickly turning to experts for guidance and using them to legitimize their preventative measures. Nonetheless, this approach did not necessarily succeed in establishing public trust in experts. In two of the countries where illiberalism is most advanced—Hungary and Serbia—most of our participants expressed distrust of experts appointed to serve on national crisis bodies and doubted the advice they provided. Why did this happen? It is possible to argue that the involvement of scientists in shaping pandemic response, combined with the wide availability of scientific knowledge in the media, has helped to create a fertile ground for populist attitudes to flourish, and hence

inadvertently stimulated hostility towards experts, regardless of the stance adopted by populist leaders (Brubaker, 2020).

There are two key reasons for this. First, abstract epidemiological models provided by scientists and public health officials may have appeared far removed from people's personal experiences with the virus. Especially in the early phase of the pandemic, when cases were low, very few people experienced the complications associated with COVID-19 themselves or personally knew anyone who had died after contracting the virus. Given the populist tendency to valorise personal experience over abstract knowledge, this situation arguably helped fuel suspicion. Second, the contemporary, high-choice information environment helped make scientific knowledge much more widely present and accessible, creating a myriad of possibilities for people to assess and challenge scientific results or even conclude that scientists do not agree on anything and hence cannot be trusted. Digital and social media played a crucial role in this, enabling people to compare and contrast expert knowledge from a variety of sources, as well as gain direct access to scientists who often sought to directly address the public through social media, or even participate in the debate as 'pseudo-experts'.

These explanations do resonate with some of our own analysis. For instance, some of our participants explained that they distrusted expert advice owing to a perceived lack of expert consensus, an impression developed based on the wide variety of expert opinion available in the public domain. This led them to be confused over who to believe, and thus distrustful—a finding aligned with existing research on the impact of scientific consensus on trust (Oreskes & Conway, 2011; Gustafson & Rice, 2019). For example, one of our Czech participants explained that he followed the opinions of medical experts at the beginning of the pandemic, but quickly lost faith owing to their contradictory views, and specifically owing to the perceived conflict between proponents of lockdown measures and proponents of the so-called herd immunity strategy:

> I was surprised that there are many experts with different opinions and, frankly speaking, I am tired of it. I think that people without education must be very puzzled by it… And now we have here this pandemic and half of epidemiologists say 'let's keep the lockdown', while the other half is for letting the virus spread across the population. So, what should the common man think? Maybe, it's better to pray… [I followed them] from the beginning, but then I found out that there were many contradictory opin-

> ions. Thousands of doctors and experts, and it's the same with lawyers… The crisis showed that we cannot believe them—such a disagreement in opinions … (Cze-11, male, 34)

While compelling, the influence of controversies nonetheless fails to explain the marked difference between attitudes to experts in Hungary and Serbia, on the one hand, and those registered in Poland and the Czech Republic, on the other hand. The reasons for this difference become apparent once we consider the way in which our participants justified their trust (or distrust) of experts. In Hungary and Serbia, the key reason for distrust was the perceived influence of political elites on experts. In both countries, several participants explained that they distrusted experts on the government-appointed national crisis teams, primarily because they were perceived as lacking in independence, which then shaped the perception of their ability to exercise professional judgement. Members of the Operational Task Force were described as soldiers not medical experts (Hun-27, female, 46), as not credible (Hun-30, meal 38), or not actually experts (Hun-05, female, 64; Hun-12, female, 59; Hun-18, male, 32), lacking in independence (Hun-05, female, 64), only saying what they are allowed to say (Hun-10, male, 75; Hun-22, female, 36), fulfilling a political order (Hun-06, male, 66), not telling the truth (Hun-07, male, 52; Hun-12, female, 59), and changing their opinion depending on context (Hun-11, female, 61). The following excerpt elaborated these reservations in relation to a prominent member of the Task Force, Cecília Müller, a physician who also serves as the country's Chief Medical Officer.

> The problem here is that the experts are politically inclined, and they form their expert opinion to align with politics. Then we should ask where can we find an independent expert whose opinion is acceptable? And whose opinion is right and the one I should follow? Tell me, which expert is the real expert? … Cecília Müller is an expert, because she is a doctor, but she is not politically independent. (Hun-26, male, 64)

For one Hungarian participant, reservations about the Task Force and its close ties with the Government were so strong that he felt compelled to trust an expert simply because their opinions were openly rejected by the Task Force:

> As I said, Cecília Müller, the Chief Medical Officer, said that only those who are sick have to wear a mask. And now … János Szlávik, the chief doctor of the Szent László hospital said that everyone should wear a mask. He is the most important doctor working in epidemiology in Hungary and he said that we should wear it… And I believe Professor Szlávik more than Cecília Müller, because Professor Szlávik was there at the first meeting of the Operational Task Force, at the first interview, and they never invited him again, he disappeared… I wonder why. (Hun-07, male, 52)

Several Serbian participants expressed similar distrust for members of their Crisis Headquarters. As participant Srb-26 (female, 37) explained: 'I realized that certain doctors didn't have their own opinions, and that they were waiting for those in power to give them the green light when someone would ask them a question'. Other reasons mentioned by Serbian participants included: the experts are not really experts, or at least were not chosen for their expertise (Srb-06, female, 31); the doctors are 'told what to say' (Srb-07, female, 22); they 'always spin the same stories' (Srb-21, female, 21); and they seem to be 'keeping something from us', 'not telling us the whole truth' (Srb-28, male, 60+). While the reasons were, to an extent, driven by generalized distrust of elites, the perceived influence of politicians on experts was a compounding cause for many (cf. Mihelj et al., 2022b for further evidence).

8.5 Trust in Experts, Media Use, and Vulnerability to Misinformation

These patterns of trust and distrust of experts coincided with differences in patterns of media use and exposure to misinformation. Once again, Hungary and Serbia stand out in the findings. Driven by distrust in officially appointed experts who featured in government communication and mainstream news media, several of our participants in these two countries turned to social media for alternative sources of expert opinion. However, the types of experts found online varied. On the one hand, several participants turned to social media to look for foreign experts. These participants tended to be anti-government and university-educated and looked for experts they perceived as trustworthy because of their expertise, assessed through their professional positions and institutional affiliations. For instance, one of our participants reported generally checking YouTube for information about COVID-19, seeking out experts in research positions

based at trusted foreign organizations. He claimed that he would watch 'whatever was shown by the YouTube algorithm. Once it was a leading doctor from the University of Chicago and I believed him. I look at the WHO [World Health Organization website] or whatever YouTube brings up'. (Hun-21, male, 31)

In a similar vein, Serbian participant Srb-21 (female, 21) also distrusted national experts, and this led her to compare the answers of Serbian experts to those of foreign experts, which she accessed through YouTube. Participant Hun-22 was likewise distrustful of Hungarian experts and sought foreign information on COVID-19 through Facebook, usually in the form of English language articles from trusted UK news sources.

> … if I see that there is an article about, I don't know, the UK or someone living in the UK, [I trust it more] because I think the media is much freer there and that doctors are able to say what they think and what they truly experience, because I think… [here] they are intimidated. (Hun-22, female, 36)

This excerpt also reveals that the participant used the perceived independence of the media as a means of assessing expert trustworthiness. UK media are implicitly contrasted with Hungarian media, which are perceived as lacking in independence, and this increases the perceived trustworthiness of experts in UK media.

Not all participants who distrusted national crisis teams turned to foreign experts. Several searched for domestic experts who did not appear in mainstream news, either because they were not among the experts chosen by the government (Hun-18, male, 32; Cze-25, male, 68), or because they were banned by the government (Pol-25, female, 79; Srb-06, female, 31). For example, Polish participant Pol-25 explained that she was attracted to a Polish expert because he was purportedly banned from sharing his opinions as he was critical of government's actions:

> For example, yesterday there was one with Professor Simon from Wrocław, who, I believe, is a national consultant. Other national consultants, I guess 89 of them, were also banned from saying their opinion on coronavirus. And Professor Simon said, 'All right, I am banned from stating my opinion, so now I am going to present my view as a regular doctor.' Now he is invited to participate in various TV programmes and airs his views on how things look. (Pol-25, female, 79)

Serbian participant Srb-06 likewise stated trusting those experts who are not prominent in mainstream news media, indicating that the lack of prominence in government-controlled media was a marker of expert independence and hence trustworthiness. She claimed: 'I also watched certain TV shows that I found on YouTube and dealt with what certain virologists and epidemiologists who weren't prominent in the media had to say about coronavirus. I trusted them more than the doctors from the Crisis Headquarters' (Srb-06, female, 31).

However, some participants who were driven to social media as a result of distrusting government-appointed experts were less able to identify trustworthy sources of expert opinion. Some fell prey to 'pseudo' experts—typically people with some background in natural sciences but not specifically virology or epidemiology, who shared misinformation. For example, two Hungarian participants mentioned Doktor Gődény, a Hungarian pharmacist and fitness personality who was adamantly against wearing masks and lockdown measures. He often posted his opinions questioning preventative measures against COVID-19, organized public demonstrations against restrictive measures, and was instrumental in establishing a nation-wide anti-vax movement centred on COVID-sceptic claims, fuelled by conspiracy theories about 'Big Pharma' (Turza, 2023, pp. 226–227). In September 2020 he was charged by Hungarian authorities for spreading disinformation, but he eventually had his prison sentence suspended and continued to speak out regularly against wearing masks and questioned the need for vaccination.

What also emerges from our analysis is the widespread reliance on YouTube as a source of expert opinion. Our participants' answers indicate that the attraction of the video-sharing platform lied in the combination of audio-visual communication and absence of editorial control, which resulted in a perception of greater authenticity and directness. Some participants appeared to turn to YouTube and other social media to look specifically for expert information that reinforced pre-existing opinions. For example, a Hungarian participant (Hun-15, male, 38) believed that the measures imposed by the government were excessive and instead followed Doktor Gődény on YouTube. He explained his choice in these terms: 'Yes, because I think it would be enough to isolate the vulnerable older groups and those with chronic illness and the others should be allowed to continue producing the GDP. It will be much worse if the economy crashes than if the virus spreads'.

These examples offer a good illustration of the double-edged nature of social media that arguably becomes particularly pronounced in contexts where the illiberal public sphere is more advanced, and in relation to contested topics prone to misinformation. In a context where experts' trustworthiness is compromised owing to perceived political influence, social media can enable access to trustworthy expert information, but they can also offer access to misinformation, and further polarize and politicize the discussion, thereby contributing to distrust.

8.6 Conclusions

As shown throughout this chapter, the initial success with the management of the pandemic in Eastern Europe was to some extent misleading and masked deep-seated problems with maintaining public trust and support for government measures. The two countries where the illiberal public sphere is most advanced—Hungary and Serbia—were also the ones marked by divisions in responses to government communication, notable distrust of expert advice provided by crisis response bodies, greater reliance on social media for expert information, and greater vulnerability to misinformation. This suggests that countries where the illiberal public sphere is stronger, and where governments exert greater control over the media landscape and the distribution of public information, may be at a disadvantage when tackling a public health crisis. Even if government control may limit the visibility of both dissenting opinion and harmful misinformation, the lack of independent media can encourage distrust of government crisis communication. Moreover, the perceived politicization of medical experts and health authorities can have a detrimental impact on citizens' trust and eventually also on compliance with preventative measures, including vaccine acceptance.

This argument is most clearly demonstrated by developments in Serbia, which initially made great strides in the vaccination drive, largely thanks to its reliance on Russian and Chinese vaccines, but soon hit the stumbling block of vaccine hesitancy. By early April 2021, it was clear that vaccine supply was starting to outstrip demand, as a large proportion of the population was reluctant to accept vaccines, often owing to fears fuelled by conspiracy theories and misinformation circulating through social media (Gadzo, 2021; Mihelj et al., 2024). In a bid to tackle vaccine hesitancy, the Serbian government even started offering payments to citizens willing to get vaccinated, amounting to 5% of the country's average monthly

salary. This move provoked concerns about ethical implications and worries that the payment scheme may backfire (Holt, 2021, May 15). Even in Poland, where citizens initially responded to government crisis communication with a reasonably high level of trust, things deteriorated during the vaccination phase, when the far-right Konfederácia party started peddling conspiracy theories and supporting anti-vaccine protests. Concerned about losing votes to their far-right competitor, prominent Law and Justice politicians refrained from unambiguous promoting the vaccination drive, a factor that arguably contributed to Polish vaccination rates lagging behind those of many other European countries (Rachwol, 2023).

Similar trends have been observed beyond Eastern Europe, and although vaccine hesitancy is a global problem, emerging evidence suggests that it may in part be driven by political polarization. A comparative study conducted in Western Europe suggested a highly significant positive association between support for populist parties and the belief that vaccines are not important and effective (Kennedy, 2019), while a recent survey conducted in France showed a correlation between voting for far-right or far-left candidates and reluctance to accept the COVID-19 vaccine (Ward et al., 2020). In the United States, multiple recent polls confirmed that vaccine hesitancy is more widespread among Republican voters, thus confirming that attitudes to vaccines have become entangled in longstanding political divisions in the country. While further analysis is needed to establish comparative trends, these developments raise serious doubts about the ability of countries worse affected by polarization and illiberalism to respond to public health crises. Our analysis suggests that the illiberal public sphere plays an important role in shaping these trends, by generating a communicative environment prone to sowing distrust and division, and hence preventing the establishment of societal consensus necessary for effective health crisis management.

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CHAPTER 9

Conclusions

As we have sought to demonstrate throughout this book, the study of communication is an essential prerequisite for a holistic understanding of the contemporary rise of illiberalism and the way it operates. Largely overlooked by existing scholarship, an understanding of the communicative aspects of illiberalism is critical to grasping the mechanisms by which illiberal narratives and attitudes gain popularity among the public, paving the way for the rise of illiberal parties and politicians to positions of power and facilitating democratic erosion. To fill this gap, we introduced an analytical framework centred around the concept of the illiberal public sphere, defined as a communicative space comprising both traditional and new media that promote and amplify illiberal actors, views, and attitudes. Having identified three ideal-typical stages in the evolution of the illiberal public sphere—incipient, ascendant and hegemonic—we have utilized original empirical data from four Eastern European countries to illustrate how the advancement of the illiberal public sphere through these stages relates to particular features and qualities of media systems, as well as to audience news consumption habits, levels of trust, engagement with false information, and attitudes towards polarizing issues. Through that, we aimed to establish how changes in systemic features interact with shifts at the level of media cultures, advancing the transformation of news habits and ultimately fostering changes in attitudes and behaviour that turn illiberalism into a taken for granted feature of political culture and everyday life.

V. Štětka, S. Mihelj, *The Illiberal Public Sphere*,
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In this final chapter, we reflect on the broader implications of our findings. We start by discussing what the comparison between the four countries tells us about the key constitutive processes and tipping points in the rise of the illiberal public sphere. We then discuss recent developments in Eastern Europe and elsewhere and consider what they mean for the prospects of the illiberal public sphere in the region and beyond. The chapter is concluded by offering some suggestions for journalistic practices and media policies that can help make media systems more resilient and able to deflect and contain the challenges of illiberalism. We are of course aware that drawing general conclusions about the evolution of the illiberal public sphere based on data from only four countries, and utilizing data collected over a relatively short span of time, has its inherent limitations. Nevertheless, we believe that the analysis developed here is sufficiently robust to demonstrate the utility of the conceptual framework we have proposed. We therefore offer these concluding reflections primarily as an invitation for future research, including both the further refinement of the illiberal public sphere concept and empirical research that applies this framework to a wider range of cases, from long-established liberal democracies to many other countries around the world with shorter democratic experiences.

9.1 The Rise of the Illiberal Public Sphere: Constitutive Processes and Tipping Points

As fragmented and incomplete as our findings inevitably are, they nonetheless show several distinct patterns that can help us identify some of the key constitutive processes and tipping points in the evolution of the illiberal public sphere—and the simultaneous decline of its liberal counterpart.

The first constitutive process is what can be described as 'the spiral of polarization'—that is, the mutually reinforcing processes of polarization at systemic and attitudinal levels. As established in Chap. 3, the advancement of the illiberal public sphere goes hand in hand with the polarization of both the media landscape and audience attitudes. News media in countries with the most developed illiberal public sphere clearly exhibit the deepest cleavages in terms of their political and ideological inclinations, and the same is true for the political attitudes and electoral behaviour of citizens consuming those news brands. Although we are unable to empirically determine the direction of causality between systemic shifts and attitudinal changes, it appears plausible that polarization—as a political strategy

employed by illiberal actors, and a business strategy adopted by news media—is both a driver and a consequence of illiberalism, symbiotically operating in its favour and becoming further entrenched as the illiberal public sphere expands. This spiral of polarization appears to be stimulated by selective news exposure. As the illiberal sphere grows in influence, the proportion of audiences exposed to ideologically and politically homogeneous sources grows. This is indicated by our findings from Hungary and especially Serbia, where the illiberal public sphere is most entrenched, and where we saw the largest share of population preferring news from politically and ideologically homogeneous sources. In contrast, audiences in Poland and especially the Czech Republic, where the illiberal public sphere is less advanced, had more heterogeneous news diets.

A key tipping point in the deepening spiral of polarization is the hollowing out of the political and media centre—that is, the disappearance of ideologically and politically neutral media outlets—which typically occurs when the illiberal public sphere reaches the ascendant stage. In countries with a strong public service media provision—such as the four countries included in our sample—this hollowing out of the centre typically involves the state capture of public service channels and their transformation into key vehicles of illiberal narratives and values. As a result, citizens are left with no other choice but resorting to ideologically and politically biased outlets, which further exacerbates polarizing tendencies. As noted in existing research, such hollowing out of the centre has adverse effects on common democratic norms and standards (Somer & McCoy, 2018; Svolik, 2019), which subsequently makes it easier for illiberal actors to further undermine their legitimacy, and ultimately capture institutions which are entrusted with guarding and promoting those standards. As our findings suggest, the emptying of the centre also opens doors for the further growth of the illiberal public sphere. This process arguably leads to an increasingly asymmetric form of polarization—not just in the usual sense ascribed to the term, which involves one end of the political spectrum, typically the right-wing, becoming more extreme than the other (Benkler et al., 2018; Hacker & Pierson, 2015), but rather in the sense that one side grows considerably bigger in scope, and colonizes a larger proportion of the media system. The case in point is, again, the state of news media markets in Hungary and Serbia, which are heavily tilted towards the right-wing conservative, pro-government (i.e. illiberal) side of the political spectrum, promoting illiberal agendas and serving thereby as important instruments for the growth of the illiberal public sphere.

The increasingly asymmetrically polarized media system enables another constitutive process in the rise of the illiberal public sphere—namely, the progressive mainstreaming and eventually normalization of illiberal attitudes. In an asymmetrically polarized media system, characteristic of the hegemonic stage of the illiberal public sphere, outlets sympathetic to the illiberal cause inevitably attract a larger audience share, making it easier for illiberal actors to promote illiberal narratives and values. At the same time, the amount and reach of liberal news outlets shrinks, leading liberal views to become increasingly marginalized and potentially ostracized in the mainstream news discourse, while illiberal opinions settle in as the norm, which arguably eases their public acceptance. The role of asymmetric systemic polarization in aiding the mainstreaming of illiberalism is perhaps most clearly evident in the evolution of attitudes to immigration and LGBTQ+ rights in our four countries, which have been habitually weaponized by illiberal actors to stoke 'cultural wars' and to mobilize voters in election campaigns. While data presented in Chap. 5, do not offer direct, causal proof that the mechanism of selective news exposure in an asymmetrically polarized system nurtures illiberal attitudes, they provide circumstantial evidence that supports this explanation. First, we confirmed that being frequently and predominantly exposed to news channels promoting illiberal views coincides with adhering to illiberal views on immigration and LGBTQ+ rights. And second, such attitudes were more entrenched in countries with the most asymmetric media systems—to the point that, as shown in Serbia, they continue to be perpetuated even when illiberal actors temporarily shift their position and seek to instrumentalize LGBTQ+ rights or support for immigration as a means of gaining international recognition. As we have seen, instrumental gestures in favour of LGBTQ+ rights among (otherwise staunchly illiberal) leaders in Serbia had little impact on public opinion, which remained overwhelmingly homophobic. Such a complete normalization of illiberal attitudes constitutes another tipping point in the rise of the illiberal public sphere, marking a juncture after which the sphere can sustain itself even without explicit support from illiberal leaders.

Apart from increasingly selective news consumption routines imposed on citizens by an asymmetrically polarized media system, the susceptibility of people to illiberal narratives is also facilitated by the changing nature of media trust, and specifically by a shift in the normative criteria used to judge media trustworthiness. As documented in Chap. 4, once polarization intensifies and news consumption starts following primarily partisan

lines, people's trust in media is no longer principally guided by established professional journalistic standards and values such as independence, impartiality, or objectivity. Even if people routinely refer to such seemingly universal criteria when justifying their news choices, the way they interpret them can vary widely, and can in fact open doors for trusting rather biased and even openly partisan and propagandistic media. This is particularly clear when looking at interpretations of media independence, which is not necessarily assessed in terms of independence from political or commercial interference, but rather with regard to independence from foreign powers, independence from the political mainstream, or independence from editorial control. These results suggest that in a context where the illiberal public sphere assumes a dominant position, the normative foundations of media trust start shifting, ultimately leading citizens to place trust in media not because they offer impartial or accurate coverage of public affairs, but because they provide an account of a reality they personally agree with or—in the extreme case—because their account of reality is aligned with the one promoted by those in power. This tendency is particularly palpable among voters of the ruling illiberal parties and can be best demonstrated through attitudes to public service (now effectively government) media in Hungary and Serbia. In the eyes of some of our interviewees from these two countries, public service media are clearly seen as trustworthy not just despite, but rather *because* of their blatant lack of independence from the government. This suggests that the advance of the illiberal public sphere is concomitant with not just important shifts in news routines—exemplified in selective exposure to ideologically and politically homogeneous sources—but also with fundamental changes in the normative assumptions and criteria that guide citizens' engagement with public life. As we have argued, these findings have important implications for how media trust is theorized and judged from a normative perspective and indicate that media trust—contrary to the gist of much writing on the topic among media and communication researchers—is not always unambiguously positive, but rather that its normative implications vary with context.

If the hollowing of the ideological and political centre of the media system—best exemplified in our countries by the state capture of public service media—constitutes a tipping point between the incipient and ascendant stages of the illiberal public sphere, the transition from the ascendant to the hegemonic stage is typically associated with a shift in the role of online media in the illiberal public sphere. As outlined in Chap. 6,

digital channels clearly played an important part in the rise of the illiberal public sphere in Eastern Europe during the first half of the 2010, having become an instrument of mobilization in the hands of populist and illiberal actors, who were amongst their early adopters, and also among the first ones to have applied a systematic, professionalized approach towards their use for political communication. However, with the further expansion of the illiberal public sphere, characterized—among other trends—by the capture of public service and other mainstream news media channels by illiberal actors, social media have increasingly started harbouring liberal voices and actors, and becoming places of resistance against illiberalism. This is apparent from our data showing that those who use social media for political activism tend to be significantly more liberal-minded and more likely to prefer democracy over authoritarianism, especially in countries where the illiberal public sphere has become dominant. These findings have important implications for our understanding of the role of digital platforms in advancing illiberalism on a global scale. Rather than focusing exclusively on their potential to act as vehicles of an incipient illiberal public sphere, we should acknowledge that their position vis-à-vis illiberalism likely shifts as the illiberal public sphere progresses. The impact of digital platforms on the quality of democracy should therefore always be evaluated in a context-sensitive manner, taking into account the nature of the political and media system within which they operate, and the relative stage of the illiberal public sphere in a particular context.

The analysis of the impact of mis/disinformation on the rise of the illiberal public sphere, presented in Chap. 7, adds further weight to our call for changing the conventional optics which tends to predominantly equate digital platforms with risks for liberal democracy, and for adopting a more nuanced approach. While social media inevitably play a significant role in the Eastern European countries' mis/disinformation ecosystems, they are certainly not the only type of communication channels that contribute to the information disorder, and help spreading false and manipulative narratives—including conspiracy theories—which are part and parcel of the illiberal actors' playbook, both foreign and domestic. As documented in Chap. 7, the dissemination of mis/disinformation is also observed in many mainstream news outlets, and the exposure to such outlet strongly correlates with audience beliefs in government-pushed conspiracies, often used to attack the liberal opposition. In this respect, we argue that the traditional focus on social media as primary vehicles of disinformation, informed largely by research in established democracies,

constitutes a blind spot that might prevent fully recognizing—and efficiently tackling—other important means and paths through which information manipulation operates and enables the ascent of illiberalism.

Taken together, the above overview of key constitutive processes and tipping points involved in the rise of the illiberal public sphere hopefully provides a useful addition to our conceptual framework and can serve as inspiration for future work on illiberalism and communication. Like the staged model of the illiberal public sphere, the discussion of constitutive processes and tipping points is rooted in our conceptualization of illiberalism as a dynamic, processual phenomenon. This approach also sets our conceptualization apart from the only other existing attempt to theorize the illiberal public sphere, developed by Bennett and Kneuer (2024), which we became aware of shortly before finalizing our book. In contrast to our approach, Bennett and Kneuer's analysis is focused primarily on experiences of higher functioning liberal democracies of the West. As such, their outline of the key operating principles of the illiberal public sphere largely corresponds to the characteristics of the incipient stage in our model. While very useful for the analysis of some of the countries affected by illiberalism, this model has limited capacity to aid a wider comparative assessment of illiberal public spheres, including cases where the illiberal public sphere has advanced beyond the incipient stage—as seen not only in the paradigmatic cases of self-proclaimed illiberal democracies, such as Hungary, but also in at least some of the oldest liberal democracies, most notably in the United States. A staged, processual model of the illiberal public sphere therefore has an important analytical advantage: it provides a conceptual tool that can help us assess the relative development of the illiberal public sphere in different countries. Through that, it can help leverage comparative analysis to identify the key processes and tipping points that enable the rise of the illiberal public sphere, as well as isolate structural features and interventions that may help slow down or counter its advance—points we return to in the last part of this chapter.

9.2 The Future of the Illiberal Public Sphere in Eastern Europe—and Beyond

What do the above summarized takeaways reveal about the possible future developments of the illiberal public sphere in the countries under scrutiny, and can any lessons be drawn from them for the other parts of the world

where we currently observe a growing popularity of illiberal leaders, policies and values?

Looking at the recent situation in the two countries where the illiberal public sphere has, according to our model, reached the hegemonic stage, it is apparent that prospects for any kind of reversal do not look too optimistic in the near future. The last Hungarian parliamentary election in April 2022 brought the fourth consecutive victory of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, and a fourth consecutive constitutional majority for his government, indicating that Fidesz's illiberal agenda and values resonate well among the population. At the same time, in light of the changes to the electoral system, which are disadvantaging the opposition (Scheppele, 2022), the clampdown on the independence of the judiciary (Aydin-Cakir, 2023), as well as the government's capture of a large portion of the media market (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023), the fairness of the elections has been questioned by observers (Bayer, 2022, April 4), and its results widely interpreted as evidence of further democratic backsliding. In 2022, the European Parliament issued an unprecedented resolution calling Hungary a 'hybrid regime of electoral autocracy' (European Parliament, 2022, September 15), in a political gesture symbolically confirming Hungary as a hybrid (i.e. non-democratic) regime, a classification of that has been applied to the country by the Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* report since 2020 (Freedom House, 2020).

In Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić secured 60% of votes in the last presidential election (which also took place in April 2022), improving his result from 2017; however, the concurrently organized parliamentary election has weakened the ruling SNS party, which—despite its victory—has had to share power in a government coalition for the first time since 2014 (Burazer et al., 2022). While this has been cautiously welcomed as a sign of a possible political opening (Ilić & Draško, 2022), Vučić's increasing geopolitical affinity towards both China and Russia, strengthened during the pandemic (Šantić & Antić, 2020) and throughout the war in Ukraine (Radeljić & Özşahin, 2023), as well as the simultaneous cooling of the relationship with the EU (Preussen, 2023, January 19) dampen the hopes for a change in Serbia's autocratic course in the near future. Given the continuing institutional capture, as well as the progressively worsening state of media freedom—Serbia has been ranked 91st in the latest World Press Freedom Index (RSF, 2023), the lowest in recent history—the channels of the liberal public sphere remain scant and face pressures from the government (Milutinović et al., 2023).In other countries which have for

an extended period been ruled by 'populist strongmen', such as India under PM Narendra Modi (Sharma, 2022) or Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Tóth et al., 2023, October 4), the illiberal public sphere—underpinned by extensive government control over mainstream media—does not show any signs of weakening. In the Philippines, the succession of Rodrigo Duterte by Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr.—the son of the deposed dictator Ferdinand Marcos—following the 2022 Presidential election has been generally perceived as a continuation of the illiberal turn started by Duterte (Garrido, 2022). His electoral victory has been ascribed, among other factors, to his 'capture of the public sphere', especially by spreading disinformation (Gutierrez & Breininger, 2022; cf. Ong, 2022). In addition to the above summarized situation in Hungary and Serbia, these developments form a clear pattern which suggests that the closer the illiberal public sphere moves to the hegemonic stage, the harder it is to turn the trajectory around and foster a revival of the liberal public sphere.

The illiberal public sphere has also been recently given a boost in some countries usually categorized as consolidated democracies. This is the case in Slovakia, where the left-wing nationalist party Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD), led by the ex-PM Robert Fico, claimed victory in the September 2023 parliamentary election, returning to power after nearly four years in opposition. The new government, which also includes the radical right Slovak National Party (SNS), is widely expected to push an ultra-conservative agenda and implement illiberal policies, especially in areas of immigration and LGBTQ+ rights, while the country's disinformation ecosystem will likely expand, and conspiracy narratives might become further mainstreamed (Buštíková, 2023, November 8). In Italy, the October 2022 general election gave rise to the right-wing populist government led by Giorgia Meloni (Brothers of Italy, FdI), which has been seen by many as potentially opening doors to the erosion of democracy following the illiberal playbook, particularly in light of the FdI's conservative and nativist ideological profile (Baldini et al., 2022). The November 2023 election in the Netherlands brought the stunning success of the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders, seen by commentators as a sign of a wider, pan-European trend of far-right actors moving into political mainstream and closer to power (Tharoor, 2023, November 27; Mudde, 2023, November 23).

There has been, however, some more uplifting news, too, offering a reason for moderate optimism regarding the resilience of the liberal public

sphere vis-à-vis its illiberal challenger—at least in countries where the latter has not yet assumed a full hegemony. The Czech Republic reversed the illiberal 'swerve' (Buštíková & Guasti, 2017) by a twofold electoral defeat of the populist leader Andrej Babiš—first in the October 2021 parliamentary election, won by the centre-right coalition of five parties, and then in the January 2023 presidential election, which he lost to the civic candidate Petr Pavel, supported by the democratic political forces and the civil society (Tait, 2023, January 28). In Slovenia, the social-liberal Freedom Movement (Gibanje Svoboda), led by the businessman Peter Golob, claimed a decisive win in the April 2022 parliamentary election, receiving 34.4% of votes—nearly 10% more than the ruling Slovenian Democratic Party of PM Janez Janša, whose last tenure as the Prime Minister (2020–2022) has been commonly associated with an attempt to emulate the Hungarian path towards illiberalism (cf. Pajnik & Hrženjak, 2022), aided by the strong personal ties between Janša and Viktor Orbán (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018). In Brazil, the closely followed October 2022 presidential election resulted in the fall of the incumbent illiberal President Jair Bolsonaro, dubbed the 'Tropical Trump' by the media (Weizenmann, 2019), who was narrowly beaten (49% vs 51%) by the left-wing populist and former President Lula da Silva. Last but certainly not least, at the time of finalizing this book, Poland saw a rather unexpected victory of the allied opposition parties in the October 2023 parliamentary election, marking the end of the eight-year rule of the conservative Law and Justice party, during which the illiberal public sphere expanded to and even beyond the ascendant stage, as documented throughout this study.

Despite these electoral results, it would be premature to declare the defeat of illiberalism in any of these four countries. While the key political actors promoting illiberal values and pursuing corresponding policies might have been forced to retreat into opposition for the present election cycle, the illiberal public sphere has not necessarily retreated with them, and the underlying factors that facilitate its establishment and growth—polarization of political and media landscapes, spreading of misinformation and illiberal narratives, or declining media trust—have certainly not disappeared. Moreover, the rising global instability due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the energy and living costs crisis, or the Israel-Hamas war, which has been sparking ethnic and religious tensions around the world, creates a fertile ground for political rhetoric exploiting people's fears and fostering demand for authoritarian solutions. In addition, the looming possibility of Donald Trump's re-election in 2024 could arguably serve as

an encouragement for other illiberal actors around the world, replicating the global effect of the 2016 election. Under such circumstances, it is clear that even if the expansion of illiberalism might have been temporary halted, the liberal public sphere will likely continue to be under significant pressure, and in a need of active support.

9.3 Can the Tide Be Turned?

The brief overview of recent developments in some of the countries where illiberalism has taken hold (albeit to different degrees) indicates that despite worsening conditions for the liberal public sphere around the world, the trajectory towards illiberal hegemony is not completely set in stone. Due to the complexity of factors involved, estimating the odds of avoiding such a destiny is far beyond the powers of this book. Nevertheless, based on our findings, we can at least offer some recommendations in the areas of journalistic practices and media policies—developed in collaboration with a variety of stakeholders from the region and beyond (see Štětka et al., 2021, for further details)—that might help counter some of the constitutive processes that, according to our analysis, stimulate the rise of the illiberal public sphere.

As outlined earlier in this chapter, one of these key processes is what we call a 'spiral of polarization', which manifests itself through increasing alignment of the news media with either side of the main political/ideological divide in the country, leading to the diminishing of the 'neutral' centre of the spectrum, and to ever more selective patterns of news exposure among audiences. However, our interviews indicate that at least some people view the excessive level of media partisanship rather critically, and would in fact appreciate more fact-based, neutral type of news provision—a qualitative finding which is consistent with quantitative data recently collected worldwide (Newman, 2021, October 19). While for many outlets, partisan bias stems from being captured by politically affiliated actors, others might choose it as a business strategy, exploiting an audience's attraction to polarizing content. We believe that in the interest of dampening polarization, such business models should be resisted, and that media organizations and professional bodies should develop guidance on how best to handle divisive content without further deepening societal cleavages and alienating more moderate audiences. This includes issues of language and style of reporting, where a particular effort should be devoted to avoiding language that demonizes the 'other side'—without however

falling into the trap of false equivalence, which might prevent journalists from doing what democracy increasingly needs them to do in today's age of 'post-truth', namely calling out deliberate attempts to distort truth and manipulate the public by illiberal actors. At the same time, media should constrain their impulses to provide such actors with the oxygen of publicity for purely commercial reasons, epitomized by the famous claim by former CEO of CBS Les Moonves with respect to Donald Trump's election campaign in 2016: 'It might not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS' (Bond, 2016, February 29).

In brief, in order to counter the spiral of polarization, minimize perceptions of partisan bias, and respond to audience demand for factual reporting, news organizations should strive to uphold professional values of impartiality, fairness and accuracy. Professional image and personal credibility should also be maintained in journalists' conduct on social media, which can sometimes be seen as unduly partisan or 'activist', reducing thereby the chances of being seen as trustworthy, especially by audience members of different political convictions.

As important as adhering to professional journalistic standards undoubtedly is for tempering polarization and maintaining people's trust across political divides—at least wherever the normative foundations of trust have not yet been completely altered through the expansion of the illiberal public sphere—it would be naïve to expect that media self-regulation alone is enough to resist the illiberal tide. In countries with an established tradition of media regulation, this is clearly also a task for statutory media regulators, who should enforce principles of political impartiality of broadcast media, which—despite the inescapable shift of news consumption towards digital platforms—remain a significant source of political information for a large part of the population. Needless to add, such regulation ought to be carried out within a legislative framework that ensures political independence of regulatory bodies, so the instruments of democratic oversight do not become tools of illiberal capture, as seen in countries such as Hungary. The task of safeguarding impartiality and—crucially—also political independence is arguably even more pressing with regards to public service media (PSM), which our study has identified as critical for the preservation of a politically neutral 'centre' of the national news media system, as well as for the cultivation of values indispensable for the persistence of liberal democracy. Knowing that in countries with a well-established PSM provision, these channels tend to be among the first institutions that illiberal governments attempt to capture, ensuring both

their independence and continuing public relevance in the contemporary high-choice news environment needs to be among the key priorities for media policy in the coming years.

However, under the quickly deteriorating market conditions for professional journalism, exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic and the economic recession, it is not just public service media that need assistance to avert the illiberal turn. Media policies should therefore aim to foster an economically enabling environment for independent journalistic outlets, including transparent schemes for their economic support. These schemes should also be specifically tailored to the segment of local and regional media, given that—as our findings indicate—they often serve as the primary sources of information for citizens living in rural areas and municipalities in periphery regions, those who tend to be among the core supporters of illiberal parties and movements.

Apart from fostering the endurance of independent, professional journalism in a pluralistic media market, policy initiatives should also seek to increase citizens' skills and the competencies necessary to safely navigate the complex political information environment they are surrounded by. Such initiatives ought to go beyond the conventional scope of media literacy programmes, by focusing on previously overlooked parts of the population (e.g. the elderly) and on the full range of media types and channels used for spreading false information (not just digital platforms, but also mainstream media, chain emails, interpersonal communication). In addition, they should seek to increase people's general awareness of the basic principles of digital economies, of the impact of digital platforms on sustainability of news media, and—last but not least—of the importance of independent journalism for democracy. It is, after all, the citizens' willingness to actively support liberal values, principles and institutions that will determine the survival of the liberal public sphere—just as their active public engagement and opposition to forces of authoritarianism have historically stood at the cradle of its formation.

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Methodological Appendix

Our research combined quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection: (A.1) population survey, (A.2) expert survey, (A.3) semi-structured qualitative interviews and (A.4) media diaries. Both population and expert survey involved the same sample of selected news brands (A.5). For more detailed information on our data, including underlying regression tables as well as instruments of data collection and analysis (population and expert survey questionnaires, qualitative interview protocols, and the media diary template), see the Electronic Supplementary Material, published online on SpringerLink. The complete dataset is available via UK Data Service (https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-855088).

Population Survey

The population survey (N = 4092) focused on public opinion research towards media consumption, political participation and democratic values. Data was collected online (CAWI, 75%) and in person (CAPI, 25%) in the Czech Republic (N = 1042), Hungary (N = 1001), Poland (N = 1040), and Serbia (N = 1009) on population aged 18 and higher. Respondents were selected by quota sampling, designed to be representative of the general population for key socio-demographic quotas: age, gender, education, region (nation-specific), size of municipality and Internet usage frequency.

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Pilot testing (30 per country) started at the end of November 2019 and the main fieldwork was conducted by the polling agency Median (in cooperation with its local partners) between December 2019 and January 2020.

Expert Survey

The expert survey (N = 60) was conducted online in the Czech Republic (N = 17), Hungary (N = 13), Poland (N = 17) and Serbia (N = 13) between February and May 2020. Driven by the overall ambition to include a proportionate number of experts with professional, academic, and civil society backgrounds, experts were initially selected based on the project stakeholders' recommendations (purposive sampling), which was then followed by respondents' own suggestions for further participants (snowball sampling).

Semi-structured Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out with 120 participants from the four countries (30 per country) between February and April 2020. Participants were recruited from quantitative surveys, using a combination of purposive and quota sampling, and from personal connections. Quota sampling was used to ensure the purposive sample was sufficiently diverse on several key demographic dimensions known to shape both media use and political behaviour, namely age, gender, domicile size and political preference. Each participant was asked to participate in two interview sessions—one face-to-face in February 2020 and one remotely in April 2020. The first wave of interviews was conducted in February and March 2020 and focused on media use, views on democracy, and opinions on social and political issues. It included a card sorting exercise that served as a prompt for a detailed discussion of news consumption preferences. The second wave of interviews was informed by the diaries and provided an opportunity for reflexive recollection of media use, attitudes to public health measures during the pandemic, and other issues. All interviews were conducted by researchers fluent in local languages, fully transcribed and translated into English and analysed using thematic analysis procedures with the NVivo software package. The coding trees largely followed the interview protocols and were formulated through a combination of deductive and inductive coding.

Media Diaries

The interview participants (N = 120; 30 per country) were asked to keep a diary for three weeks from 9 to 29 March 2020, between the first and second interview. The diary period coincided with the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and with the introduction of lockdowns in all four countries. In their diaries, participants were asked to include descriptions of all encounters with information, broadly defined, regardless of whether these encounters involved the media or not. Diaries were kept in original languages and analysed using thematic analysis procedures with the NVivo software package, using the coding trees applied in the analysis of second interviews.

Selected News Brands

The news brands that featured in the population survey as well as in the expert survey were chosen following a consultation with local experts, stakeholders, and members of the Illiberal Turn's Advisory Board. The selection—necessitated by the space constraints of the survey questionnaire—was guided by the aim to cover the most important outlets (from the perspective of their political relevance) from across the key media segments (TV, radio, online, print) whilst avoiding ideological/political homogeneity, i.e. by including brands with diverse range of editorial stances.

The Czech Republic

TV Prima	Commercial TV
TV Barrandov	Commercial TV
TV Nova	Commercial TV
Czech Television	Public service TV
Czech Radio—Radiožurnál	Public service radio
Mladá fronta DNES	Daily newspaper
Právo	Daily newspaper
Blesk	Daily newspaper
Hospodářské noviny	Daily newspaper
Respekt	Political weekly
iDnes.cz	News website
Parlamentnilisty.cz	News website
Novinky.cz	News website
Aktualne.cz	News website

Hungary

TV2	Public service TV
MTV	Public service TV
RTL Klub	Commercial TV
ATV	Commercial TV
Kossuth Radio	Public service radio
Klubrádió	Commercial radio
Magyar Nemzet	Daily newspaper
Magyar Hírlap	Daily newspaper
Népszava	Daily newspaper
Figyelő	Business weekly
Magyar Narancs	Political weekly
Origo.hu	News website
Index.hu	News website
444.hu	News website

Poland

TVN	Commercial TV
Polsat	Commercial TV
TVP	Public service TV
RMF FM	Commercial radio
TOK FM	Commercial radio
Radio Zet	Commercial radio
Polish Radio (Polskie Radio)	Public service radio
Radio Maryja	Private (Catholic) radio
Gazeta Wyborcza	Daily newspaper
Fakt	Daily newspaper
Super Express	Daily newspaper
Rzeczpospolita	Daily newspaper
Newsweek Polska	Political weekly
Onet.pl	News website
wPolityce.pl	News website
TVN24.pl	News website
Wp.pl	News website

Serbia

Radio-televizija Srbija (RTS)	Public service TV
Pink	Commercial TV
Prva	Commercial TV
N1	Commercial TV
Radio Sputnik Serbia	(Russian) state radio
Radio Slobodna Evropa (RFE)	(US) state-funded radio
RTS Radio Beograd	(Local) public service radio
Politika	Daily newspaper
Večernje Novosti	Daily newspaper
ALO	Daily newspaper
BLIC	Daily newspaper
Danas	Daily newspaper
Vreme	Political weekly
Novosti.rs	News website
rs.sputniknews.com	(Russian) state news website
www.danas.rs	News website

Electronic Supplementary Material Guide

File title	*File content*
ESM-A1	Population survey questionnaire (English version)
ESM-A2	Regression tables from population survey
ESM-B1	Expert survey questionnaire (English version)
ESM-B2	Expert survey media brands classification (descriptives)
ESM-C1	First interview protocol (English version)
ESM-C2	Second interview protocol (English version)
ESM-D	Media diary form (English version)
ESM-F	Interview analysis—coding trees

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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