

**VÁCLAV ŠTĚTKA & SABINA MIHELJ (2024). THE ILLIBERAL PUBLIC SPHERE: MEDIA IN POLARIZED SOCIETIES, PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 278 PP, E-ISBN: 9783031544897, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-54489-7**

In “The Illiberal Public Sphere: Media in Polarized Societies”, Václav Štětko and Sabina Mihelj deliver a timely and conceptually ambitious analysis of the changing media and political landscape in Central and Eastern Europe. Focusing on the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Serbia, the authors provide both an original theoretical framework and rich empirical evidence for understanding how illiberalism is constructed, mediated, and normalized in contemporary societies.

The book opens with a clear statement about the current state of democracy: “There is little doubt that the era of triumphant liberalism is over” (Štětko & Mihelj, 2024, p. 1). The authors argue that recent years have seen the public sphere in the region transformed by polarization, populism, and the rise of illiberal actors. Drawing on several years of fieldwork, including surveys, interviews, and media diaries, they set out to explain how these processes unfold and what they mean for democracy.

A key strength of the book is its innovative conceptual model. Rather than treating the public sphere as inherently liberal, the authors show that it can be “co-opted, colonized, and ultimately dominated by illiberal actors, narratives, and institutions” (p. 31). They propose a three-stage model—incipient, ascendant, and hegemonic—allowing them to trace how illiberalism moves from the margins to the mainstream (pp. 35–40). This typology is both elegant and valuable, helping to make sense of the diversity of trajectories in the region.

Notably, the authors distinguish illiberalism from related concepts such as populism or authoritarianism, defining it as “an ideological universe that... leads to a gradual decoupling of democracy from constitutional liberalism, potentially opening doors to authoritarianism” (p. 29). This clarity allows them to avoid conflating the many forms of democratic erosion and to focus specifically on the communicative dimensions of illiberalism.

The comparative approach is particularly valuable. The authors carefully situate each country within their model. For example, Hungary and Serbia are described as having reached the “hegemonic” stage, with captured mainstream media and near-total dominance of pro-government voices. In contrast, the Czech Republic remains closer to the “incipient” stage, with a still robust and trusted public service media sector (pp. 40–50). Poland, meanwhile, is presented

as a case of an “ascendant” illiberal public sphere, marked by intense contestation and partial capture of key institutions.

One of the most interesting chapters examines media polarization and audience repertoires. The authors find that “the news media landscapes... have a tendency towards polarization alongside the political and ideological axis” (p. 80). However, they caution against simplistic notions of “echo chambers,” noting that “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” (p. 73). Still, in Hungary and Serbia, closed media repertoires—where audiences consume only ideologically homogeneous sources—are prevalent (p. 74). The authors conclude 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...and the more likely they are to vote for parties associated with illiberalism” (p. 82).

The empirical richness of the book is impressive. As the authors note: “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” (p. 5). Their methodological pluralism enables them to combine macro-level systemic analysis with micro-level insights into audience practices, trust, and epistemologies.

Chapter 4 provides a compelling account of the shifting foundations of media trust. The authors write: “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...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” (p. 90). This is especially evident in Hungary and Serbia, where most media are “genuinely untrustworthy, and media trust is no longer an unambiguously positive thing” (p. 88). Through qualitative interviews, the authors reveal that audiences increasingly judge trustworthiness not by independence or professionalism, but by alignment with personal or partisan worldviews—a finding with profound implications for democratic resilience.

The book also addresses how illiberal actors weaponize issues like immigration and LGBTQ+ rights. The impact of such campaigns varies according to the stage of the illiberal public sphere and the resilience of civil society: “When the illiberal public sphere is at an incipient stage, independent PSM are still able to instil more liberal attitudes... 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” (p. 146). In Hungary and Poland, public service

media have been instrumentalized to amplify anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. At the same time, in the Czech Republic, their relative independence has helped sustain more liberal attitudes among audiences.

The discussion of digital platforms is nuanced. The authors challenge the view that social media are simply vectors of illiberalism, finding that these platforms can also serve as “channels of resistance,” particularly where mainstream media are tightly controlled (p. 153). Their data show that “in countries where the illiberal public sphere is more advanced...social media play a greater role as sources of information, often promoting liberal attitudes and support for democracy” (p. 164). At the same time, messaging apps may serve as “key channels of misinformation” (p. 168), and the relationship between digital platforms and political attitudes is highly context-dependent.

Chapter 7 maps disinformation ecosystems, arguing 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” (p. 204). Contrary to much Western-centric literature, the authors show that “digital platforms are not necessarily the only—or even the most important—part of the local disinformation ecosystems” (p. 205). In Hungary and Serbia, legacy media play a central role in amplifying disinformation, while in the Czech Republic, fringe online outlets remain more significant.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a final test case. The authors find that “countries where the illiberal public sphere was more entrenched...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” (p. 215). In Hungary and Serbia, participants expressed notable distrust toward government-appointed experts and relied more heavily on alternative sources, including social media (pp. 226–231). The authors conclude 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” (p. 232).

While the book is exemplary in scope and execution, some limitations remain. The staged model, though analytically robust, may oversimplify hybrid regimes (pp. 40–50). The focus on four countries, while justified, leaves open questions about applicability elsewhere. The discussion of platform governance could be deepened, given rapid changes since the study period. Nevertheless, the authors explicitly invite further research: “We therefore offer these concluding reflections primarily as an invitation for future research...” (p. 240).

The “Illiberal Public Sphere” stands as a landmark study in the field of media and democracy research. Its conceptual innovations, empirical depth, and comparative ambition make it essential reading for scholars and practitioners

alike. As Štětka and Mihelj conclude, “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” (p. 251).

*Mateusz Patera*

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND