Central European Journal of Communication

Scientific Journal of the Polish Communication Association

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Editors' Introduction

As of early 2025, a cross-cultural debate continues over how science serves society. With daily news around the world reporting on the crises of democracy, misinformation, and socio-political polarisation—with all their accompanying toxicity—there is an urgent need to revisit socially driven research using adaptive methodologies and empirical approaches that can respond to rapidly changing contexts. Moreover, as traditional boundaries between the life sciences, humanities, and social sciences erode, we observe a growing integration of advanced technologies into our everyday lives. Since this transformation challenges the cultural foundations of media and society and reshapes how we perceive and engage with them, we — communications and media researchers — face not only new topics for exploration but also—perhaps more importantly—new tools for applied research and scholarly excellence. This further underscores the need to communicate our findings to citizens in pursuit of sustainability and future-savvy solutions, even if that means moving beyond our research communities and comfort zones.

Here at the *Central European Journal of Communication* (CEJC), we have witnessed rapid changes in the scope of communications and media studies since the first CEJC issue, which addressed media systems and media-political relationships in comparative and local contexts back in 2008. The unique blend of Central and Eastern European (CEE) media and societies offers fertile ground to readdress traditional and Western-oriented media conceptualisations. We can now see how far the socio-political structures coupled with highly personalised technologies are transforming towards new waves of populism, geopolitical reorientation and the toxicity of divided families, communities and nations.

On the surface, the profound shifts introduced by Generative Artificial Intelligence further extend the list of potentially relevant scholarly challenges to maintain quality, networks, and communication—the CEJC foundations of applied and socially relevant media research.

Overall, the 40th issue of the *Central European Journal of Communication* (Spring 2025) clearly mirrors the day-to-day struggle for democratic media in the CEE region, and beyond.

Firstly, Konrad Kiljan and Barbara Konat adopt a rhetorical approach to analyse the media's role in shaping public emotions in the pre-election campaigns. By looking at six European countries, the authors test and examine geographical distance vs. geographical proximity to war as significant variables in political communication and populist voices.

In a similar vein, Agnieszka Szymańska takes the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a contextual factor in the coverage of war through the social media channels of a selection of Poland's legacy media. Based on semi-structured interviews, her study provides empirical evidence of journalists' perceptions of the media's roles, alongside accuracy, authenticity, and accountability.

Continuing this thread, Andreea Stancea and Nicoleta Corbu investigate the roles of global social media platforms in shaping contemporary Romania's political preferences. To this end, the authors uncover the significance of civic literacies, conspiracy theories, and the digital news consumption among key factors responsible for media-political polarisation; in other words, the widening gap between far-right and far-left voters.

The multiple layers of the socio-political foundations of populism and its discourses are further examined by Tiago Gomes Lapa, who analyses the Facebook accounts of two far-right political parties: Chega in Portugal and Vox in Spain. His study employs a social constructionist perspective on the narrative of the so-called "people" versus "the elites," identifying the need for a deeper understanding of each country's unique socio-economic, cultural, and historical contextualisations.

Travelling back to the Baltic Sea region, Heike Graf and Jessica Gustafsson analyse German and Swedish podcasts dealing with post-migrant citizens as underrepresented communities. The holistic research addresses key frames, such as living conditions, diversity and representation, and the inclusion of marginalised voices by the mainstream legacy media in both countries compared.

The list of scholarly papers concludes with a regulatory and policy analysis of Poland's democratic monitoring mechanisms regarding access to information. Alicja Jaskiernia and Lucyna Szot offer an in-depth examination of national and European media law provisions, revealing potential mismatches within the regulatory framework and highlighting how these gaps can be vulnerable to political intervention and agendas.

Finally, instead of an Interview with an expert, practitioner, and scholar, we publish this time an executive extract of a Citizen-Driven Debate on media capture and social polarisation, organised on January 23, 2025, at the TVP (Telewizja Polska – Polish Television) headquarters in Warsaw. The transcribed voices of Marius Dragomir, Čedomir Markov, Jakub Wygnański, and Bissera Zankova serve as a timely reminder of citizens' power to shape both present and future democracies, as well as the critical need to preserve the human dimension in the age of AI and amid ongoing high-tech capture.

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Geographical Proximity of War as a Catalyst for Variations in the Frequencies of Emotional Appeals in Pre-Election Debates

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Abstract: Appealing to fear was widely believed to be a rhetorical strategy behind the last decade's successes of populists. Recent empirical studies, however, show that this perception has been oversimplified. highlighting that emotional appeals are frequently used by politicians across the spectrum and that their distribution is shaped by multiple factors. Our study contributes to this field by introducing another dimension: proximity to war. We hypothesize that politicians in countries bordering a militarily aggressive neighbor would aim to evoke different emotions than their peers running for office in countries distant from it. To validate this hypothesis, we employed a Large Language Model (GPT-4) to assess emotional appeals in pre-election debates in six European countries (Estonia, Poland, Finland, Greece, Spain, the Netherlands). Our results confirm that appeals to fear dominate debates in countries close to conflict, while appeals to anger prevail in those more distant from it. Consequently, studies on populism and political communication in general, should consider conflict proximity as a crucial variable.

Keywords: political communication; emotional appeals; war proximity; pre-election debates; populism.

INTRODUCTION

Appeals to emotion play a central role in political communication, allowing politicians and campaigns to establish contact and mobilize citizens them in the desired direction (Brader, 2020; Jones et. al, 2013; Ridout & Searles, 2011). Recent research on emotions has concentrated on their role in the success of populists adopting

an passionate tone, frequently characterized by fear-mongering (Bonikowski 2017, Gerstlé & Nai, 2019; Rico et al., 2017; Skonieczny 2018). Throughout history, politicians have resorted to creating a sense of military threat to generate a 'rally around the flag' effect, portraying themselves as strong leaders and diverting public attention from domestic political challenges (Baum, 2002).

The success of such rhetoric relies on the public's perception of threat. In the absence of a tangible enemy, the America and its allies were persuaded by political and media activities following the events of 9/11 that the threat could materialize anywhere (Polletta, 2006; Redfield, 2009; Rychnovská, 2014). Similarly, ecological movements and parties often use fear-driven rhetoric around climate change, emphasizing severe consequences like environmental collapse or resource scarcity (Furedi, 2018; Gil, 2016; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009).

Research suggests that populists use significantly more negative and fewer positive emotional appeals than mainstream politicians (Widmann, 2021) to fuel the narrative of ordinary people versus corrupt elites (Skonieczny, 2018). However, the scale of affective responses to such rhetoric varies only among specific audiences (Schumacher et al., 2022), and there is evidence that mainstream politicians adapt simplistic language as often as the populists (Wang & Liu, 2018).

Politicians' rhetoric depends on adapting to the communicative context within which public functions exist. War is one of the few factors with the potential to reshuffle an entire political scene (Edelman, 2013), but its impact is supposed to be closely determined by audience's proximity to the conflict (Kemmelmeier & Winter, 2000). Through an examination of the types of emotional appeals used in pre-election debates, this study empirically validates whether political discourses adapt various emotional tones in countries close to war zones (henceforth Frontline states). Employing qualitative linguistics methodology, the study also answers calls for examining each emotion separately (Weber, 2013) to help better understand problems of political communication and international relations (Clément & Sangar, 2017).

In the context of populists needing to build a sense of fear to succeed, it is interesting to observe how the entire political scene changes when an external source of fear emerges. By aggregating data from six countries, which held elections in 2023, we investigate whether geographical proximity to a conflict zone correlates with an increase in the frequency of fear appeals across the political spectrum.

EMOTIONAL APPEALS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In the last decade, numerous analyses have cast emotions in a rather negative light, blaming their exploitation for the contemporary decline in the quality of public discourse. Prior to the recent rise of populist movements, scholars considered emotions were an essential catalyst for establishing connections and trust between leaders and the public (Marcus, 2000) as well as a tool for mobilizing emancipatory movements (Bargetz, 2015). As emotions facilitate perception, preference formation, choice, and memory, they play a crucial role in social order formation and maintenance (Long & Brecke, 2003).

The persuasive rhetoric employed by contemporary populist leaders in the online sphere encompasses several key aspects, which collectively create a potent appeal that resonates with a broad audience. At the core of their strategy lies an emotional appeal, which skillfully taps into emotions, often leveraging fear, anger, and nostalgia to evoke powerful reactions among their followers (Mudde et al., 2017). This strategy is complemented by a dual-pronged approach that involves simplification (Martelli & Jaffrelot, 2023), rendering complex issues in easily digestible terms (Wang & Liu, 2018), and the cultivation of a divisive ‚us vs. them' narrative, fostering a sense of unity among their supporters while vilifying the perceived elite (Hawkins, 2009). Furthermore, populist leaders extensively use mobilizing language, encouraging active involvement, and repetition to embed their core messages firmly in the collective consciousness. In addition, their adept usage of social media and multimedia content, combined with personal engagement with the audience, fosters a sense of community and loyalty. Social media have also made non-populists more prone to appeal to anger, disgust, and fear as they mimic adversaries with emotionality and framing promoted by platforms' algorithms (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021).

Characterizing populism is difficult because it is simultaneously understood to be an ideology, a style, a discourse, and a strategy. Furthermore, its simplistic arguments do not have to be explained in unsophisticated language (McDonnell & Ondelli, 2022). These elements converge to establish a persuasive online presence that garners widespread support and engagement, contributing to the success of populist leaders in the digital era. In the last decade, democratic politicians struggled to find rhetoric would present an alternative to fear-mongering language (Moffitt, 2016). As a result, mainstream politicians circulated between offering a sense of hope and positive agenda and portraying the populists as a dangerous threat to international stability and quality of life. When factors like the pandemic, climate change, and military conflicts heightened citizens' sense of insecurity, constructing optimistic democratic narratives became an even more challenging task (O'Regan, 2023).

It is important to recognize that the use of fear as a rhetorical tool was never exclusive to populists. In situations where genuine cause for concern exists and fear is justified, employing fear-based rhetoric is an effective method of communication. Fear has the potential to foster community cohesion, mobilization, compassion, and even hope. The crucial distinction lies in the underlying causes, determining whether the aim is to address pressing issues necessitating solutions or to target and eliminate perceived adversaries. McDonnell and Ondelli (2022) suggest mainstream politicians have already simplified their language, speaking in a manner no more complex than that of populists (McDonnell & Ondelli, 2022) and Boler and Davis (2018) argue that mainstream politicians are more likely in digital environments to appeal to anger, disgust, and fear to mimic their populist adversaries' emotionality and framing promoted by platforms' algorithms. There is not however any research to show either whether escalations in the use of emotional appeals positively affect election performance or how frequently they present specific emotions.

In the modern conceptualization of emotional appeals in political discourse, Konat et al. (2024) argue that over half of the arguments presented by politicians during pre-election debates contained some form of emotional appeal. This observation builds upon the classic Aristotelian concept of *pathos*, which with *logos* and *ethos*, constitutes the three rhetorical strategies. The inclusion of emotions in the analysis of everyday argumentation, a tradition dating back to Walton (1992), further enriches this framework. Understanding emotional appeals or pathos as discursive phenomena enables their identification and analysis within discourse samples.

Our categorization of emotions is rooted in cognitive psychology, which views emotion as a reaction to a stimulus. Each emotional appeal can be understood as a type of stimulus, where speakers, using specific words or phrases (such as "war", "children", or "coward"), are attempting to elicit emotions in the audience. Emotions in cognitive psychology are primarily studied through two approaches: dimensional and categorical. The dimensional approach places emotions within a multi-dimensional space, often using three dimensions: valence (ranging from positive to negative), arousal (from low to high), and dominance (from weak/submissive to strong/dominant) (Russell, 1980). Alternatively, the categorical approach divides emotions into distinct categories. Paul Ekman (1992) and Robert Plutchik (2003) each propose categorical models that are commonly employed both in psychology and computational linguistics. Ekman's framework identifies a quintet of foundational emotions – anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and joy – posited as universal, innate, and deeply embedded in human nature (Ekman, 1992). Plutchik's theory expands on this foundation, presenting eight primary emotions, inclusive of Ekman's five, with the addition of surprise, trust, and anticipation (Plutchik, 2003).

Emotion is a complex process, beginning with the cognitive evaluation of a stimulus, leading to actions to cope with it. This sequence includes the feeling state, known as the emotion, and ends with a return to equilibrium. Emotional reactions are responses to vital stimuli, preparing organisms to respond appropriately. Emotions correspond to varying patterns of behavior and physiological responses. Below is a table adapted from Plutchik's model, outlining emotions as sequences of events. Each emotion is described by a typical stimulus event, cognitive evaluation, feeling state, behavior, and its effect. Although our set of basic emotions is based on Ekman's categorization, we rely on Plutchik's later operationalization, which frames emotions as reactions to stimuli (see Table 1). This perspective better supports our aim to identify emotional appeals (pathos), rather than expressions of felt emotion, as typically captured in sentiment analysis.

Table 1. Conceptualization of Emotions based on the model developed by Plutchik (2003)

Emotion	Stimulus Event	Cognition	Behavior	Effect
Anger	Obstacle	Enemy	Attack	Destroy Obstacle
Fear	Threat	Danger	Escape	Safety
Sadness	Loss of Valued Object	Abandonment	Cry	Reattach to Lost Object
Joy	Gain of Valued Object	Possession	Retain	Gain Resources
Disgust	Unpalatable Object	Poison	Vomit	Eject Poison

This conceptualization provides the grounds for operationalization of emotions in terms of a stimulus-reaction framework. In this manner, from the perspective of cognitive psychology, words can be treated as emotion-eliciting stimuli, as evidenced by a multitude of emotional lexicons (Mohammad & Turney, 2010; Wierzba et al., 2021). In those lexicons, language units are tested in their efficiency to elicit emotions in human subjects. This is under the model of pathos (emotional appeal) used in this study, where we observe how politicians use language as an emotion-eliciting device.

PROXIMITY OF WAR AND THREAT PERCEPTION

Research indicates socio-economic factors underpin of the recent rise of populist movements. The inability of established political establishments to address the ambitions of their constituents has led to mounting frustration, providing fertile ground for the growth of anti-elitist movements (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022; Rodrik, 2018). Ongoing cultural transformations and rapid technological

advancements fuel a pervasive sense of disorientation and upheaval, prompting a proclivity among citizens for anger, the pursuit of simplistic remedies, and the emergence of populist leaders as a response to this disarray. The concept of social anomie, initially described by Durkheim (1893) and developed further by Merton (1938), has resurfaced in discussions on the contemporary political climate (Teymoori et al., 2017). It reflects a state of normlessness and disillusionment, exacerbated by the rapid forces of globalization and technological progress, which results in disaffection from social and cultural change (Margalit, 2019). In such times, charismatic leaders appealing to fear are more likely to emerge, capturing the allegiance of disoriented masses.

In response to these multifaceted factors causing dissatisfaction with the existing political system, numerous countries have seen a rise in support for populist-authoritarian leaders. These politicians skillfully harness the public's frustration, directing it towards specific groups, such as migrants and perceived treacherous elites, to rally their supporters. Populist politicians try to hold a monopoly on fear, portraying mainstream political elites as a threat to citizens' freedom and well-being.

Russia's aggression towards Ukraine resulted in the re-emergence of another source of fear, that of war, but the effect was uneven among European countries (Anghel & Jones, 2023). War is an event so powerful that its entrance into the context can transform the public perception of social reality. Although individual personality traits play an important role in the perception of conflict as a threat, its emergence is a powerful event with the potential to restructure citizens' priorities entirely (Boehnke & Schwartz, 1997). Afraid for their lives, citizens reconfigure expectations towards democratic institutions, political leaders, and policies.

A looming threat of war can be a potent source of fear, particularly in frontline countries, i.e., bordering aggressive neighbors. An existential threat has the potential to reshape political discourse, often leading to phenomena such as the „rally around the flag" effect (Porat et. al, 2019). This type of crisis amplifies both the pace of information exchange and the need for physical and emotional proximity (Huang et. al, 2015). However, geography plays a crucial role, as proximity to conflict amplifies the realistic nature of this threat and its emotional resonance (Åhs et al., 2015). Physical closeness, usually corresponding with higher refugee visibility, alters threat perception, influencing desired leadership and defense policies (Rousseau & Garcia-Retamero, 2007; Zaborowski, 2022). Leaders in endangered regions are tasked with the delicate balance of guaranteeing safety while navigating competition with other political actors to present themselves as competent guides through turbulent times. Taking these factors into account, we posit the notion that politicians adopt one of several emotional strategies when war breaks out across the border.

POLITICAL LEADERS IN DEBATES

Pre-election debates are unique events, being the most viewed spectacles during campaigns, whose primary function is to inform the voters about the policy and character of the candidates (Benoit et al., 2003; Benoit 2013). Although they are sometimes criticized for their focus on the performative, dramatic aspect (Coleman, 2020), there is evidence that they help voters clarify issue position as well (van der Meer et. al., 2016; Zhu et al., 1994). Voters learn about policy differences better by watching election debates than during other campaign events, when news coverage tend to omit them (Jamieson & Adasiewicz, 2000). Differences in format designs influence whether they meet the capabilities and entitlements of the citizens (Coleman & Moss, 2015) and Turkenburg (2022) suggests that their emotional appeal contributes positively to their role in the deliberative system, driving citizen reflection and engagement.

Televised debates become even more important as the audience becomes fragmented due to the growing number of communication channels running on separate platforms. After the rise of social media and the subsequent atomization of political discourse, they remain the only campaign events offering 'cross-cutting' exposure (Goldman & Mutz, 2011). As the only moment in the digital world with all perspectives gathered in the same time and space, debates force collective reflection on who we are and the nature of the common social state. In debates, assorted candidates are viewed and offered the same means for persuasion. Within them, despite variation in formats and question blocks, they formulate their appeals on equal terms. Politicians usually use this moment to strengthen their campaign message to ensure their electoral base that they hold the correct views. Their reception can, however, change when they are seen in direct comparison with others.

Taking part in a debate can also be analyzed as a performance whose aim is to establish leadership credentials worthy of a vote. Political communication in a debate is a series of attempts to convince the audience to take part in a social drama with the selected political actors playing the leading role (Schechner 2014). Primarily constructed by the acts of speaking, it shares other characteristics with a performance, starting from showing up at a specific place and arranging communicative situations with other people (Austin, 1975). By verbal and nonverbal acts, politicians perform their roles in the media spectacle, trying to leave an impression of being fit for leadership.

Appealing to emotions allows politicians to create bonds with the audience and position themselves as the right leaders (McDermott, 2020). The emotional aspect determines the course of action that society should be mobilized towards and allows leaders to carry it, as it makes speech memorable and redefines common identity. Eliciting certain emotions can result in identifying threats

to avoid, dangers to confront, or prospects to hope for. The audience decides if the attempts are successful, based on their worldview and overall performative footprint that all leaders carry with them. When politicians succeed in meeting the demands of the population, their leadership is legitimized by establishing a political community around them. The need to connect with the mood of the population means that to be successful, emotional appeals should reflect the state the population is in, so that it can identify with the message and be transformed by it.

Considering these dynamics, this paper employs automated language analysis models to dissect the role of fear in contemporary political discourse. Specifically, we analyze transcripts from pre-election debates held in 2023 across six European countries, aiming to recognize the intensity of appeals to different emotions and check whether in frontline countries bordering an aggressive neighbor, the politicians employ fear-based rhetoric more extensively than those in regions distant from military conflicts.

METHODS

MATERIAL

For textual analysis, transcripts were extracted from popular pre-election debates that took place before parliamentary elections in 2023 in six European countries: Estonia, Finland, Poland (frontline countries bordering the aggressor in the Ukraine war—Russia) and Greece, The Netherlands, and Spain (all three distant from the aggressor). All of these countries condemned the war and supported the attacked side, but the degree and type of their actions varied. (Volintiru et al., 2024). The number of debate participants varied from Estonia, Finland, Poland and Greece (n=6) to Spain (n=7) and The Netherlands (n=16). The latter statistic reflects the high diffusion of the Dutch party system. According to the Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index (TAP), the most comprehensive index of populism in Europe, the selected countries varied significantly on the level of populism support, 2018 data showing over 40% of populist support in Greece and Poland, 20-25% in The Netherlands and Spain, 18% in Finland and 8% in Estonia. The material was pre-processed using Spacy IO Python packages for sentence and token identification. The exact dates, participants' list, and information on the entities organizing the debates can be found in the Appendix Table.

PROCESSING

As our methodology, we use the conceptualization of pathos as an appeal to emotions, used widely in current empirical studies on rhetoric (Walton, 1992; Konat et al., 2024). Pathos is conceived as an interactional event in which the speaker is attempting to elicit emotions in the audience for rhetorical gain, using linguistic means. The presence of emotional appeal in text can be manually annotated by human raters assessing whether a given unit of text aims to elicit emotions in the audience. Developing this approach and using a manual annotation scheme, we performed automatic annotation with OpenAI's GPT-4 model via API (December 2023). We provided the automated language model with a set of instructions (annotation scheme) previously used for human annotation.

Initial investigations in computational linguistics annotation have shown that GPT models, when provided with clear annotation schemes, can perform at a similar level to untrained human annotators (Gilardi et al., 2023). More recent studies further confirm this reliability in complex emotion-related tasks. For example, Moon et al. (2024) demonstrated that GPT-3.5 could successfully identify rhetorical strategies such as logos, ethos, and pathos in Korean-language health discourse, with results aligning closely with human judgments. Rønningstad et al. (2024) found that GPT-4 performed comparably to human annotators in entity-level sentiment annotation, sometimes even showing greater internal consistency than individual raters. Rathje et al. (2024) also report that GPT models can reliably detect psychological constructs such as discrete emotions and moral foundations across twelve languages, showing test-retest stability and outperforming traditional lexicon-based methods. Taken together, these findings suggest that when grounded in well-defined annotation frameworks, large language models like GPT-4 can serve as robust tools for emotion analysis, making them a practical and theoretically defensible alternative to manual validation—especially in multilingual, cross-cultural, and resource-constrained research contexts.

Automated analysis methods have one advantage over manual analysis – they can be used for vast amounts of data with little effort. They also have a disadvantage – they still are quite crude, providing only an approximation of classification. The reasons for this are twofold. First, the nature of human communication is fuzzy – each sentence may contain an appeal to more than one emotion and have more than one communicative intention. Second, the natural language processing (NLP) methods used in this study are still in the early stages of development and each of them has its internal limitations. Using GPT models with an annotation scheme allows for most sophistication, close to untrained humans – yet it yields little replicability, due to the "black box" nature of the model itself. Using sentiment analysis to explore emotional reactions seems to be the most established and widely used method, yet in the context

of political discourse, its results are distorted by the noise in social media data produced by trolls, bots, and avid supporters. Each result obtained with the use of NLP methods should be considered with respect to the research questions and the size and type of data used.

With this method we can determine if the appeals and potentially elicited emotions vary between populists and across different countries. Our methodology includes analyzing intensity and distribution of five basic emotions: anger, fear, sadness, joy and disgust. This typology is based on Paul Ekman's concept of basic emotions, which are culturally universal and biologically based, reflecting common human experiences. This allowed us to quantify and visualize the prevalence and intensity of specific emotional appeals in political speeches, offering a nuanced understanding of how politicians leverage the range of emotions to influence public opinion.

SEGMENTATION AND CLEANING

The debates were all transcribed automatically using OpenAI Whisper with Huggingface distribution (openai/whisper-largev2). Transcription files were then segmented into sentences, which were then treated as basic units for analysis. Segmentation was performed using Spacy 3.7, except for Estonian, where we adapted a simple regex-based segmentation due to the lack of an available Spacy model. Segments shorter than 30 characters were merged with the following sentence to mitigate errors in segmentation resulting in one word or very short sentences (such as 'How so?') see Table 2[1].

Table 2. Aggregates (N) and Frequency (n) of sentences
longer than 30 characters by language

Geographical Proximity to War	Language	Sentences of more than 30 characters (n)	Aggregates (N=6973)
Frontline	Estonian	852	2091
	Polish	386	
	Finnish	853	
Distant	Dutch	2054	4882
	Greek	1284	
	Spanish	1544	

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[1] All data is available in repository: https://osf.io/kusbe/?view_only=743cd202b0af4f7e9b165ab141035b45 [Anonymous view-only link for blind review]

EMOTIONAL APPEALS ANALYSIS WITH OPENAI API

The manual annotation scheme was transformed into a message for OpenAI GPT API. To capture appeals to emotions in pre-election debates in multilingual data we used Application Programming Interface (API) to GPT-4 (gpt-4-0613) language model. Each sentence was processed by the chat completion API with the message:

```
{
„role": „system",
„content": „You are an analytical tool designed to identify rhetorical pathos
  in text. Your task is to analyze if the speaker's intention is to elicit specific
  emotions for rhetorical purposes. The only emotions to consider are joy, fear,
  disgust, sadness, and anger. If the text does not intend to elicit these emotions,
  or if the intention is ambiguous, respond with ‚No pathos' or ‚Unclear', respec-
  tively. Do not infer emotions not explicitly stated in the text, and do not iden-
  tify emotions outside of the five specified."
},
{
„role": „user",
„content": f"Analyze the following text for pathos: {text}"
},
{
„role": „assistant",
„content": „Based on the analysis, is there an attempt to elicit an emotion?
  If so, identify only one of the specified emotions: joy, fear, disgust, sadness,
  anger. If not, respond with ‚No pathos'. If uncertain, respond with ‚Unclear'.
  Do not identify emotions not listed."
}
```

The construction of the message was based on previous tests to match two criteria: 1) clarity of instruction to focus on attempts at eliciting emotions and to return only five basic emotions without hallucinations; 2) avoiding false positives by not biasing the model towards searching for emotions even if they are not present.

POST-PROCESSING

In the data returned by API, next to the requested categories of five basic emotions, no pathos and unknown, there were several erroneous answers (such as sentence repetition etc.). These were merged into the category "incorrect answer".

RESULTS

Results for each country separately, as well as the results of the joint analysis (see Table 3 below), show the general dominance of the category 'No pathos', which accords with previous human annotation studies on other data sets.

Table 3. Frequency of appeals to emotion (Pathos) in percentages in the six countries.

| PATHOS	Frequency Of Emotional Content of Sentences Longer than 30 Characters	Percentages of Overall Aggregate (N=6973)	Aggregate Percentages (N)
No Pathos	5184	74.34	
Unclear	539	7.73	83.65
Incorrect	110	1.58	
Anger	426	6.11	
Fear	360	5.16	
Sadness	208	2.98	16.35
Joy	102	1.46	
Disgust	44	0.63	

Fear appeals were the most frequently used emotional strategy in the Frontline countries, accounting for 45.03% of all emotional appeals - 1.56 times more frequent than in the Distant group, where they constituted 28.78% (see Table 4). Conversely, anger was more prevalent in the Distant countries, making up 38.74% of appeals, which is 1.78 times more than in the Frontline group (21.82%). Sadness appeared with relatively similar frequency in both groups (20.37% in Distant vs. 16.60% in Frontline), while joy was nearly twice as frequent in the Frontline countries (14.65%) as in the Distant group (7.86%). Disgust remained marginal in both cases, with a slightly higher frequency in the Distant group (4.24%) than in the Frontline countries (1.90%).

Table 4. Frequency of emotional appeals – numerical (#) and average percentage (%) – in the Frontline and Distant groups of countries

PATHOS	#Frontline	%Frontline	#Distant	%Distant
Anger	62	21.82	364	38.74
Fear	122	45.03	238	28.78
Sadness	45	16.60	163	20.37
Joy	30	14.65	72	7.86
Disgust	5	1.90	39	4.24

The frequencies (as percentages of the aggregate) of the five types of emotional appeals in those sentences containing more than 30 characters ranged from any emotional appeal ranged from a high of 38% (Anger) through 32% (Fear), 19% (Sadness), 8% (Joy) and 4% (Disgust). The frequencies become more interesting when we divide the data following the distinction between countries bordering the conflict zone and those distant from it to validate the research hypothesis.

Figure 1. Frequencies of emotional appeals in Frontline and Distant states
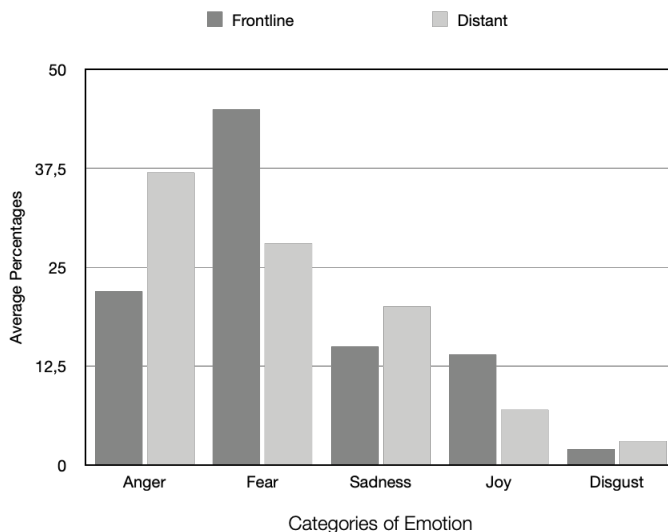
As we can see in Figure 1, there are some differences, especially in terms of fear, which is more frequent in Frontline countries, and anger, which seems to be more dominant in Distant ones—surpassing 45% of emotional appeals. These results should be treated with some caution, as the raw data was small, due to the general infrequency described above.

Due to the differences in data set sizes, we performed a proportions z-test, used to compare two proportions (or proportions from two different groups) and determine whether the observed differences are statistically significant. The results of the statistical analysis revealed that there were significant differences in the proportions of fear and anger between the compared groups, as indicated by p-values of 0.00000, while no significant differences were observed for joy, disgust, and sadness, with p-values of 0.11662, 0.05856, and 0.56463, respectively. These differences can be observed selected representatives of the Frontline and Distant groups presented in Figure 2, in which Spain shows a high level of anger with a low level of fear compared to the levels of Finland's anger (lower) and fear (higher)

Figure 2. Comparison of extreme frequencies of emotional appeals in the language representatives of the Frontline group (Finnish) and the Distant group (Spanish)
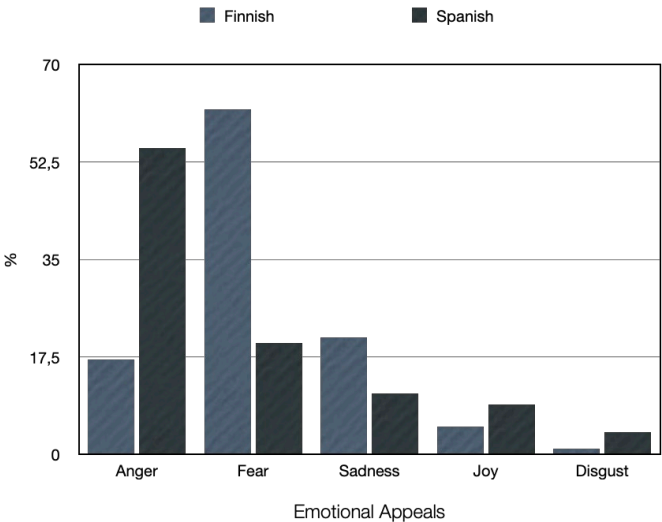
These differences can be observed in a detailed qualitative investigation of examples, where we can see how, in three distinct languages, appeals to emotions are realized similarly. The varying intensity of appeals to emotions can be observed in the following cases of fear appeal:

EXAMPLE 1 – ESTONIA:

English: Ukraine's victory or Ukraine's loss is an existential question of our security, so in addition to the moral perspective of humanity, it is especially us, a neighbor of Russia, who have a particular security obligation to ensure that the [defender survives] the great war started by Russia against Ukraine. [Isama vastus on, et Ukraina võit või Ukraina kaotus on eksistentsiaalne meie julgeleku küsimus, nii et lisaks inimsuse moraalsele vaatele on just meil, Venema naaberriigil, eriline julgeleku kohustus seista sellest, et tänapäeva.]

EXAMPLE 2 – SPANISH:

English: Currently in Spain, more people die from heat waves than from traffic accidents, and this is a very serious statistic. [A día de hoy en España mueren más personas por olas de calor que no en accidentes de tránsito y eso es un dato muy grave.A día de hoy en España mueren más personas por olas de calor que no en accidentes de tránsito y eso es un dato muy grave.]

EXAMPLE 3 – DUTCH:

English: And we're going to lose our country if we don't do something about it very quickly.
[En we raken ons land kwijt als we daar niet heel snel wat aan gaan doen'.]

CONCLUSION

Appeals to emotions suffered from a negative reputation after being blamed for their role in paving the success of populism. Scholars and commentators often put rhetorical techniques in the same category as factors such as disillusionment with the globalized economy and the emergence of social media, whose design promoted both an over-flux of negative emotions and audience fragmentation (Bossetta & Schmøkel 2024; Kubin & von Sikorski 2021; Stier 2018). This type of oversimplified approach resulted in multiple suggestions on how their effect could be mitigated to preserve the democratic system, including normative calls for distinguishing between factual and emotional argumentation (Oraby et al., 2017). Schumacher et al. (2022) suggest the success of appeals to emotions are conditional on the listener's education level. Others scholars argue that positive emotions, such as compassion, reappraisal, and empathy, can be a basis for successful alternative political communication, producing stronger responses among audiences (Wawrzyński, 2022; Wawrzyński & Marszałek-Kawa, 2022). It remains unclear, however, if the emotional dynamics of debates might adapt to the transformations of the political climate when a fear factor such as a war dominates the public agenda. This study analyzed how politicians react to the emergence of a fear factor—was—and if their choice of emotional strategies was dependent on geographical proximity, frontline state or distant, as threat perception theory would predict.

Our findings suggest that proximity to war can be an important factor that should be considered in future studies on political communication. Politicians have long been advised to portray distance from threats in their speeches to their advantage, either as an imminent threat they are ready to face or as an unnecessary foolish danger that can be avoided under wise leadership. Human perception is largely determined by a threat-sensitive surveillance system that enables or hinders our ability to act. To react to external threats, most of the time it remains cautious, avoidant, and anticipatory (Groenendyk & Banks, 2014). Channeling anxieties fueled by proximity to war toward political enemies is a powerful rhetorical strategy, as avoidance is the primary response in fight-or-flight situations, especially when facing authoritative power figures (Webster et al., 2016).

We confirm empirically that in contemporary politics, distance to military conflicts still has the potential to differentiate the rhetoric politicians employ.

The results show the general dominance of appeals to negative emotions in all the analyzed cases. However, the difference between the dominance of appeals to anger (which prompts people to attack to destroy obstacles) and fear (prompting to escape and reintroduce safety) points to the roles political leaders try to play at the stage altered by the war context, which Plutchik's (2003) theoretical model of emotions suggests. If politicians can understand and adapt to the emotional expectations of their audience, it suggests that the emotional foundations of leadership reflect the dominant desires of the public. Those distant from conflict may seek leaders who are capable of initiating action, while those closer to it are more likely to desire leaders who offer safety. As audience expectations change with geographical distance, emotional fuel for rhetoric needs to appeal to a variety of senses. Proximity to war correlates strongly with fear-oriented emotional strategies, with politicians trying to adapt and present themselves as the right leaders for times of conflict.

In this paper, we explained how the characteristics of pre-election debates discussed in the theoretical section relate to our findings. Still, it is worth mentioning the limitations of analyzing this format and suggesting directions for future studies that could further enrich our understanding of mediatized political communication.

More studies on threat perception are needed to examine factors responsible for its role and intensity. Future studies should observe how it evolves in time and if the feeling of safety evolves gradually, together with geographical distance. Although it is bound to be an important factor, it can be mitigated by historical experiences and differences in political culture (Wildavsky & Dake, 2018). Although pre-election debates offer unique insights into political rhetoric by requiring candidates to present themselves alongside their opponents, it is important to recognize that most political communication takes place through other channels, which should also offer valuable findings. Future research could explore comparisons between politicians' rhetoric on social media, where they have greater control over their messaging, examine cultural influences, and investigate how rhetorical strategies evolve, particularly in response to emerging conflicts.

The transcriptions with Whisper models range between 70-90% accuracy, depending on the language (Radford et al., 2022). In future studies, it would be worthwhile to employ human correction of transcription to ensure high-quality annotation. The model also does not yet provide full diarisation nor data-set based speaker identification. Employing human annotators who will match voices with the names of the speaker will allow for more fine-grained analysis of specific political parties and personal pathos styles of politicians.

As a limitation, our analysis is based on a basic emotion model to ensure clarity and reliability in automated annotation. Future research in political communication could build on more complex frameworks, such as TenHouten's (2006) social theory of emotions or the Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al., 2009), to capture the moral and social dimensions of emotional appeals more comprehensively. Another limitation lies in the capabilities of the GPT-4 model in recognizing the speaker's intention. In 1.58 % cases, the model did not return one of the requested answers, instead providing erroneous responses such as "I do not know this language". Adoption of more advanced models or the human-in-the-loop (HILT) paradigm would produce more accurate results.

Although populism can transform the entire political scene (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021), it is difficult to identify in which historical moment is the present. It is possible that the reshuffling of the political scene influences the popularity of emotional appeals, and they are going to be affected by conflicts long after their duration. It might also be true that emotions dominate alternative venues to preelection debates, and comparing our study with other pre-election events in the following years would allow us to observe the evolution of the dynamics captured in that study over time.

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APPENDIX

Information about the six debates analyzed in the study

Country	Date	Organizers	Participants	Duration (hour: minutes)	Moderators	Geographical Proximity to Conflict Zone proximity
Estonia	29 January	Eestlaste Kesknõukogu Kanadas (EKN), Ülemaailmse Eesti Kesknõukogu (ÜEKN), Postimehe, Tartu College (VEMU), Eesti Elu	6	2:06	Martin Ehala (Postimees, Editor), Reet Marten Sehr (EKN, ÜEKN)	Frontline
Poland	9 October	Telewizja Polska (TVP)	6	1:00	Michał Rachoń, Anna Bogusiewicz-Grochowska (both TVP)	
Finland	13 November	Ilta-Sanomat, Politico	6	1:52	Hanna Vesala, (Ilta-Sanomat) Sarah Wheaton, (Politico)	
Greece	10 May	Ελληνική Ραδιοφωνία Τηλεόραση (ERT1)	6	2:56	Mara Zacharea (STAR), Sia Kosioni (ΣΚΑΪ), Georgios Papadakis (ANT1), o Antonis Sroiter (ALPHA), Panagiotis Stathis (OPEN) Rania Tzima (MEGA)	Distant
Spain	13 July	Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE)	7	2:55	Xabier Fortes (RTVE)	
Netherlands	3 November	Radio 1 (NPO)	16	2:25	Winfried Baijens, Wilma Borgman (both NPO)	

Broadening the Field of View and Increasing Pressure: Polish Journalists on the Roles of Social Media during the War in Ukraine

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Abstract: War is a time of significantly increased demand for information and difficult access to verified data. The example of the ongoing war in Ukraine illustrates the importance of the media as an information source, particularly social media, its roles, and how it can be utilized by various types of actors. The article analyzes the significance of social media in the work of professional journalists in covering the war in Ukraine. The article uses the perspective of Polish journalists, based on the results of in-depth interviews (IDI) conducted in May 2022, after the opening period of the conflict, to present the argument.

Keywords: war communication; social media; journalist research; quality of media content

INTRODUCTION

War is a time of significantly increased demand for information yet also presents challenges in accessing reliable and verified data. Media perform a special role in this context as a source of information for various groups of recipients. The importance of a media presence during wartime has taken on various forms across historical periods depending on the available communication technology, the prevailing foreign policy paradigm, the international situation in general and the political regime of the country, in which the media must operate (see Ammon, 2001, pp. 5–65; Szymańska, 2021, pp. 21–37).

At the time in 1918 that Senator Hiram Johnson uttered the words "[t]he first casualty when war comes is truth", the range of existing types of media was quite limited. The level of available communication technologies made it difficult to influence the audiences of hostile countries through mass media. The

prevailing political paradigm at that time also assumed that native media served not only as an information channel, i.e., to inform, but also to promote patriotic attitudes among citizens. In the intervening 100 plus years, almost everything has changed: the conditions and the manner of politics, as well as the media itself and the way it understands its role. Only the deficit of truth remains unchanged.

This article analyzes the significance of social media in the work of professional journalists in covering the war in Ukraine and uses the perspective of Polish journalists and based on the results of nine in-depth interviews (IDI) conducted after the first period of the conflict in May 2022.

The IDI is a classic qualitative method that researchers have successfully applied in the discipline of media studies (see Jabłonowski & Gackowski, 2012, p. 21; Jabłonowski & Jakubowski, 2014, p. 22). Research of this kind is exploratory in nature. Exploratory cognitive activity as a qualitative procedure has an interpretive character and is close to idiographic explanation; thus, is in the tradition of hermeneutical cognition (Sztompka, 2007, p. 41). The aim of an IDI therefore, is to empirically search for new dependencies by deepening knowledge about the already established dependence, better recognition of the circumstances accompanying its course, etc. (Krauz-Mozer, 2005, p. 48). The results of the research discussed in this article will serve as a contribution to reflect on the current paradigm of the role of the media in wartime, the usefulness of explanatory models to be used in the future and an indication of the space for the emergence of further models.

MEDIA REPORTING WAR – A SHORT HISTORY

In the context of reporting wars (and international issues in general), the importance of the mass media is, first and foremost, determined by the dynamic development of communication technologies. The technical standards available during World War II allowed for the transmission of a message by telephone or telegraph in real-time only in text form. The recorded image (photo or film) of events had to be transported to the editorial office, where it underwent a complicated chemical process. Only the technology available during the Vietnam War enabled the transmission of an image with a slight delay of approximately 48 hours (Cohen, 1986, pp. 38–39). In the mid-1970s, the speed of text transmission increased to a maximum of 1,200 words per minute. A decade later (in the 1980s), the development of satellite technology increased this efficiency tenfold (Cohen 1986, p. 159). The presence of satellite television also meant that from then on, decision-making processes in the field of policy regarding foreign issues were accompanied by live television coverage. In literature, this period is referred to as the ‚decade of the dish’ (Gowing, 1994, p. 3; Korte, 2009, p. 131).

The technology available at that time, however, was still costly (Hess & Kalb, 2003, p. 72). This is why, even in the mid-1990s, media coverage of a given issue was limited to when an expensive "dish" was made available at the site of the event (Cohen, 1986, pp. 47–48). Almost unlimited transmission was possible only in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century (Hess & Kalb, 2003, p. 72). However, technical development does not automatically mean an increase in the quality of the coverage.

In the opinion of Ted Koppel, a long-time American war correspondent and winner of numerous prestigious journalistic awards, the delay of several days in the reporting procedure contributed to a higher quality of coverage, as the authors had more time to consider the correct comment to make on the reported events. The commentary on the events could mature in the author's mind and be created within several days, which was needed to deliver the film reel to the editorial office of the appropriate medium (Hess & Kalb, 2003, p. 21). Nowadays, when the media broadcasts programs 24 hours a day, reporters can no longer afford such comfortable reporting conditions. The media must be prepared for live streaming at any time and does not have time not only to think over the wording intended for use in the message but often even to properly verify the information obtained (Szymańska, 2017b). The pressure of time is not the only problem facing modern media. A significant issue affecting the quality of foreign coverage by the media is the growing economic pressure, which Western media feels even more strongly today than any political influence (Szymańska, 2017a). This should be accounted for, when considering the media's role in the modern world.

The second factor that influences the way the media reports on war is the standards applicable at a given historical moment and in a particular country regarding the functions and tasks that politicians expect from the media and which the politicians are willing to accept from them. Several stages of development regarding these relations can be distinguished in the period after World War II (Idzik & Klepka, 2020). In specific historical periods, politics dominated this arrangement, and at times, the media prevailed. In retrospect, it can be assumed that these relations followed a sine wave pattern (Szymańska, 2021). Which of the elements gained the advantage at a given moment depended mainly on the current state of communication technology development and the current political situation. Regardless of the political system (democratic or non-democratic), the media causes politicians more trouble with the better, faster, and more mobile communication technology they have and use. In an undemocratic regime, new communication technologies may lead to the emergence of new media channels that evade the control of those in power. This carries the risk of an alternative circulation of information, which is not conducive to the effectiveness of state propaganda, a crucial instrument for influencing society in non-democratic

systems. For a change, in a democratic system, the presence of independent media is a critical element in legitimizing the political system and those who govern and is therefore essential from the perspective of society. This does not mean, however, that independent media are liked, convenient, and enjoyed from the point of view of politicians. After all, politicians in democratic systems are continuously controlled and evaluated by the media (as long as they are indeed independent) and are usually criticized more often than praised. Questioning competencies and political decisions in times of peace is certainly a challenge for democratic governments and political elites. This criticism from the media gains an entirely different dimension during wartime when sustained public support for the conduct of a war is a prerequisite for victory.

The paradigm in force during World War II, and subsequently during the Cold War, assumed the unity of politics and the media. For example, the American media in the first half of the 1960s, as in the 1940s and 1950s, identified itself with the policies implemented by the government (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 73). In the same period, a similar relationship between the media and politics was also indicated by Yoel Cohen in the case of the UK (Cohen, 1986, p. 102). The dominant model of relations at that time meant a unified voice between the government and the media, with the media playing the role of an advocate for the government, and all consequences of this situation (Ramaprasad, 1983, pp. 72–73).

Due to the rapid development of the media, this situation changed at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s (Larson, 1988, p. 5). The image of the Vietnam War presented on American television reached a much larger audience than war media coverage had in the past. Moreover, unlike the text press, images had a powerful emotional charge (see Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009; Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). The most significant qualitative change, however, concerned the fundamental attitude of the American media towards the activities of the US government. The course of the Vietnam War and the participation of US soldiers in this conflict over time were assessed increasingly critically by the American media. The end of the Vietnam War, therefore, marks the time when the media finally shifted away from the model of a government advocate to an adversary model of this relationship (Ramaprasad, 1983, pp. 72–73).

The influence of television broadcasts presenting images of the Vietnam War on American public opinion made politicians aware of the power of the media, which may have contributed to the loss of public support for the war. This experience changed the attitude of American politicians towards the media during armed conflicts. From then on, the goal of successive administrations was to isolate journalists as effectively as possible from information of a strategic nature, especially in situations of political and military crises (Seib, 1996, p. 107). Yoel Cohen formulated similar observations regarding the attitude

towards the media by the British Foreign Office politicians and diplomats of the time (Cohen, 1986, p. 102).

The tactic of isolating journalists from information was sometimes more and sometimes less effective in subsequent armed conflicts. During the Iranian Revolution of 1979, American politicians finally succumbed to the pressure of the media, which became the de facto channel for disseminating diplomatic information (Seib, 1996, p. 107). During the invasion of Grenada by American troops in 1983 and Panama in 1989, the US government administration gained an advantage: journalists were forbidden access to the conflict area, i.e., the media found itself in a state of complete isolation (Foerstel, 2001, p. 99). At that time, the way of reporting the war was a derivative of the so-called *pool system*, i.e., media access to information from the conflict area was controlled and supervised by the government (Foerstel, 2001, p. 100). In the same period, a similar tactic of behaviour towards the media was used in Great Britain during the conflict with Argentina over the Falklands-Malvinas (Koschwitz, 1983, p. 56; Ossendorf, 1988, p. 88). As a result of the use of the so-called *pool system*, the role of the media was reduced to being the distribution channel of government messages. The pool system used by the Coalition during the first Gulf War showed that the system was insufficient to wholly isolate the media from all available information. The media's power of influence also lay in the possibility of informing about this fact and thus weakening the support for actions carried out by the government administration (see Foerstel, 2001, pp. 100–102).

The period of the first Gulf War is also essential for these considerations due to the importance that US TV station *CNN* gained in the international media discourse at that time, because it developed into being the leading creator of the narrative about the Gulf War and later also about other events on the international political scene (Edwards, 2001, pp. 312–314). The phenomenon of the global scale of the impact of this TV station is called 'the *CNN* effect'. This term describes the influence exerted during the 1990s by the coverage of this medium on world politics, diplomacy, and the way of reporting concerning international affairs (Gilboa, 2005, p. 27).

A decade after the *CNN* effect emerged, a new paradigm of media influence has emerged in international relations, known as the *Al Jazeera* effect. Its emergence was a consequence of subsequent changes that have occurred in the media sphere and within the international arena. The *Al Jazeera* effect primarily concerns the influence that new media have gained on foreign policy (see Seib, 2008). In this context, researchers emphasize the importance of the Internet as an alternative source of information (e.g., informal blogs) about the situation inside countries (such as China or Cuba) where independent media are not available. On the other hand, the *Al Jazeera* effect also applies to the loss of the dominant position in the global media landscape by Western mainstream media (including *CNN*)

in favor of various types of media from other countries, and thus the end of the dominance of the Western perspective of looking at global problems.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the example of the Qatari TV program *Al Jazeera* demonstrated how satellite TV and the Internet, when combined, contributed to the emergence of a new type of community. Despite being territorially dispersed, this community had a significant impact on international politics. This view refers to the concept of virtual state, which posits the existence of a new quality in international relations, a derivative of globalization processes (see Rosecrance, 1996). The virtual state created by *Al Jazeera* and other Muslim media was as real in this context as the actual states of the region. The *Al Jazeera* effect, therefore, refers to the impact that the use of a combination of assorted media types by certain actors has on various aspects of an international situation. As exemplified by organizations such as Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, or ISIS, this phenomenon has gained particular importance, especially in the context of the existing threat of terrorism (see Seib, 2008; Krawczyk, 2009; Baines et al., 2010; Macnair & Frank, 2017).

The presence of the media and their way of reporting events are therefore not indifferent to the course of wars. The media can have a mobilizing effect on the societies of the warring parties and their allies or be a factor that weakens their involvement. Finally, the media can be instrumentalized by the parties to the conflict, especially in the case of non-democratic regimes, and used for their strategic purposes (see Szurmiński, 2009). Recently years shows the use of the media and social-media channels for destabilizing and manipulating public opinion within and outside the country. These unethical, manipulative actions are some of the most important elements of modern hybrid warfare, which uses both hard (weapons and munitions) and soft (media, and especially new media) tools to conceal intentions and maximize confusion and uncertainty (Monaghan, 2015, pp. 65–74; Iasiello, 2017, p. 60).

The multiplicity of media messages and the broadened range of recipients, and finally, the paradigm shift in the media (especially the emergence of social media), have also increased the number of actors participating in international political war communication. In addition, over the last few years, social media has also increased the importance of international communication at both the meso and micro levels. The last of the above-mentioned levels of communication, which is particularly difficult for politicians to control, can have a significant impact on the work of contemporary journalists reporting on a war. In this situation, it is worth not only to consider how social media's presence affects the work of professional journalists. but also interesting to determine the role that social media plays in shaping the opinions of professional journalists covering the war in Ukraine. These issues were the subject of the Polish Media on War in Ukraine (PMWUa) project, which formed part of the Jean Monnet Chair project Media,

Freedom, Trust and Transparency in the European Union (FreeMed). The PMWUa project was conducted at the Chair of Political Communication and Media at the Institute of Journalism, Media & Communication Science of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland.

RESEARCH PROJECT "POLISH MEDIA ON WAR IN UKRAINE"

The research covered two stages. First stage includes a qualitative analysis of media coverage of the first month of the war in Ukraine in selected Polish media outlets. The scope of analyzed outlets included information portals (*onet.pl*, *interia.pl*, *wp. pl*), commercial and public radio (*Radio Kraków*, *Radio RMF*), and TV stations (*TVP1, TVN*), as well as nationwide and local daily press (*Gazeta Wyborcza, Rzeczpospolita, Nasz Dziennik, Fakt, Dziennik Polski, Gazeta Krakowska*) and weeklies (*Newsweek, Polityka, Wprost, Tygodnik Powszechny, Do Rzeczy, W Sieci, Gazeta Polska*). This stage of research aimed to identify the climate of the Polish media discourse on the war in Ukraine and to select journalists who authored the coverage. The second stage of the research consisted of in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted with Polish publishers and journalists.

The selected respondents (n=9) included publishers (n=2), journalists working in editorial offices in the country (n=4), and war correspondents (n=3), see Table 1. Respondents who were authors of reports from within Ukraine are marked with an asterisk (*). All interviews were conducted in Polish. The average duration of the interview was approximately 45 minutes. Transcription was performed manually based on the recording. The results were evaluated using MAXQDA software.

Table 1. The structure of respondents

Media outlet and the function of the respondent in the editorial office	Respondents
RMF.FM (publisher)	Jonasz Jasnorzewski
RMF.FM (war correspondent) *	Mateusz Chłystoń
ONET.pl (publisher)	Piotr Kozanecki
ONET.pl (journalist)	Mateusz Baczyński
WP.pl (war correspondent) *	Patryk Michalski
Gazeta Wyborcza (journalist)	Bartosz T. Wieliński
Polityka (journalist)	Jagienka Wilczak
Tygodnik Powszechny (journalist/correspondent) *	Marcin Żyła
Wprost.pl (war correspondent) *	Karolina Baca-Pogorzelska

Source: Author's own work

The interviews took the form of semi-structured interviews. The interview guideline comprised 12 questions (see Table 2). The cognitive value of the obtained results was enhanced by using open-ended questions and by appropriately placing control questions in the interview guideline (Szymańska & Köhler, 2018). This article analyzes and presents selected answers that address the relevance of social media in reporting on an ongoing conflict. Most of the quotes below come from answers connected to the questions marked with double asterisks (**) in Table 2. By the standards adopted in the research and due to the discussion of sensitive materials and battlefield content, the statements and opinions obtained during individual interviews are discussed below, maintaining the anonymity of their authors. Quantifiers regarding the type of medium used in the evaluation of the statements obtained are generally used separately so as not to facilitate the identification of the author of the quoted statement. The adoption of such standards was necessary to recruit the respondents for the research.

Table 2. Interview guideline

	Interview questions
	How do you assess the credibility of contemporary media?
	What is the role of the media during wartime?
	How, in your opinion, is it possible to maintain objectivity in the information provided in war zones? What causes the most difficulties?
	How do you assess the credibility of media coverage during the war in Ukraine?
**	To what extent can the service of other media be a source of information on events in a war-torn country?
**	To what extent does the presence of social media affect the work of a journalist covering contemporary wars?
**	What is the role of a journalist covering events in a war-torn country for a news service?
	Who is the addressee of your information service on events in Ukraine?
	To what extent do you take into account possible reactions abroad to your publications?
	How do you see the role of the media reporting on wars in the future?
**	How do you personally verify information about events in Ukraine?
	Is it easier or more difficult to report on a war that is taking place so close to Poland's borders than to report on other, more distant conflicts?

Source: Author's own work

Polish journalists pointed out many consequences of the presence of social media during the ongoing war in Ukraine. In their statements, they referred to both the positive and negative sides of this presence. The observations of the respondents concerned both the impact of social media's presence on the course of the war after 24 February 2022 and its influence on the work of professional journalists reporting on this conflict. All these aspects of social media's presence

concerning the war and the work of professional journalists served as criteria for organizing the research results, which will be discussed in detail below and illustrated with specific statements from the respondents.

OPINIONS OF POLISH JOURNALISTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

THE GENERAL POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE PRESENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Among the positive aspects of social media's presence, journalists highlighted its benefits in broadening the field of view and increasing insight into the conflict's course. In their opinion, social media plays a key role in reporting about this particular war, because, for the first time, we gain direct access to the very first front lines:

> The Ukrainian war showed the key role of social media […] because professional correspondence […] is accompanied by those in social media, and they probably do an even better job, and all this social media and the reports that appear there are more important […].

> […] In social media, we have a "live" transmission from the war. […] a journalist, […] going with a camera to the front line, generally rarely goes to the place of direct fighting. […] Today, soldiers who shoot, who are in the trenches, who fire, who defend, have phones and shoot this live, and today we feel as if we are in this war. […] if only professional journalists were allowed in there, we would not have three-quarters of these images, and we would not have this kind of report.

In the opinion of the respondents, social media also contributes to a significantly greater pressure than the media in general puts on political actors in the case of this war. A significantly expanded circle of recipients of the war message (in this case, extended by social media users) positively increased the impact factor of the media as representatives of the public mood:

> The presence of social media is of key importance, and it is also thanks to the media that Ukraine manages to exert […] pressure that until now, if not for the media, the government of Ukraine (and) President Zelensky could exert only through diplomatic channels on Western societies, on Western governments, on Western leaders […]. Thanks to the media […], I mean, here, both

professional media and social media, this pressure is greater, and I think it allows one to get more than they would get without it.

Journalists also noted that social media is being successfully used by Ukrainians to maintain Western interest in the ongoing war within their territory. A much larger group of communicators and broadcasters of the war message, shortening the distance of the presented image to the perspective of those directly fighting, means that this time, the war could no longer be ignored, and it even forced a profound change in the attitude of Germany toward this war:

> Social media is crucial because, on the one hand, it keeps the West interested in the events. The war in Ukraine has ceased to be a local conflict, e.g. thanks to such wide access to the media by those interested in this war and participants in this war […] which made it possible to extend this war globally […]; the war in Ukraine is no longer a matter for only Ukrainians, it is not a local conflict; it is a matter for the whole world, and the Ukrainians managed to do it.

> Strong pressure from the local media, including Ukrainian social media, but also the European media since the beginning of the war, changed the attitude of Germany very much.

THE GENERAL NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE PRESENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Among the adverse effects of social media, journalists most often emphasize, and strongly, the threat of the rapid dissemination of disinformation and fake news. The respondents were, nevertheless, aware that both sides of the conflict are manipulating the facts, although, of course, for distinct reasons:

> Social media […] is an easy tool to spread disinformation.

> Truth was the first to fall in this war, […] Both sides practice their propaganda because each has its own goal in this. Furthermore, it is obvious how the media is used for this, […] this war has shown what a huge role the media plays in disinformation, also in achieving such particular goals, […] the disinformation role of the media in this war has become very clear and active.

> In this war, the media is, however, one of the most important battlefronts. Of course, we talk widely about the media, including social media. […] the art of disinformation that has been created in recent years is so effectively used at the moment.

One of the respondents linked 21st-century technologies to the difficulty of combating disinformation:

> The saying 'truth dies in war' worked very, very well for us during this conflict. The fact that we have access to modern technologies does not make the situation any easier".

This instrumental use of social media to spread manipulated information by both sides of the conflict requires much more effort from journalists to verify the information they receive. As one journalist argued:

> Today, the greatest challenge for all media is to verify everything that appears on an ongoing basis, especially on the Internet.

Another respondent explained the problem in greater detail and had an interesting solution:

> I have liked many news channels on the Telegram communicator on my phone, with information from Ukraine; and indeed, if something happens, hundreds of pieces of information appear there immediately, but unfortunately, only about sixty percent of it is later confirmed. Today, you just have to be careful and make a big correction, especially remembering that anyone can post anything on the Internet. If this is not a verified source of information, then we cannot treat it as reliable information.

Nevertheless, the failures of the mainstream media demonstrate the need for vigilance in the work of a journalist when using social media as a source of information. Journalists of the Polish media also learnt from their experience, as one journalist explained:

> Fakes posted via Telegram, via Twitter, and so on. Unfortunately, this is the dark side of social media. Large international media sometimes get into such stupid topics, for example, the *Washington Post* recently announced that the Spirit of Kyiv has died. I do not know how many times the media has buried him [The Spirit of Kiev].

Polish journalists saw another negative consequence of the presence of social media in this war in the heavily distorted image of the war that social media recipients receive:

> One of the dangers of social media, I am thinking mainly of Instagram now, is the fragmentation of the image of war. Any picture sent from a war or a war-torn area becomes a report or correspondence. It is great that such fragments of reality are shown, but sometimes we get the impression that the war is depicted in these "icons" and told through pictures that create the illusion of being there. Unfortunately, images, short texts, or posts have limited power to convey knowledge.

However, the journalists did recognize that some social media users can overcome the limitations of these forms of media and are able to convey a very reliable, qualitative message through them. One of the respondents referred to a specific example:

> In my opinion, Paweł Reszka is a good example of showing the war through social media in Poland. His snippets of text posted on Facebook are compelling images. They are quite short, but they explain a lot.

A negative result of the presence of social media is, in the opinion of Polish journalists, the very uniform, even homogeneous approach to presenting the conflict, as one respondent explained:

> Social media brings together like-minded people, so the message on a given topic becomes more and more homogeneous over time.

Another negative side of the presence of social media during this war is an increase in emotional saturation and the brutalization of the message. As one of the respondents noted, it was possible for the first time for media users to see what the professional media are not allowed to show, but which is an indispensable element of war; in other words, journalists saw how a specific combatant died in a war:

> We see what the soldier who is firing at the moment sees. […] there was this TikTok where […] a live transmission was conducted by one of the Kadyrovs, i.e. one of those Chechen soldiers, […]. He died at the time when […] he spoke […] during his broadcast.

Being a viewer of such a brutally realistic message evokes completely different emotions than when following the course of the war through professional media. As a result, the perceived advantage of social media in broadening the perspective on the conflict is highly ambivalent. Social media users who share images of the war do not avoid brutal images. In contrast, the image of the victims

is presented without adhering to the ethical principles that are the standards in professional media work.

Journalists have made similar observations regarding security rules, which are inherently much harder to enforce on social media users than on professional journalists who must apply for accreditation and adhere to security recommendations if they wish to continue reporting on the war. Wartime is a moment when ill-considered reports about the deployment of forces or the effectiveness of an enemy attack can result in human lives being lost, and social media deals with this matter in a much worse fashion than professional media:

> If we have an object being bombed and people live nearby, they immediately upload a video. What is also not entirely good in Ukraine was that we found that the army later appealed and looked for the authors of such recordings, as the aggressor's army could precisely answer the question of whether they got to the place they wanted.

> So social media is doing a good job on one hand and a very bad job on the other. For example, inhabitants of particular places, witnesses of attacks, and individuals who reveal certain information often facilitate the enemy's work. A very famous example is social media, I guess TikTok – the day before the attack on a shopping center in Kyiv, a guy on TikTok posted a video where you could see how many troops were there and where they were standing. Heavy equipment was set up on the base. It was all in the background of the video. And then the rocket arrived. The guy was detained, and later, another video, some kind of propaganda video, appeared on the web, made under the title "Don't do what I did". But it also shows how both sides follow social media, and it shows that the social media role is important after all.

> [O]n the other hand, all these war messages carry a very high risk. We have military accreditations in which we are clearly told what rules apply to us. That we can't live-stream the attacks. Even if we witness a rocket fly over, we cannot show it, so as not to show the trajectory of the flight. We can't show the work of air defense. There was at least one case, I don't know if it's the only one, in which a Dutch journalist was expelled by Ukraine with a two-year ban on entering the country as punishment for broadcasting live. He deliberately showed that, here in Odessa, a rocket was flying overhead and would land. This is reprehensible because the Russians can use their flight corrector immediately.

THE IMPACT OF THE PRESENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE WORK OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS COVERING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

The impact of social media on the work of professional journalists covering the war in Ukraine, was substantial, and in the opinion of Polish journalists, both positive and negative. It was therefore twofold similarly to the impact on the fate of the conflict in general, i.e.:

> Sometimes it helps, sometimes it hinders. It helps because, as I mentioned, very often we can learn something quickly from social media.

> I think that social media has a great impact on the work of a professional journalist, both positively and negatively. The negative impact, which has not changed for many years, is that social media aggregates extreme content. The reactions and comments of social media users often do not bring anything new. […] The advantage of social media is that almost everyone has access to this first cohort of information about the war, because most of us use social media, and it is difficult to escape the war using it.

In a war zone social media is a significant source of information that first appears there. Professional journalists also look to social media for confirmation of information that reached them through other channels about the location of events:

> Before anything appears in the professional media or official announcements, practice shows that it will first appear in social media.

> With certain technological tools and with a lot of time and patience, you can find out some things that would normally be difficult to find out.

> When, for example, I received some information that there was a rocket attack on this place, I went on Facebook, I went on Twitter, on other social media. And I tried to look for confirmation first in this way because it is known that the services of the state will tell us to wait for an official announcement. So, trying to confirm, I was scrolling through social media, and I found, for example, a recording where clouds of smoke could be seen over the town mentioned earlier. So that confirmed something had happened. Subsequent recordings showed that, for example, ambulances rushed in that direction, so it was possible to conclude that something was going on. It was also such a light bulb for us that, okay, let's go there because something is happening. So the role of social media is hugely important nowadays.

For war reporters and journalists covering the ongoing war, social media is also an essential source of information coming directly from political decision-makers as it helps to reach vital informants much faster:

> I get information about the war in Ukraine both from my colleagues from the editorial office, as well as from practically all the media available. I also use channels on Telegram […] I expanded the catalogue of media used by me by pages of the Twitter profiles from Ukrainian intelligence services or ministries, or various offices, whether Ukrainian, British, or American.

> […] the presence of social media certainly makes it easier to reach many contacts and many people, the actors of events […] because almost everyone is present somewhere in social media

Social media has accelerated the flow of information. It allows information not only to be quickly acquired and exchanged, but also to be put into circulation much more quickly. Thanks to this, in the opinion of Polish journalists, social media allows for faster documentation of events. Moreover, it is precisely this documentary function during wars that deserves special mention:

> Thanks to social media, information can be shared very quickly, important information can be introduced into mass circulation very quickly, […] recordings that may be evidence of, for example, war crimes or other important events, and in this sense, I think that from the point of view of journalists, it is also very valuable.

In the opinion of Polish journalists, social media is also the reason why the importance of professional media has increased. Firstly, as an important point of reference in the work of journalists, and secondly, in the context of verifying information from the war zone:

> I write to […] our correspondent in Ukraine and ask him: "How was it?". I also use Twitter, check various foreign media, and arrange this picture from such a mosaic.

> Whenever there is information about the credibility of which we are not sure, and we know that we will not be able to verify it quickly on our own, we check whether the BBC has provided it. Whenever they describe it, even if from the same source, sometimes even the good choice of words that the BBC presents helps us to wrap it up a bit.

We try to check the given information through at least three independent, reliable sources. […] It is therefore beneficial if a given event receives confirmation through large, recognized international media. […] for example […] CNN or the BBC and, for example, the Associated Press, because then I have the feeling that this information has its justification. Of course, we also […] check with people who often have this information first-hand.

I have my media and editorial offices, which I trust for many reasons – these are largely English-language editorial offices. The first step of verification is to trust the media, which has not let me down so far.

Most journalists move freely within the media sphere, and they are aware of which media is reliable and which is unreliable.

CONCLUSIONS

The ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine has shown that the presence of social media has qualitatively changed the way of communicating about the war. The increased impact of social media is due to several reasons. First of all, it results from the fact that its message completes the picture of the ongoing war and complements the reports of professional journalists with the perspective of insiders, direct participants and victims of this conflict (but also the perpetrators, which must not be forgotten), which contributes to the emotionalization of this message compared to the coverage of previous armed conflicts – probably to a similar extent as the appearance of television broadcasts in the case of the Vietnam War. Secondly, the grand scope of social media has multiplied the number of people who receive information about the war. Thirdly, the consequence of social media's presence is the constant updating of war information, as the operation mechanism of this communication strategy coincides with H.M. Kepplinger's concept of instrumental updating, well known in media studies (see Kepplinger et al., 1989, 1991). Fourthly, social media significantly contributed to accelerating the circulation and flow of war information.

All these factors together mean that the possibility of exerting pressure on the political actors involved in this war has multiplied significantly. Social media probably also has a significant impact on creating a social climate conducive to the construction and continuous strengthening of the alliance between Western countries and Ukraine. The narrative about the war in Ukraine as a fight to defend democratic values and the right of nations to self-determination, consistently built through social media channels, allowed for the creation of a community

of values connecting Ukraine to its Western allies. The result of the presence of social media, combined with reports from Western mainstream media, is a phenomenon whose mechanism is similar to the concept of the *virtual state* that the *Al Jazeera effect* is based on.

However, the speed and easy access to social media as a war messaging channel is a double-edged sword. The negative aspects of social media's presence include, above all, significant information chaos and the need to substantially increase efforts in data verification and fact-checking. There is no doubt that social media is one of the important front lines in today's war. The presence of social media has increased the effectiveness of traditional propaganda communication activities. The aggressor of this war uses social media to spread disinformation and destabilize public support, even in countries allied with Ukraine. On March 1st, 2022, the Polish Institute for Internet and Media Research alerted on Twitter that in the previous 24 hours, the activity of Russian trolls on Polish Internet increased 11,000 times (sic!) (Instytut Badań Internetu i Mediów, 2022). Social media has also become a space of information warfare (the so-called "TikTok war" and the emergence of warfluencers), and the intensity of information diversion makes it difficult for journalists of professional media to work. This field is a space for new theoretical concepts.

The adverse effects of social media's presence ultimately increase the importance of traditional media, which is once again gaining significance as a crucial point of reference for professional journalists covering the war in Ukraine and as a tool for verifying the information they gather. In this situation, the self-referential nature of professional media increases, as their employees willingly utilize the message of media with an established position in the global media landscape. A special role in this context is once again played by media channels such as the BBC, CNN, Reuters, and the Associated Press. It follows from this that, in the context of the war in Ukraine, which, according to media coverage, is being fought over Western values, at least for Western media (in the Western world?), the media, which were the lighthouses indicated in *the CNN-Effect concept*, are regaining importance again.

Within the margin of the above analyses, it is worth considering another issue of the presence of social media during this particular war. Due to the specificity of using this media (algorithms responsible for content selection and, in the case of some social media, also the very young age of users and the time they spend on using it), it is difficult to predict the social consequences of the presence of such an intense and uncontrolled of war in the social media space today, though they are sure to occur.

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The Role of (Social) Media News in Shaping Romanian Voters' Support for Populist versus Mainstream Parties

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Abstract: This study builds on research exploring how media exposure and conspiracy beliefs shape support for populist movements, addressing a gap in analyses comparing populist and mainstream parties in Romania. Using an original dataset from an online panel survey conducted by Kantar/Lightspeed with 1,500 respondents, the paper examines predictors of vote intention for both the radical right *Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor* (AUR) and the mainstream *Partidul Social Democrat (*PSD). Results show that social media news consumption is associated not only with AUR support but also with left-wing PSD support. These findings suggest that, in Romania, PSD and AUR share similar voter profiles, highlighting the unique overlap between left – and right-wing populist appeal.

Keywords: vote intention; populist parties; news consumption; political knowledge; mainstream; Romania

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Europe has witnessed a rise in nationalist and populist movements, many of which promote euro-skepticism and advocate for closer ties with Russia. This rise in populist parties across Europe has raised new questions about the conditions under which citizens form political preferences. Scholars have increasingly highlighted the role of media, and particularly social media, in this process as a channel for mobilization, an alternative source of news, and a space

that facilitates polarization and in-group, out-group dynamics (Douglas et al., 2019; Hameleers, 2020; Müller & Schulz, 2021). Bypassing mainstream media and communicating directly with voters, populist actors can amplify messages that challenge elites and resonate with disaffected citizens (Bartlett et al., 2011).

Beyond media, two additional factors have been consistently linked to populist support: skeptical orientations often associated with conspiracy beliefs and political knowledge. Conspiracy narratives provide simplified explanations for complex crises (e.g., COVID-19), reinforcing distrust in institutions and mainstream elites. Prior studies have demonstrated that such beliefs strongly predict support for political parties (Cantarella et al., 2023; Christner, 2022; Loziak & Havrillová, 2024; Mancosu et al., 2017). This study, however, employed a measure that reflected a narrower form of skepticism (see Measurements section for details). Similarly, political knowledge conditions the association with populist support. While lower knowledge levels have been associated with higher populist attitudes, recent evidence has suggested that 'informed populists' are more inclined to vote for radical parties, whereas 'uninformed populists' are more likely to abstain (Marcos-Marne et al., 2023; Stanley & Cześnik, 2022; van Kessel et al., 2020).

While extensively studied in Western Europe, the dynamics of populist support remain less explored in Eastern Europe, where such movements have risen more recently. Romania exemplifies this through the ascent of *Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor* (Alliance for the Union of Romanians, AUR), which has consolidated its position in national politics, reflecting broader European trends (Soare & Collini, 2024). Following Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), in this paper populism is understood as a thin-centered ideology framing politics as a struggle between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite," often intertwined with nationalism or authoritarianism. Within this framework, AUR represents a populist party combining anti-elite appeals with ultranationalism, traditional family values, and anti-Western rhetoric (Burciu, 2024; Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023; Soare & Tufiş, 2023). Previous research on Romanian populism has been either general (Aparaschivei, 2010; Momoc, 2018; Pătruţ, 2017) or focused on individual parties (Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023; Gherghina & Miscoiu, 2014; Soare & Tufiş, 2023). Few studies have compared predictors of support for populist versus mainstream parties, particularly regarding news consumption. This gap is especially relevant as AUR, since its 2019 founding, has steadily expanded, entering Parliament in 2020 and further strengthening its base during Romania's "super electoral year" of 2024, positioning itself as the main challenger to mainstream parties. Thus, the present paper sought to address this gap, with three main objectives.

Firstly, to investigate the differences between traditional and populist parties' supporters in terms of news consumption habits, and how this reflects on voting intention. Several important studies have focused on analyzing the effects of news consumption on vote intention, in particular vote intentions for a populist party

(Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Schulz, 2019; Schumann et al., 2021). To our knowledge, scant research has discussed this relationship in an Eastern European country (Aparaschivei, 2010; Matiuta, 2023; Momoc, 2018; Pătruț, 2017), with only a few studies addressing the potential role of news consumption on voting for a populist party, compared to mainstream parties (Matiuta, 2023; Soare, 2023).

Secondly, the study examined the association between conspiracy narratives and vote intention during recent crises, such as COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which amplified disinformation and skepticism toward official narratives. Building on previous research on conspiracy beliefs in Romanian society (Buturoiu et al., 2021; Corbu, Bârgăoanu, et al., 2023; Corbu, Buturoiu, et al., 2023; Corbu et al., 2020), it explored how conspiracy-like skepticism relates to voting intentions—an understudied topic in Romania. The analysis also considered political knowledge as a potential predictor of populist support, as studies show that lower knowledge aligns with higher populism, while "informed populists" tend to vote and "uninformed populists" often abstain (Marcos-Marne et al., 2023; Stanley & Cześnik, 2022; van Kessel et al., 2020).

Thirdly, previous studies that explored the rise of populist parties in Romania have focused solely on a specific party (Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023; Gherghina & Miscoiu, 2014; Soare & Tufiș, 2023), and less on a comparative analyses of populist parties versus mainstream parties. This paper bridged this gap in the literature by conducting an empirical analysis of the role of news consumption habits, orientation as proxy for conspiracy thinking and political knowledge in shaping Romanian voters' support for populist parties versus mainstream parties. To the best of our knowledge, this was the first study in Romania to conduct a comprehensive analysis of vote intention predictors in a country where the populist parties have relatively recently started to gain momentum.

Although focused on Romania, this study offers insights relevant to other young democracies in Eastern and Southern Europe, marked by fragile institutions, fragmented media, and the rise of populist movements (Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023). AUR's trajectory illustrates these dynamics, making Romania a useful case for understanding broader populist trends. By comparing vote intention predictors for AUR with those for PSD, PNL, USR, and UDMR, the study explores whether factors commonly linked to populist support are unique to AUR or reflect wider patterns within Romania's party system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE ROLE OF NEWS CONSUMPTION IN SHAPING POPULIST VOTING INTENTIONS

News consumption patterns have been widely studied, with research consistently showing that political preferences are closely tied to the channels through which individuals access information. Supporters of populist radical right parties tend to rely heavily on social media platforms, where direct communication, emotionally charged narratives, and alternative sources of information circulate more freely. This reliance reflects both the style of populist parties, which strategically use digital platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers, and the preferences of their electorates, who are more inclined toward online and alternative news environments. By contrast, mainstream parties are more strongly associated with traditional media channels, such as television, radio, and established newspapers. This is partly due to their commitment to journalistic norms (e.g., credibility, fact-checking, and editorial oversight) (Heft et al., 2020), but also because their support base tends to include older demographics who consume news less through digital platforms and more through legacy media (Reiter & Matthes, 2023; Strömbäck et al., 2023). In this sense, party communication strategies and voter media habits reinforce one another: populist parties thrive on social media because their supporters are present there, while mainstream parties remain anchored in traditional media, where their audiences continue to seek consistency and reliability.

On one hand, research links the rise of populist parties to the flow of information in today's hybrid media system (Bos & Brants, 2014; Krämer, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2008). Social networks such as Facebook and X are particularly effective in promoting populist parties and candidates (Gerbaudo, 2018). Populists use these platforms more actively than traditional talk shows to share messages directly with large audiences at low cost, bypassing gatekeepers (Ernst et al., 2019; Engesser, Ernst, et al., 2017; Krämer, 2017). Their "us versus them" narratives, marked by fear and anger, fit the social media attention economy and attract visibility (Engesser, Fawzi, et al., 2017). Social media also enables populist actors to shape public discourse and involve citizens in spreading their messages (Faris et al., 2017; Müller & Schwarz, 2023). Overall, populist content and issue agendas are highly visible online, even to users not directly seeking them, reinforcing populist and exclusionary attitudes (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Hameleers et al., 2018).

On the other hand, recent studies find evidence that support the idea of mainstream media remaining one of the most influential sources for news consumption (Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2021; Shehata et al., 2024; Tóth et al., 2023) and has been shown to reinforce mainstream political views. Norris (2001) argues that mainstream media tends to provide balanced coverage and promotes

centrist views, which in turn fosters support for mainstream parties. Similarly, Thussu (2007) argues that mainstream news often emphasizes stability and the status quo, aligning with the ideological perspectives of mainstream parties rather than those of radical right movements.

Mainstream media's editorial standards limit the sensationalism typical of radical right rhetoric and promote balanced, centrist perspectives (Strömbäck et al., 2013; Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022). In contrast, radical right parties thrive on alternative and social media, which lack similar journalistic constraints and enable direct, unfiltered communication with supporters (Mudde, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2013; Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

- H1a. The more people follow news on digital and social media channels, the more they intend to vote for a populist party (AUR).
- H1b. The more people follow news on media mainstream channels, the more they intend to vote for mainstream parties.

THE ASSOCIATION OF BELIEFS IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE WITH POPULIST VOTING BEHAVIOR

Beyond media consumption, research highlights the role of conspiracy-related orientations in shaping political behavior. However, the role of conspiracy theories on voting intention is a topic that remains underexplored in research on Eastern European countries. Conspiracy theories, often described as beliefs in covert malevolent operations, are pervasive in today's information environment. Imhoff et al. (2022) examined the "conspiracy mentality" or "conspiracy mindset" in Western Europe and the United States, revealing a connection between conspiracy beliefs and political decisions. Additionally, Imhoff et al. (2022) conclude that conspiracy theories about the government correlate with anti-elitism and political extremism.

While most research has concentrated on understanding the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories (Uscinski et al., 2018), there has been limited investigation into whether conspiratorial attitudes can predict certain political behaviors (Mancosu et al., 2017). Furthermore, the few studies that have explored this topic have produced mixed results or have not directly examined the connection between belief in conspiracy theories and the intention to vote for a populist party (Cantarella et al., 2023; Mancosu et al., 2017). Furthermore, research shows a link between a conspiracy mindset and a preference for right-wing parties (Christner, 2022; Loziak & Havrillová, 2024), with general political mistrust being an important predictor in the relationship between conspiracy mentality and voting behavior (Loziak & Havrillová, 2024). Despite these findings, there has been insufficient investigation into how conspiracy theories are connected to populist or nationalist ideologies in Eastern European countries.

In Eastern Europe, the intersection between conspiratorial orientations and voting behavior remains understudied, despite conditions that make this relationship especially salient: low levels of institutional trust, the persistence of disinformation, and high reliance on social media for news. Our study addressed this gap by examining whether skeptical orientations are associated with differential voting intentions. Although this measure does not capture the full range of conspiracy mentality, prior studies have used similar single items on health crises or institutional transparency as proxies for broader conspiratorial orientations. Research on COVID-19 misinformation links vaccine skepticism with general conspiracy thinking and distrust of elites (Bertin et al., 2020; van Mulukom et al., 2022; Earnshaw et al., 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020). Even narrow indicators of vaccine skepticism or institutional distrust can reliably predict political attitudes (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Freeman et al., 2020). Thus, while interpreted cautiously, our item validly reflects skeptical orientations overlapping with conspiracy beliefs and institutional mistrust.

Based on these insights, we aimed to investigate the role of skeptical orientations as a proxy of conspiracist thinking on voting intention:

> H2. Individuals with higher levels of skeptical orientations are more likely to intend to vote for a populist party (AUR) than for a mainstream party.

Furthermore, while we have substantial information on the demographics of populist voters, the reasons behind their choices remain less clear. Political knowledge is a key variable in understanding voting behavior, because it encompasses the amount and accuracy of information individuals possess about political processes, institutions, and actors. Traditionally, higher levels of political knowledge are associated with stable and predictable voting patterns, while lower levels correlate with reliance on heuristics and affective cues (Marcos-Marne et al., 2023; Stanley & Cześnik, 2022; van Kessel et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant for understanding the support for radical right parties, which often thrive on simplified messages and emotive appeals.

However, recent scholarship complicates this assumption by distinguishing between 'uninformed populists' and 'informed populists' (Stanley & Cześnik, 2022). The former may hold strong anti-elite attitudes, but their lack of political knowledge often prevents them from translating these attitudes into electoral behavior, making abstention more likely. By contrast, the latter group combines anti-elite orientations with enough political knowledge to recognize party platforms and to effectively channel their preferences into votes for populist radical right parties. Stanley and Cześnik (2022) suggest that higher political knowledge can either deter or encourage support for these parties, depending on voters' understanding of the parties' platforms and the broader political context. More

specifically, lower political knowledge correlates with higher levels of populism, and it is the 'informed populists' who are more inclined to vote for populist parties, whereas 'uninformed populists' are more likely to abstain from voting. There is evidence suggesting that individuals with lower levels of political knowledge are more likely to support populist parties (Bischof & Senninger, 2018; Oliver & Rahn, 2016). This can be attributed to several factors, including the communication strategies of populist parties, which often present their messages in simple, direct, and emotionally charged ways. These strategies resonate with voters who may not have political sophistication or the detailed knowledge necessary to critically evaluate more complex political issues or policies. Additionally, individuals with lower political knowledge are less likely to be engaged with or trust traditional political institutions and mainstream media, making them more receptive to populist rhetoric that challenges the status quo (Arzheimer, 2009; Rooduijn, 2019). Conversely, those with higher education are generally expected to possess more informed and stable political attitudes and to be better equipped to handle the complexities of globalization and digitalization, making them less susceptible to populist rhetoric.

Thus, one critical question that emerges is:

RQ1. How does the level of political knowledge impact vote intention?

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY CONTEXT, DATASET AND VARIABLES

STUDY CONTEXT: POLITICAL PARTIES IN ROMANIA:
AUR, PSD, PNL, USR AND UDMR

This study analyzes the populist party Alianța pentru Unitatea Românilor (AUR) (Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023; Soare, 2023) in relation to Romania's mainstream parties. Founded in 2019, AUR rapidly evolved from a fringe movement to a parliamentary force by 2020, positioning itself as a major challenger to the establishment. Identified as a far-right, ultranationalist, and anti-Western party (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), its motto "Family, Nation, Faith, and Freedom" reflects a conservative and exclusionary ideology. AUR leveraged public discontent with mainstream politics, promoting nationalist, traditionalist, and anti-elite narratives, especially online during the COVID-19 pandemic (Burciu, 2024).

By contrast, Romania's mainstream parties have stable roots. The Partidul Social Democrat (PSD) dominates among older and rural voters; the Partidul Național Liberal (PNL) appeals to urban, pro-European groups; the Uniunea

Salvați România (USR) began as a reformist alternative; and the Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România (UDMR) represents the Hungarian minority.

AUR's rise continued in 2024–2025, gaining 18% in the 2024 parliamentary elections, 13.9% in the first round of the 2024 presidential race, and 40.9% in the May 2025 rerun—confirming its establishment as a major force in Romanian politics.

DATA SET OF THREATPIE PROJECT

To test the hypotheses, we used an original dataset from an online representative survey conducted by Kantar/Lightspeed in Romania between May 16 and June 24, 2022. The survey covered multiple scales and variables and has been used in related studies on misinformation detection and political efficacy (Gehle et al., 2024; Schemer et al., 2024).

The analysis focused on the Romanian subsample (N = 1,500) of adults aged 18 and over, selected using soft quotas for age, education, and gender. Participants had a M_{age} = 40.56 years (SD_{age} = 12.78), 48.9% were male, and education levels were 11.7% low, 52.5% medium, and 34.5% high[1].

MEASUREMENTS

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

The study aimed to examine how news consumption influences voting for a challenger party. We used the intention to vote for the populist party AUR as the main dependent variable and included four mainstream parties (PSD, PNL, USR, UDMR) as comparison models. Voting intention was measured on a 5-point scale from 1 ("not at all probable") to 5 ("very probable") for each party.[2]

INDEPENDENT AND CONTROL VARIABLES

The main independent variable was operationalized in two types of news consumption of (i) mainstream media and (ii) digital and social media.

Assessment of the former variable was based on three items, each measured on a 5-point Likert scale indicating the frequency of following the news on TV, radio, print newspapers. The three items were grouped into one scale

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[1] This study uses data for Romania from a larger dataset collected in 18 countries in Threatpie NORFACE project (threatpie.eu).

[2] Details on variable measurements and descriptive statistics are provided in Appendix A (Tables A1–A2).

(with loadings from .740 to .843; α = .706). Assessment of the latter variable was also based on three items (News aggregators [such as Google News or Yahoo News], Social media sites such as [Facebook, X, etc.,] and Messaging services [such as WhatsApp, Telegram or Facebook Messenger]. We obtained one variable using the mean of the three items grouped into one factor (with loadings from .753 to .864; α = .761).

Conspiracy-oriented skepticism was assessed with a single item capturing agreement (from 1 = "Do not agree at all" to 5 = "Agree completely") with the statement: "Public health officials are not telling us everything they know about COVID-19 vaccines." Although this item does not directly measure conspiracy beliefs, it reflects a skeptical orientation toward official information, which we use as a proxy for conspiracy thinking (M = 3.62, SD = 1.38). General political knowledge originally consisted of four categorical variables, each representing a multiple-choice question designed to assess the respondents' knowledge of political figures and international organizations. Each variable provided several answer options, from which respondents could select. Subsequently, these categorical variables were recoded into four dummy variables, where a correct response was coded as "1" and an incorrect response was coded as "0." Finally, the four dummy variables were combined into a composite score by calculating the average of the four binary scores, resulting in a single continuous measure of political knowledge ranging from 0 (no correct answers) to 4 (all correct answers) (M = 1.46; SD = 1.06).

Several control measures were included to predict voting intentions for a radical right party. First, we considered respondents' outgroup feelings, measured through their evaluations of people with a separate ethnic background. We distinguished the role of the interest in politics, political orientation and fear towards the Russian – Ukraine war on voting intention. Finally, socio-demographic characteristics were included as control variables (see Appendix A for detailed information about the control variables).

METHODS

Based on the nature of our dependent variable, the most straightforward statistical model was to estimate OLS models to assess how the explanatory variables are related to vote intention. To estimate the significance and weight of our relationships, we computed the following equations[3]:

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[3]   The findings should therefore be read against the distinction between mainstream and challenger parties discussed in the introduction: while mainstream actors (PSD, PNL, USR, UDMR) attract voters through established structures and programmatic stability, AUR functions as a challenger party, mobilizing disillusioned voters through populist rhetoric, distrustful orientations, and social media visibility.

$$
\begin{aligned}
Vote\ intention\ _i \\
= \ &\beta_0 - \beta_1 * news\ consumption\ on\ mainstream\ media + \beta_2 \\
&* news\ consumption\ on\ digital\ and\ social\ media\ platforms\ + \beta_3 \\
&* general\ political\ knowledge + \beta_4 * skeptical\ orientations\ + \ \beta_5 * age + \beta_6 \\
&* Gender: male + \beta_7 * Education\ level + \ \beta_8 * political\ orientation + \ \beta_9 \\
&* Political\ interest\ + \beta_{10} * Outgroup\ feelings\ + \beta_{11} * Afraind\ of\ Russian \\
&- Ukraine\ war\ + \ \varepsilon
\end{aligned}
$$

FINDINGS

RESULTS OF LINEAR MODELS

The fixed effects in our models (see Tables 1 & 2) support H1a and H1b, as well as H2 and our RQ1: news consumptions on digital and social media channels, conspiracy theories and general political knowledge are significant predictors across all models. Individuals who follow news on digital and social media channels, who have skeptical orientation to conspiracy and who have low political knowledge have a higher probability of voting for a populist party like AUR.

HYPOTHESIS 1A: DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS CONSUMPTION

The first hypothesis (H1a) posits that the more individuals follow news on digital and social media channels, the more they intend to vote for a radical right party (AUR). The results from Table 1 support this hypothesis: individuals following the news on digital and social media channels have a higher probability of voting for a populist party. Compared, the effect of following news on digital and social media channels on vote intention for mainstream parties varies. For both PSD and PNL (see Table 2), the following news on digital and social media channels is a significant positive predictor of vote intention for these parties, however the effect is stronger for PSD. The vote for the other mainstream parties (USR and UDMR) is not impacted by the news consumption on digital and social media channels.

Table 1. OLS regression models predicting vote intention for Romania's radical right party *Alianța pentru Unitatea Românilor* (AUR)

	Vote intention for AUR	
	Standardized coefficient	Standard error (SE)
Following news on mainstream media	0.08*	(0.04)
Following news on digital and social media	0.11***	(0.04)

	Vote intention for AUR	
	Standardized coefficient	Standard error (SE)
General political knowledge	-0.12***	(0.04)
Conspiracy theories	0.12***	(0.03)
Age	-0.18***	(0.03)
Gender: male	0.004	(0.03)
Education level	-0.11***	(0.03)
Political orientation	0.002	(0.03)
Political interest	0.03	(0.05)
Outgroup feelings	-0.06*	(0.03)
Afraid of the Russian–Ukraine war	-0.01	(0.04)
Observations	1,011	
Adjusted R^2	0.11	
Residual Std. Error	0.95 (df = 999)	
F Statistic	12.67*** (df = 11; 999)	

Note: All coefficients are standardized (β). Robust standard errors (HC3) are reported in parentheses. Significance levels are denoted as † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2. OLS regression models predicting vote intention for Romanian mainstream political parties: *Partidul Social Democrat (PSD), Partidul Național Liberal (PNL), Uniunea Salvați România (USR) and Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România (UDMR)*

	Vote intention for PSD, PNL, USR, and UDMR							
	PSD		PNL		USR		UDMR	
	Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE
Following news on mainstream media	0.10**	(0.04)	0.06	(0.05)	-0.08*	(0.05)	0.09*	(0.04)
Following news on digital and social media	0.12***	(0.04)	0.07*	(0.04)	0.03	(0.04)	0.04	(0.04)
General political knowledge	-0.15***	(0.04)	-0.02	(0.03)	-0.01	(0.03)	-0.14***	(0.04)
Conspiracy theories	0.08**	(0.03)	-0.12***	(0.03)	-0.11***	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)
Age	0.03	(0.04)	-0.08**	(0.03)	-0.14***	(0.04)	-0.24***	(0.04)
Gender: male	-0.02	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)	-0.01	(0.03)
Education level	-0.08***	(0.03)	-0.06**	(0.03)	-0.06*	(0.03)	-0.13***	(0.04)

Vote intention for PSD, PNL, USR, and UDMR							
PSD		**PNL**		**USR**		**UDMR**	
Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE
Political orientation	-0.21***	(0.03)	0.25***	(0.03)	0.22***	(0.03)	0.07**	(0.03)
Political interest	0.14***	(0.04)	-0.02	(0.04)	0.05	(0.04)	0.02	(0.05)
Outgroup feelings	0.02	(0.03)	0.06*	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)
Afraid of the Russian–Ukraine war	0.10***	(0.04)	0.13***	(0.03)	0.15***	(0.04)	0.09***	(0.03)
Observations	1,020		1,025		1,018		1,022	
Adjusted R^2	0.13		0.13		0.11		0.14	
Residual Std. Error	0.95 (df = 1008)		0.94 (df = 1013)		0.96 (df = 1006)		0.96 (df = 1010)	
F Statistic	14.94*** (df = 11; 1008)		15.23*** (df = 11; 1013)		12.64*** (df = 11; 1006)		15.69*** (df = 11; 1010)	

Note: All coefficients are standardized (β). Robust standard errors (HC3) are reported in parentheses. Significance levels are denoted as † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$

HYPOTHESIS 1B: DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS

Turning to H1b, the expectation was that following mainstream media would predict vote intention for mainstream parties more strongly than for the populist party (AUR). The findings provide partial support for this hypothesis. Specifically, PSD and UDMR vote intentions are positively and significantly associated with mainstream news consumption, while PNL and USR show no such relationship. Interestingly, the model (see Table 1) also indicates that AUR supporters continue to rely on mainstream media alongside social media, reflecting the party's growing visibility across the media ecosystem. We can assume a hybrid nature of AUR's media strategy: although it relies heavily on social media to mobilize, it also benefits indirectly from exposure through mainstream channels, whether directly viewed or consumed via online retransmission. This pattern suggests that mainstream media consumption does not uniformly consolidate support across all mainstream parties, but rather differentiates among them, with center-left and ethnic minority parties more clearly aligned with traditional news audiences.

HYPOTHESIS 2: SKEPTICAL ORIENTATIONS

H2 posits that the more individuals have a skeptical orientation towards conspiracy narratives, the more they intend to vote for a populist party (AUR). The results strongly support this hypothesis, as skeptical orientation (used as proxy for belief in conspiracy theories) is a significant positive predictor of vote intention for AUR in both models. In comparison, the role of skeptical orientation on voting intention for mainstream parties is mixed. For PSD, skeptical orientation positively predicts vote intention, however, for PNL and USR, belief in conspiracy theories negatively predicts vote intention.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

As expected in RQ1, political knowledge significantly affects voting intentions. Higher political knowledge reduces the likelihood of voting for the radical right AUR and, unexpectedly, also for the mainstream PSD, while it has no significant effect on PNL or USR. Thus, greater political knowledge is linked to lower vote intentions for AUR and PSD.

CONTROL VARIABLES

Higher education is associated with lower intentions to vote for AUR and PSD, similar to patterns observed for political knowledge. Age shows a negative association with AUR support, with younger individuals expressing higher voting intentions, while its relationship with mainstream parties varies, negative for PNL, USR, and UDMR, and non-significant for PSD. Consistent with previous studies, openness toward ethnic groups is negatively related to AUR voting intentions, indicating that exclusionary attitudes align with populist preferences.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper offered insights into voting intentions by comparing radical right and mainstream parties. The findings align with previous research (Betz, 1994; Christner, 2022; Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023; Gross, 2023; Hameleers, 2020; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Schulz, 2019; Schulz et al., 2024), highlighting shared and distinct factors shaping support for populist versus mainstream parties.

This paper focused on the role of news consumption and conspiracy theories beliefs on intention to vote. As noted, research has shown that news consumption is an important factor shaping vote choice, with patterns indicating that citizens who rely more on online news channels are more likely to support radical right parties, whereas those who follow traditional channels tend to support

mainstream parties (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Schumann et al., 2021). Although previous research has explored various news consumption habits, this article is the first to assess comparatively the predictors of vote intention for mainstream parties versus radical right parties, particularly in an Eastern European country context where the populist attitudes just started to rise again. Prior studies predominantly concentrated on the effect of radical right parties on Romania political arena and society (Crăciun & Ţăranu, 2023; Gherghina & Miscoiu, 2014; Soare & Tufiş, 2023), and less on what might determine citizens to support the radical parties.

In line with prior research, this study's findings confirmed that there are some variations in the role of news consumption on vote intention for radical right party, compared to mainstream parties. The study found the latter was more impacted by the traditional media, and the vote intention for some parties currently in the Romanian Parliament wass not significantly associate with any type of news consumption (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Schumann et al., 2021). An even more fascinating result for Romania is that the voters' profile of a left-wing political party (PSD) was similar with the voters' profiles of the radical right party (AUR). One primary explanation was that these parties' voters share common demographic characteristics, economic concerns, and a preference for populist, nationalist rhetoric (Busuioc, 2016; Chiruta, 2023). Both parties have successfully tapped into the sentiments of disenfranchised and conservative segments of the population, creating a significant overlap in their support bases (Chiruta, 2023; Momoc, 2018; Popescu, 2016).

In relation to the possible association between conspiracy theories beliefs and individuals' vote option, our findings have suggested that belief in conspiracy theories is a significant positive predictor of vote intention for a radical right party, while the results for mainstream parties are mixed with positively vote intention for social-democrat party and negatively vote intention for center right and liberal mainstream parties. This finding was in line with the research evidence on the effects of conspiracy theories beliefs on individuals' behavior, showing a link between a conspiracy mindset and a preference for radical right-wing parties (Christner, 2022; Loziak & Havrillová, 2024).

This article faced several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the issue of not using longitudinal data to observe how an individual's voting option evolves over time. Therefore, it is difficult to observe and assess the vote formation process, as well as to monitor the predictors of vote intention closely to 2024 electoral rounds. Despite the limitations posed by the absence of longitudinal recent data, the novelty of this large-scale dataset at the national level in Romania offers a unique opportunity. Second, we only measured individuals' voting intention and not the vote option in the previous elections, which could be a significant oversight. Assessing selection effects and not only social media exposure effects

would have allowed us to observe whether individuals who endorsed a populist radical-right party in the last election relied more frequently on social media for news than those who voted for any other party (Schulz, 2019; Schumann et al., 2021). Third, the measurement for conspiracy theory belief in this study was composed of only a single item specifically related to COVID-19 vaccines. The reliance on a single-item measure may have limited the generalizability and robustness of our findings regarding conspiracy theory beliefs.

Despite these limitations, the study offered three primary findings. First, news consumption had a significant impact on voting intention, suggesting that radical right parties' supporters were following more news on social media, while mainstream parties' supporters followed more news on traditional media or none. One exception is the *Partidul Social Democrat* (Social Democrat Party, PSD), whose supporters follow news on both traditional media channels and social networking sites, indicating a similarity in profiles with radical right party supporters. Second, the findings reflected that individuals believing in conspiracy theories were more prone to support radical right parties and social democrat parties, supporting again the idea that these parties share voters. Third, our findings indicated a negative trajectory for political knowledge and support for a radical right party, however this negative trend was valid for both radical right and mainstream parties. This trend might suggest that the proliferation of information sources, particularly through social media, has led to a saturation of information, making it difficult for individuals to discern accurate information from misinformation. This can erode political knowledge overall. Studies have shown that misinformation can negatively impact political knowledge and perceptions, contributing to confusion and distrust in both radical right and mainstream political entities. This exploratory finding should be further considered in studies discussing political knowledge and news knowledge.

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ANNEX

Table A1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Range
Voting for AUR (radical right)	1,500	2.19	1.51	1	5	4
Voting for PSD (social democrat mainstream party)	1,500	2.28	1.44	1	5	4
Voting for PNL (mainstream party)	1,500	2.3	1.40	1	5	4
Voting for USR (mainstream party)	1,500	2.34	1.44	1	5	4
Voting for UDMR (mainstream party)	1,500	1.56	1.06	1	5	4
Following news on mainstream media	1,500	3.11	-	1	5	4
Following news on SNS	1,500	3.24	-	1	5	4
General political knowledge	1,500	1.46	1.06	0	4	4
Conspiracy theories	1,500	3.69	1.38	1	5	4
Age	1,500	41.00	12.78	18	65	47
Gender: male	1,499	-	-	0	1	1
Education level	1,486	2.23	-	1	3	2
Political orientation (right)	1,500	5.84	-	0	10	10
Political interest	1,500	4.38	-	1	7	6
Outgroup feelings	1,500	68.50	28.16	0	100	100
Afraid of the Russian - Ukraine war	1,500	3.35	-	1	5	4

Table A2. Description of the variables

| Variable name	Measure
Vote intention	Categorial variable measuring which political party or candidate a respondent plans to vote for in an upcoming election. The original survey questions asked the respondents to rate their probability of voting for specific parties.
Following news on mainstream media	Measures the frequency with which a respondent follows news from mainstream media sources (e.g., newspapers, television news). It was measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means very often, and 5 means never. The scale was reversed that higher values indicate higher frequency of following the news on mainstream channels.
Following news on SNS	Measures the frequency with which a respondent follows news on SNS (e.g., social media platforms etc.). It was measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means very often, and 5 means never. The scale was reversed that higher values indicate higher frequency of following the news on mainstream channels.

Variable name	Measure
General political knowledge	Assesses the respondent's knowledge of political facts and current events. This battery had 4 items testing the general knowledge of the respondents: Who is the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care?, Who is the current General Secretary of the United Nations (UN)?, Which of the following countries does not belong to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)?, and Who leads the European Commission at the moment?. The final political knowledge was computed as an average of the correct answered given by a respondent. Higher values represent better level of political knowledge.
Conspiracy theories	Measures the extent to which a respondent believes in conspiracy theories. This can be assessed through agreement with statements on a Likert scale (e.g., strongly disagree to strongly agree). The item measured was Public health officials are not telling us everything they know about COVID-19 vaccines - Generally speaking, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?.
Age	The age of the respondent in years.
Gender: male	Dummy variable equal to one if respondent is female, zero otherwise.
Education level	The respondents were asked which is the highest education level they finished. The variable is coded on lower education, medium education and higher education.
Political orientation (right)	Placement on a left-right scale [In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?]
Political interest	The respondents were asked 'Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?' The variable is measured on a seven-item scale, where 1 means not at all interested, and 7 means very interested in politics.
Outgroup feelings	Measures a respondent's feelings towards groups they do not belong to, often using a feeling thermometer scale (e.g., 0-100, where 0 is very cold/unfavorable and 100 is very warm/favourable). The variable was measured on the item 'People who have a different ethnic background than I'
Afraid of the Russian - Ukraine war	The variable was measured on the item 'How afraid are you of the Russian war on Ukraine?'.

Table 3. Conceptual clarifications of main terms

Concept	Definition (as used in this study)	References
Mainstream parties	Established political parties with stable parliamentary presence and governing experience since the 1990s (e.g., PSD, PNL, UDMR, USR). They are institutionalized actors shaping Romania's political order, characterized by programmatic continuity, formal organizational structures, and access to state resources.	Hanley & Sikk (2016); Katz & Mair (1995); Sikk (2012)
Challenger parties	Political actors that contest the established political order, often with limited prior institutional experience. They mobilize support through anti-establishment rhetoric, outsider positioning, and rejection of mainstream norms. In the Romanian case, AUR is conceptualized as a challenger populist party despite its parliamentary representation.	De Vries & Hobolt (2020); Hanley & Sikk (2016); Sikk (2012)
Populism	A thin-centered ideology that divides society into two antagonistic groups: "the pure people" vs. "the corrupt elite", and claims that politics should express the general will of the people. In practice, it is often articulated through anti-elitist, anti-establishment rhetoric.	Mudde (2004); Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser (2017)

Concept	Definition (as used in this study)	References
Radical right	A party family combining nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Radical right parties advocate for exclusionary nationalism, restrictive immigration, and law-and-order policies, while positioning themselves against liberal-democratic pluralism.	Mudde (2007); Norris & Inglehart (2019)
Misinformation	False or misleading information that is shared without intent to deceive.	Tandoc et al. (2018); Wardle & Derakhshan (2017)
Disinformation	False information deliberately created and disseminated with the intent to deceive or manipulate.	Freelon & Wells (2020); Wardle & Derakhshan (2017)
Conspiracy theories	Beliefs that events are secretly manipulated by powerful and malevolent groups acting in covert coordination. Conspiracy beliefs attribute hidden motives to elites and institutions, often in ways that reinforce anti-elitist and populist worldviews.	Douglas et al. (2019); Imhoff & Bruder (2014); Uscinski et al. (2018)

Figure 1. Ideological map of mainstream and challenger parties in Romania
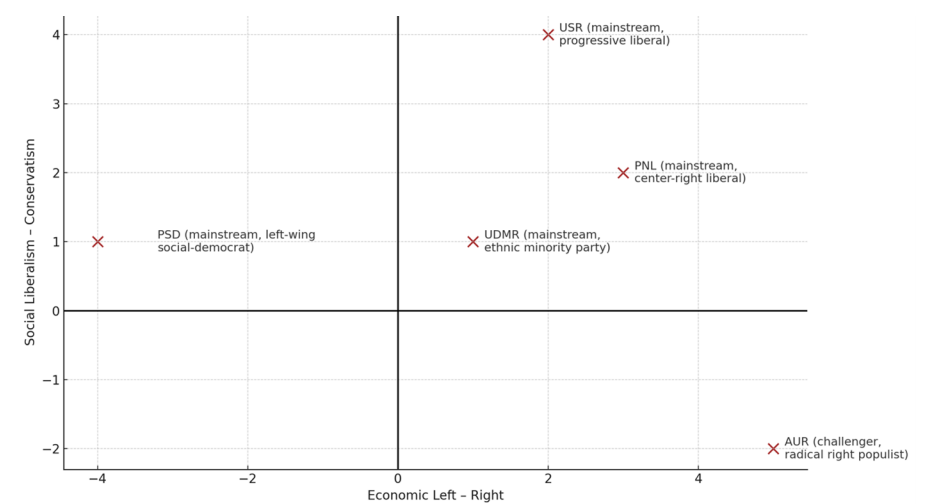
Source: Jolly, Seth, Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Jonathan Polk, Jan Rovny, Marco Steenbergen, and Milada Anna Vachudova. Forthcoming. "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019." *Electoral Studies.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420

Table 4. Romanian parties by ideology and system position

Party	Ideology	Mainstream / Challenger	Justification
Social Democratic Party (PSD)	Center-Left, Social Democratic	Mainstream	Institutionalized party with continuous parliamentary presence and governing experience since the 1990s; largest left-wing force.
National Liberal Party (PNL)	Center-Right, Liberal-Conservative	Mainstream	Long-standing governing party, pro-European orientation, and historically one of Romania's main establishment actors.
Save Romania Union (USR)	Liberal, Progressive / Reformist	Mainstream	Newer but consolidated through stable parliamentary representation and participation in government; positions itself within the pro-European mainstream.
Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR)	Ethnic Minority, Centrist Pragmatic	Mainstream	Represents the Hungarian minority; consistently present in parliament and part of governing coalitions since the 1990s.
Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR)	Radical Right, Nationalist Populist	Challenger	Despite parliamentary representation, positions itself as anti-establishment, mobilizing voters through outsider rhetoric and opposition to mainstream elites.

Echoes of the People: Unveiling Populist Constructs in Chega and Vox's Discourse on Elites

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Abstract: The following paper draws from the social constructionist approach (Burr 2015) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) to analyze the populist discursive frameworks in the Facebook accounts of populist far-right parties Chega (Portugal) and Vox (Spain) during January-March 2023. The aim is to demonstrate how country-based contexts affect and shape discursive constructions of the elites. Methodologically, this paper follows the discourse historical approach (Wodak, 2001) to critical discourse analysis. The results show that although both parties' constructions of "the people" are identical, the same does not concern the elites, as Vox's characterization of this group encompasses environmentalists, the media, feminists, trans people, and separatists. Neither Vox nor Chega places immigrants as part of either group but as a sub-group that is protected by the elites, with Chega adding the Roma ethnic minority to the same predicament.

Keywords: Social constructionism; Populist discourse; far-right; Chega; Vox

INTRODUCTION

Portugal and Spain seemed to be inherently resistant to the new far-right populist revival that has happened in other European countries, being described as the Iberian exception (Alonso & Kaltwasser 2015) within the context of EU politics. Both countries endured longstanding right-wing authoritarian regimes in the 20th century, which seems to have been misinterpreted as acting like immunizers against far-right populism (Ramos Antón & Baptista, 2022), as Chega and VOX's current positions as the third largest political forces in Portugal and Spain, respectively, evidently outlines.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis that affected the two nations particularly hard, a lengthy period of political turmoil and economic hardship

followed. In the Spanish case, Podemos, a newly found left-wing populist party, experienced a meteoric rise in 2015 by campaigning against economic austerity measures (Luengo et. al., 2016). In Portugal, Southern Europe's most stable party system (Luengo et. al., 2016), there was not any electoral breakthrough by emergent reactionary populist parties, despite significant electoral gains by those at the end of the left-wing political spectrum.

Within the realm of far-right populism, however, the economic and social crisis did not translate into electoral wins. In the Spanish case, Alonso and Kaltwasser (2015) argue that regional autonomies with variable degrees of self-governance, and a longstanding history of strong independent movements, which create a struggle between national and regional identities, prevented the use of the typical nativist rhetoric among far-right parties. In addition, Alonso and Kaltwasser (2015) claim that strong electoral performances by the mainstream right-wing party Partido Popular (PP) and its ability to attract votes from the radical right-wing sector of the electorate, coupled with Spain's disproportional electoral system, were also contributing factors to the failure of the Spanish populist far right. In the Portuguese case, Marchi (2013) argues that organizational disarray, fragile leadership, and weak political programs prevented the far-right from achieving electoral success.

As Mendes and Denison (2021) point out, the turning point in Vox´s surge in popularity was the Catalonian constitutional crisis of 2017, which effectively activated a countrywide nationalist sentiment in the country. Most Spanish citizens opposed the possible secession of Catalonia from Spain, regardless of their own regional sentiments and identities. Vox's strong opposition to Catalonian independence resulted in a significant growth in support for the party.

Additionally, the change of the migratory influx onto the Spanish coast in 2018, after Italy decided to close its ports to migrant boats while Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez opted to keep the countries' ports opened, provoked a rise in the anti-immigrant sentiment, which was strategically leveraged by Vox (Mendes & Dennison, 2021).

In the Portuguese case, Santana-Pereira and Cancela (2020) argue that populist attitudes were significantly widespread in the country before the surge in popularity of Chega, which could be explained by a lack of supply from the political spectrum, rather than a lack of demand from the electorate. Furthermore, analysis by Garcia and Salgado (2020) of the prevalence of populist features in online comments on the websites of mainstream newspapers in both countries in 2019 highlighted the surprising parity in the demand for populist parties in both nations (19.8 % in Portugal and 18% in Spain).

The analysis was conducted during a period when Vox was on the verge of becoming the third-largest political force in Spain, while Chega was only a few months old and seeking parliamentary representation for the first time. This

supports the argument that Chega's rise was driven by a lack of supply from the political spectrum, contesting the belief that there was a lack of demand from the electorate, challenging the idea of a "Portuguese exception".

Chega′s disproportionate focus on anti-corruption policymaking, which occupies a central role in its electoral program, proved to be a successful approach in a country marred by a longstanding history of political and corruption scandals (Mendes & Dennison, 2021).

Another pivotal point of Chega's agenda is its strong focus on welfare beneficiaries (Heyne & Manucci, 2021), which the party argues frequently constitutes a misuse of public funds, a position that has also helped Chega garner significant support.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO POPULISM

Populism's conceptualization has sparked extensive academic debate. It has been labeled as an antagonizing attitude regarding the perceived elites, a political style, a political strategy, an ideology, a discursive style, a frame, or simply as a trait that certain political actors and movements possess. Moreover, Taggart (2004) argues that populism does not possess palpable core values and is, therefore, "highly chameleonic."

Cass Mudde's paper "The populist Zeitgeist" (2004) introduced the concept of populism as a "thin ideology", which states that populism is a small, thin-centered ideology that hardly exists in isolation and must be attached to another "thicker" ideology. Mudde claims that populism can manifest itself in a wide range of political ideologies, displaying distinct appeal to voters. As Brubaker (2017) states, the core element of populism is alleging to speak in the name of "the people", composed of honest, well-intended, proud, and hard-working citizens who represent the backbone of the nation and are despised by an elite. However, some characteristics may vary from left to right-wing ideology and vice-versa. The sovereignty of "the people" who want to break away from "the elite" is another key concept of populism.

Populism is closely related to identity politics. An example of this is Muller's (2017) reflection on populist parties' restrictive selection of those who get to be a part of "the people". Although everyone who is not part of the "elites" should be automatically part of "the people", that is not the case since only "real people" get to be a part of "the people", since populism considers certain groups to be unworthy of such label and therefore excludes them. This is particularly true within right-wing populism, where nativism constitutes a core trait in the populist people-centered and anti-elite discursive framework (Afonso, 2021).

Laclau (2005) argues that this divisive framework arises from a discursive narrative filled with 'empty signifiers', which consist of context-dependent terms that have floating meanings and are employed by populist actors to connect with broad sectors of the electorate.

Therefore, this paper contends that the traditional populist discursive framework of the people versus the elites is subject to variations concerning the characterization of both groups, which are shaped by distinct historical, social, economic, and cultural backgrounds and contexts. By identifying and characterizing the members of these groups within Chega and Vox, drawing from the social constructionism approach (Burr, 2015) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), the paper aims to show how this discursive framework is prone to shift, despite these are two parties belonging to the same political family.

Social constructionism argues that knowledge is constructed through individual perceptions and social interactions rather than being an objective reality (Burr, 2015). It contrasts with the positivist approach of the natural sciences, which seeks objective facts through observation and measurement. Within social sciences, it provides a new epistemological perspective by suggesting that social, historical, and cultural contexts shape constructions of truth and knowledge (Burr, 2015).

Burr (2015) claims that social constructionism abides by the premise that reality is a matter of individual or social perspective, and some of the facts that we perceive to be the truth are merely a social construct. Therefore, we can consider that our views of the world are prone to being biased by personal interests that lead us to construct the fabricated reality we want to see.

Airoldi (2022) provides a novel perspective on the subject, asserting that technological advancements and artificial intelligence have integrated various facets of daily life, with social media being a prime example. As a result, these digital platforms have become constructors of social reality alongside the aforementioned social, cultural, and personal contexts. This is particularly relevant given that this paper focuses on Facebook as its primary subject of analysis.

Therefore, and following social constructionist theory, this paper approaches these two distinct groups ("people" and "elites") as a social construct adopted by populist parties fueled by individual interests that result in a biased perception of society.

Social identity theory addresses an individual's self-perception of membership and belonging to a particular social group (Tajfel, 1974). These can be, but are not limited to, ethnic, national, religious, or gender groups, among many other smaller social identities that individuals can feel a part of. The theory suggests that these perceptions of social identity affect its member's attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of other social identities of which they are not a part.

This introduces the concept of in-groups and out-groups. Members of a specific group tend to be biased in favor of their own group (in-group) and prejudiced against the rival group (out-group). The more an individual feels part of or is affiliated with a particular social group, the stronger influence social identities will play out in their relationship with other groups (Tajfel et al., 1979). Hence, the people are seen as the in-group and the elite as the out-group within the populist discursive framework. As populists see themselves as part of the people, they will tend to formulate antagonistic discursive constructions of the out-group (elites).

METHODOLOGY

This paper addresses the following research questions:
- RQ1: What are the differences in the discursive constructions by Chega (Portugal) and Vox (Spain) of "the people" and "the elites"?
- RQ2: How can these differences be attributed to each country's socio-economic, cultural, and historical contexts?

This qualitative exploratory-comparative study employs the discourse-historical approach (Wodak, 2001) to critical discourse analysis, which is a qualitative analytical method of interpreting, explaining, understanding, and describing how discourses maintain, construct, underline, and ultimately legitimize social inequalities (Mullet, 2018). The discourse-historical approach focuses on context, historical background, ideology, and the underlying meanings of language, and has been employed in research concerning racism, far-right populism, islamophobia, and nationalism (Reisigl, 2017).

Wodak (2001) argues that the discourse-historical approach is problem-oriented, multidisciplinary, and heavily focused on historical contextualization to interpret discourse. It introduces the concept of interdiscursivity, which happens when a particular text, speech, or semiotic representation has varied types of intertwined and paired discourses. This allows for the identification of the underlying ideologies embedded in the discursive processes, which serve to hold and maintain the hierarchical societal power relationships.

The dataset comprises Facebook posts (N=513) from the official accounts of Chega (n=279) and Vox (n=244) during January to March 2023, which were subjected to thematic coding using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step coding process. The study thus collected, contextualized, and exported all the pertinent posts into the qualitative analysis software Nvivo.

No predefined codes were used. Instead, short descriptive labels were created after a thorough review of the dataset. These labels were then grouped into broader themes, referred to in this study as discourses.

Amongst the dataset were numerous discourses, but only those deemed suitable for addressing the problem at hand were considered relevant and effectively coded. Following the principle of interdiscursivity, themes were not coded as mutually exclusive, meaning each post could be coded into multiple types of discourses.

Three coding rounds were performed to ensure reliability and that the assigned themes accurately reflected the existing dataset. Furthermore, the final set of themes was subjected to a peer review to attest the validity of the thematic framework. Political parties do not directly address and identify those groups they perceive to be a part of "the people" and "the elites," as these are groups constructed through their own discursive practices.

Just 10 months prior to the analyzed period, in the snap general election of March 2022, the Portuguese had elected the Socialist prime minister António Costa to his third term of office. Costa's Socialist party had a parliamentary majority after obtaining 41.37% of the votes and 120 out of 230 members of parliament in the general election. However, Costa's third term was marked by political instability resulting from several corruption and political scandals that led to the resignation of several ministers and secretaries of state. Additionally, Costa's government struggled with widespread economic distress and the deterioration of public services such as healthcare and education. Following this period, political scandals continued to injure Costa's government, leading to his resignation in November 2023.

In Spain, at the same time as in Portugal, the government of Pedro Sánchez' Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) experienced political turmoil largely caused by economic issues, the influx of migrants arriving at the Spanish coast, and the ever-present separatist question. This period culminated in the May 2023 Spanish regional elections, which resulted in a severe electoral loss for PSOE, leading to Sánchez' resignation and a snap election in July of the same year.

The dataset timeframe, spanning January to March 2023, was chosen to capture a non-electoral period and avoid the intensified polarization of electoral campaigns. This enables an analysis of how populist discourse was constructed and applied in non-election contexts, unveiling the influence of situational factors on populist rhetoric.

Moreover, given how academic scholarship converges on the pivotal role social media platforms play in the communication process of far-right populist movements (Khosravinik, 2017; Mudde, 2019), Facebook was considered a suitable platform for analysis given the affordances it offers regarding direct communication between party and audience.

RESULTS

The discourses presented in the following section help identify the discursive constructions by Vox and Chega of the people and the elites and outline important differences in how each party positions specific groups within the populist discursive framework.

**Table 1. The seven major discourse topics employed by Vox
(Spain) and the five by Chega (Portugal).**

VOX		CHEGA	
Discourse	**Frequency**	**Discourse**	**Frequency**
Anti-system discourses	6	Anti-system discourses	36
"Bad for the country would be if, after years of economic pillage, ideological deliriums, and attacks on the institutions, others kept their policies or denied changing ways. Only Vox can, with its presence in the government, guarantee an alternative to Pedro Sánchez."		"Little by little, Portuguese people realize that there is one true alternative to the big center of interests that has been misgoverning us. Portugal needs a cleansing, and the political parties of the system are not the ones who will do it!"	
Corruption discourses	43	Corruption discourses	122
Santiago Abascal about the electoral pacts of Coalition Canaria: "They are very comfortable with this dilapidated bi-party system. Yes to partnerships with PSOE, but no to Vox. This is saying yes to corruption, with the ones that live off bribes, with the ones that release criminals."		"Now is the moment to resist and start preparing the alternative Portuguese people so desperately need. Enough of socialism! Enough of corruption!"	
Media discourses	27	Media discourses	11
"The media should be plural, and the government that concedes television licenses should assure that plurality. It is outrageous that TV broadcasters occult the leader of Spain's third political force in such a blatant way."		"It is with tremendous pride that we reached, at the beginning of 2023, 100.000 subscribers of CHEGA TV. This is a team effort that displays the enormous work that this parliamentary group does every day, in an unfiltered, uncensored manner"	
Minority discourses	100	Minority discourses	45
"To enter illegally in any country is a felony punished by every penal code of the world. To finance illegal immigration and abandon your fellow countrymen while they are going through bad times is an attack against common sense. In any country of the world. And there is no censorship that can hide this."		"To some immigrants, there's houses, subsidies, and almost everything for free. For Portuguese people and for those who are forced to emigrate, there's taxes to pay and zero support from the state. A country turned upside down!"	

VOX		CHEGA	
Discourse	**Frequency**	**Discourse**	**Frequency**
Nation discourses	29	Nation discourses	22
"Santiago Abascal appeals for the "great coalition of honorable Spanish" against the worst government."		"They shall not pass in their attacks to our traditions, our rurality, our Portugal!"	
Environmental discourses	34		
"Brussel's bureaucrats have declared war against the European popular classes. No one asked Europeans if they wanted to submit to the environmental deliriums of the progressive elites. Vox will reject any restrictions that would limit Spanish people's liberty and mobility."			
Separatism discourses	35		
"Santiago Abascal on the Socialist Party: "It has done the worst thing a political party could do: surrender to separatism by setting putschists and terrorists free, ruining coexistence, and steal prosperity away from Spanish people.""			

Source: All quotes in this table are taken from public posts on the official Facebook pages of Vox and Chega, published between January and March 2023.

ANTI-SYSTEM DISCOURSES

These can be found in both the Facebook rhetoric of both Vox and Chega, albeit the former does not rely heavily on anti-system discourses, only employing them to present itself as the sole reliable alternative to solve Spain's issues. This includes characterizing the rest of the political spectrum as being unable to address specific issues and positioning itself as the only "real opponent" to "*Sanchismo*", a term coined by the party to describe Spain´s prime minister Pedro Sánchez´s rule. Anti-system discourses are also visible when the party addresses the flaws of the democratic system in Spain, and its lack of direct representation, advocating for referendums to be conducted in crucial legislative policies.

In contrast, Chega employs anti-system discourses much more predominantly, using them to consistently criticize the inability of other political parties, both left and right-wing, to address Portugal's issues, asserting that only Chega can "save Portugal." It discredits the entire political system, claiming that the "political system is sick and only Chega can cure it." Furthermore, Chega often produces discursive constructions in which the focus alludes to pre-democracy times, highlighting the failures of the bi-party system dominated by the *Partido*

Socialista (PS [Eng: Socialist Party]) and the *Partido Social Democrata* (PSD [Eng: Social Democratic Party]) over the past "forty-something years" that have led the Portuguese populace to ruin.

CORRUPTION DISCOURSES

While corruption discourses are central to the discursive strategy of Vox, they undoubtedly constitute the major focus of Chega′s discursive strategy. Vox targets media outlets, the PSOE government led by Pedro Sánchez, and, to a lesser extent, the mainstream right-wing political party, *Partido Popular* (PP [Eng: People's Party], due to connivance with PSOE's unlawful policies. Media outlets are criticized for bias and partisanship, while the PSOE government was accused of corruption, involvement in scandals, and questionable alliances with corrupt people, putschists, and former ETA members. Vox even goes as far as accusing PSOE of extravagant spending on illicit activities.

In the case of Chega, its focus on corruption was fueled by political scandals in early 2023, which led to the resignation of various government members. The party heavily criticized the government and expressed widespread distrust in political institutions, portraying corruption as deeply embedded in Portugal's political system, positioning itself as the only "fighter against corruption", and advocating for legislative measures to mitigate and tackle corrupt practices.

MEDIA DISCOURSES

All of Vox's media discourses analyzed in this paper portray Spanish mainstream media outlets as subservient to PSOE or as protesting the lack of coverage of Vox's political activity. These discourses usually revolve around a mainstream media conspiracy against Vox and the gatekeeping and agenda-setting practices, which the outlets conduct with the aim of harming the party.

Recurrent themes include manipulating public opinion and adulteration in news coverage, mediatic pressure on the party, and the left-wing ideological stance of most of Spain's major media conglomerates. The party encourages its audience to watch live events through its own digital platforms, citing censorship on external media that may distort the coverage to fit their interests.

Chega's media discourses mainly focus on its own newspaper, *Folha Nacional*, which the party claims to be the only uncensored newspaper in Portugal, automatically implying that all others in the country are censored to some extent. Chega also criticizes online censorship of its own content and *Polígrafo*, a Portuguese fact-checking newspaper, for lying and trying to harm both Chega and the image of its founder, André Ventura. The party criticizes *Consórcio*, a group of journalists it ironically labels as "independent," alleging they are left-wing activists

funded by Open Society. The party claims *Consórcio*'s sole purpose is to attack Chega, ridiculing the group's first "investigation," which was centered on the party's connection to hate speech.

MINORITY DISCOURSES

Even though Vox refers to minority discourses on a much more frequent basis, these make up a crucial element of the discursive strategy of both parties. Although both Chega and Vox target illegal immigrants, immigrants from Islamic backgrounds, and refugees, they diverge concerning other minority groups, with Vox focusing on feminists and trans people and Chega addressing concerns regarding the Portuguese Roma Community.

Vox frequently targets the immigration groups mentioned above, claiming they bring crime and insecurity to the country. The party also accuses the government of financing illegal immigration and contributing to the insecurity that has taken over Spanish neighborhoods. Vox often shares news articles about Muslim extremists perpetrating acts of terrorism or violence, with the aim of portraying a scenario of a cultural clash between Spanish citizens and intolerant, violent, and extremist Muslim immigrants, who pose a threat to European identity and values.

In the context of feminists and trans people, Vox is primarily a strong opponent to the existence of the Spanish Ministry of Equality, labelling it a waste of public funds used to promote left-wing gender and feminist policies. The party is the most vocal opponent to the country's trans law, which allows youngsters from the age of 16 to legally change gender without the permission of their parents or legal tutors. Vox calls the trans law an "abomination". In the context of feminist discourses, the party claims the government does not actively protect women, but only adopts policies that obey the feminist agenda.

Chega's immigration discourses openly condemn the government and other political parties' immigration policies, namely the "policy of open borders," which caused an influx of "ideological, uncontrolled, and irresponsible immigration," a big portion of which is illegal. Chega often creates a separation between immigrants who come to Portugal and Portuguese emigrants living abroad. Chega claims they cannot be compared since many immigrants come to Portugal for welfare subsidies and fail to integrate into Portuguese society. In contrast, Portuguese emigrants are hard workers who respect the cultural habits of their host countries. The party raises concerns about immigration from countries possessing "failed regimes with a culture of terrorism, violence, and Islamic fundamentalism."

Furthermore, Chega also labels the Portuguese Roma community as problematic and unintegrated in Portuguese society. The party's narrative emphasizes

the Roma's heavy reliance on welfare subsidies, increasing school dropout rates, disregard for women's rights, and conflicts with neighboring communities.

NATION DISCOURSES

As shown in Table 1, both parties use nation discourses with a relatively similar frequency. Vox's nation discourses primarily focus on one central topic: national unity. The party accused Pedro Sánchez's government of attacking the Spanish constitution, endangering national sovereignty, and destroying Spaniards' sense of unity and freedom.

Chega's nation discourses are often embedded in nationalist or patriotic rants. Some examples are the "great Portugal" and the profession of love for the nation ("our beloved country"). Other topics are also the historical revisionism being employed by the far-left and the attacks on "our traditions, our rurality, our Portugal." The party emphasizes rebuilding national pride, claiming it will "fight with everything it has" to achieve that goal. The party also claims to be fighting for the "good Portuguese", creating a separation between those and the rest of the people.

ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES

These discourses constitute a substantial part of Vox's Facebook communication. The party is a vocal opponent of energy transition and the UN's 2030 agenda for sustainable development. Vox states that citizens were never asked to vote for its implementation and that it will be "deadly" to Spain, leading to the loss of jobs and energy sovereignty in the country. Vox criticizes the government and EU legislators for a plethora of policies, such as introducing insect-based food products in supermarkets, restricting car circulation in Madrid, abolishing fossil fuel vehicle production in the EU from 2035, and new government taxes on plastic. The party is particularly vocal regarding fossil fuel vehicle production and circulation restrictions, claiming these attack the middle class and the freedom of movement of "humble and hard-working people".

SEPARATISM DISCOURSES

Separatism discourses occupy an important role in Vox's discursive strategy in a country with such historical divisions as Spain. The party often addresses separatism in Catalonia and the Basque country, labelling separatists as traitors, putschists, and enemies of Spain. Vox views separatist parties as unconstitutional and advocates for their illegalization, accusing both PSOE and PP of striking pacts with these groups and granting pardons to political leaders from the

2017 Catalonian crisis and former ETA members instead of prosecuting them. Separatist discourses focus on division and the promotion of national unity.

INTERDISCURSIVE PRACTICES

The following section outlines Vox and Chega´s interdiscursive practices identified in this study (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Vox's interdiscursive practices

	A: Anti-system discourses	B: Climate discourses	C: Corruption discourses	D: Media discourses	E: Minority discourses	F: Nation discourses	G: Separatism discourses
1: Anti-system discourses	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
2: Climate discourses	0	34	2	0	0	0	2
3: Corruption discourses	0	2	43	27	1	1	8
4: Media discourses	0	0	27	27	0	0	0
5: Minority discourses	0	0	1	0	100	4	5
6: Nation discourses	0	0	1	0	4	29	7
7: Separatism discourses	0	2	8	0	5	7	35

Source: own evaluation

In Vox's case, the aspects that instantly stand out are the interdiscursive practices between media and corruption discourses. All media discourses intersect with corruption discourses, with media agents being portrayed as dishonest, biased, manipulative, and subservient to Pedro Sánchez's government. This data accurately displays Vox's hostile views on Spanish media, which explains why many news articles the party shares on its Facebook account come from *La Gaceta de la Iberosfera*, a Vox-owned newspaper. Nation and separatism discourses are also often intertwined. This is a predictable outcome since Vox labels separatists as enemies of the nation. The dynamic between union (nation) and division (separatism) that Vox employs in its discursive practices also contributes to this paradigm. Separatism also intersects with corruption discourses, which is explained by Vox's accusations of PSOE and PP establishing political pacts with anti-constitutional and criminal political parties and giving pardons to those involved with ETA or the Catalonian independence proclamation.

Chega, by contrast, has scant interdiscursivity except for some between anti-system and corruption discourses, which are employed to contend that all parliamentary adversaries, with an emphasis on the governing socialist party, are corrupt.

Table 3. Chega's interdiscursive practices

	A: Anti-system discourses	B: Corruption discourses	C: Minority discourses	D: Media discourses	E: Nation discourses
1: Anti-system discourses	36	7	1	2	2
2: Corruption discourses	7	122	4	0	2
3: Minority discourses	1	4	45	0	2
4: Media discourses	2	0	0	11	0
5: Nation discourses	2	2	2	0	22

DISCUSSION

The results offer a detailed overview of the key discourse topics in Chega and Vox's Facebook communication strategies, providing substantial empirical data. This data is combined with relevant literature to address the two research questions (RQ):

RQ1 – WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES IN CHEGA AND VOX'S DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF "THE PEOPLE" AND "THE ELITES"?

The two parties share similar discursive constructions of the people, which Vox describes as "a coalition of honorable Spanish". In contrast, Chega presents it as "the good Portuguese," with both depicting an elite exploited group composed of proud, hard-working, honest nationals, who include, for instance, the working classes, the elderly, and army veterans. Both parties depict the people as being neglected by the elites, who are invested in protecting their interests and favoring minorities over the bulk of national citizens.

Immigrants comprise the most concrete example. They are not portrayed as part of either the people or the elites, but, according to both parties, are privileged in the sense of being protected by elites and favored over ordinary citizens.

Both Vox and Chega characterize immigrant minorities, predominantly refugees, illegal immigrants, and immigrants coming from Islamic backgrounds, as being privileged and subsidy-dependent at the expense of taxpayers, who do not receive such financial aid from the state.

A pertinent observation is that the emphasis Chega places on the Roma community is not proportional to their demographic presence in Portugal. Despite Spain having both a larger absolute number and a higher percentage of Roma people (approximately 1.5% in Spain vs. 0.5% in Portugal (European Commission, 2023; IOM, 2016)), it is Chega, not Vox, that more prominently constructs the Roma as a discursive target. This suggests that the salience of Roma discourses in far-right rethoric is not driven solely by population size.

This study's empirical findings, coupled with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), enabled the identification of multiple out-groups that make up the discursive construction of the elites. As expected, in the discourses of both Chega and Vox, the political class occupies a leading and central role in the out-group, which is a precise alignment with the traditional populist discursive framework. In the context of media discourses, Vox openly positions media institutions as being not only a part of but also an instrument of the ruling elites. Vox accuses Spanish media outlets of being biased and ideologically aligned with the left, using agenda-setting, gatekeeping, and framing strategies aimed at twisting, manipulating, and decreasing the party's media coverage, undermining its relevance on the Spanish political landscape. Chega only hints at perceived censorship while also occasionally attacking specific media outlets over negative coverage. Whereas Chega effectively suggests that media organizations are indeed a part of the elites, Vox's hardline narratives undoubtedly position media as a preeminent member of the aforementioned group.

In contrast to Chega, Vox's diversity of discourse topics depicts an enriched and nuanced depiction of the elites, enlarging this discursive construction to other groups: environmentalists, feminists, and separatists. The party argues that environmentalists, the sole group to be labeled as part of the "progressive elite," advocate for extreme left environmental views, arguing that initiatives like the energy transition and the UN 2030 Agenda are luxuries only accessible to the privileged. According to Vox, these policies obstruct Spain's resource exploration, leading to unemployment, poverty, a shift in cultural habits, and the erosion of past working-class achievements.

Regarding feminism, Vox sees the topic as ideological silliness and claims the feminist lobby has infiltrated the government. Vox aims at drawing a line between feminism and women, characterizing the former as the privileged minority that only intends to fulfill its own agenda, and not actively trying to improve women's condition in society. Vox claims it does, contrary to the rest of the Spanish political spectrum.

Lastly, separatists, seen as the divisive force obstructing Spanish unity, are also depicted as part of the elite due to mainstream parties' concessions with separatist leaders. Vox accuses the government and judiciary powers of not prosecuting separatist leaders and ETA members for crimes against Spain.

RQ2: HOW CAN THESE DIFFERENCES BE ATTRIBUTED TO EACH COUNTRY'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC, CULTURAL, AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS?

While RQ1 outlines significant differences in both parties' discursive constructions, specifically in references to the Roma people being addressed by Chega as a minority group that is protected by the political elites, the disparity in media discourses between both parties, and Vox´s inclusion of feminists, trans people, environmentalists, and separatists as members of the aforementioned group.

Separatism can be straightforwardly explained by the regionalist sentiments prevalent in the country, which have already been extensively covered in the academic realm. Regrding the Roma, the community has historically been one of the most marginalized ethnic minorities in Europe (Kende et. al. 2021).

According to the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (EFRA) survey on minorities and discrimination in the EU (EFRA, 2016), 47% of the Roma respondents in Portugal felt discriminated against due to skin color, ethnic origin, or religious beliefs in the previous 12 months period, compared to 35% in Spain. This difference becomes more prevalent when analyzing the results for a 5-year period, with Portugal scoring 71%, considerably more than in Spain—51%. Therefore, this paper speculates that the level of prejudice against the Roma community in Portugal is significantly higher than that of Spain, which translates into a more salient topic for Chega to leverage. Discrimination against the Roma community has been a longstanding paradigm within Portuguese society. Research also suggests that Chega is the only political force that targets the Roma community by labelling it as problematic and unintegrated into Portuguese culture, and thus can capitalize on this paradigm by effectively obtaining larger proportions of the vote in municipalities with large Roma communities (Afonso, 2021). Magalhães and Costa-Lopes (2023) argue Roma citizens are the beneficiaries of welfare ethnocentrism, similar to the populist rhetoric other far-right parties employ in Eastern Europe.

Even though the anti-Roma sentiment still exists in Spain (Gonçalves, 2020), it does not seem to be such a salient topic as in Portugal. Studies focusing on successful integration cases highlight Roma individuals' pivotal role in some of Spain´s cultural practices, such as flamenco music and Andalusian and Spanish cultural heritage (Chinoy & Arias, 2023). On a political level, the existence of three Spanish MPs of Roma origin (Público, 2022) suggests that this ethnic minority has integrated better as a community and faces less prejudice

in Spain than in neighboring Portugal. Unlike Chega, which seems to fit more into the Eastern European populist discursive framework on the topic of Roma people (Kende & Krekó, 2020), Vox focuses on other minorities to employ its nativist ethnocentric discourse.

Regarding environmentalist discourses, Moreno and Thornton (2022) argue that Vox aligns with other familiar climate action contrarian discourses in the US and Europe, employing denialist and obstructive narratives against pro-climate laws. The authors correlate Vox's environmental views to those of other far-right parties in Europe (Moreno & Thornton, 2022). This is, however, a rather simplistic view of the far-right climate policy, especially when taking into consideration numerous contradictory examples such as the far-right ecologism displayed, albeit in an incoherent and slow-paced fashion, by the Hungarian and Polish far-right (Lubarda, 2024), or the Identitarian movement (Zúquete, 2018).

Chega, by contrast, does not seem to devote noteworthy attention to environmental policies. Unfortunately, this seems to be an unexplored research topic within the far-right populist realm in Portugal, which means that little can be added.

On the topic of feminism, Vox's anti-feminist discourse is linked to the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity policies, which threatened traditional gender roles that positioned men as primary providers. As these roles weakened, women's empowerment in both public and private spheres grew (Santamarina, 2021). Portugal experienced similar economic distress during the same period, even though that did not translate into the results presented in this research, with virtually no anti-feminist discourses being reported in the data. This does not mean that the party does not employ anti-feminist discourses or promote an anti-feminist sentiment. A quick search on the parties' Facebook page easily spots an array of moments when Chega, a self-proclaimed "defender of the traditional family" (Chega, 2024), attacks the "feminist agenda" and gender equality policies. Indeed, in the beginning of 2024, André Ventura vocally opposed the planned usage of a portion of Portugal's state budget to implement legislative policies to narrow the gender equality gap (Lusa, 2024). However, this topic does not appear to be as important and prevalent for Chega compared to Vox. It is also important to note that, in contrast to Portugal, Spain has a Ministry of Equality, of which Vox is a strong opponent, which resulted in a higher volume of anti-feminist rhetoric in the dataset.

Regarding trans people, it is essential to contextualize the timeframe in which the sample was gathered. In January-March 2023, the Spanish parliament promulgated a new nationwide trans law allowing self-gender determination to all citizens aged 16 and over and for those aged 14 to 16 with parental or legal tutor consent. Additionally, trans issues have long been an increasingly salient topic in Spanish society (Olveira-Araujo, 2020), generating a political landscape

that partially explains Vox's focus on the trans community. On the other hand, no such pressing issues were occurring in Portugal at the time, which resulted in the press barely mentioning the trans community. It is important to point out that, despite the situational context that was presented, Vox appears to attribute a higher level of prominence to both feminists and trans people and, through its discursive practices, effectively attributes elite membership to these groups.

In the realm of media discourses, the strenuous relationship between populist parties and mainstream media institutions has been extensively documented (Nærland, 2023), with the term "anti-media populism" (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021) being coined to describe a status quo in which the media, alongside the political class, is a part of populist parties' discursive construction of the elites. Nærland (2023), however, argues that a multiplicity of situational factors shapes this relationship and can vary on a country and regional basis. Furthermore, this paper's empirical findings outline the distinct discursive approaches each party has adopted when directly addressing the media. Vox undoubtedly displays harder antagonistic views on the subject, as demonstrated by both parties' inter-discursive practices regarding media agents.

Catarralá and Palau-Sampio (2022) analyzed Vox's media discourses throughout both the April and November 2019 general election campaigns. They observed how Vox's discursive constructions of the media revolved around three central components: being excluded from the media agenda, the ideological stance of some media outlets, and accusations of deceiving or misleading news articles, which falls in line with the findings presented in this paper, with additional nuances that were presented in the results section. Research carried out during the 2018 Andalusian regional election, a pivotal moment in Vox's political resurgence, noted that during this period, and at a moment when Vox was a residual party in the Spanish political landscape, the party benefited from greater mediatic focus when compared to parties of similar size (Ollala et al., 2019).

Weighting the empirical findings of this study with the available literature, Vox appears to be aligned with the traditional anti-media populist positioning, which is not the case for Chega. André Ventura maintained a prominent presence as a television football and legal commentator beyond his election to parliament, along with his role as a columnist for Portugal's most-read daily newspaper, *Correio da Manhã*. The argument is that complicit media coverage benefitted Ventura and Chega with platforms for increased visibility, effectively facilitating the party's growth trajectory (Serrano, 2020). As visible in the data, this does not translate into the party's favorable portrayal of the media. Still, it creates a separation from Vox's more radicalized discursive approach.

CONCLUSIONS

This study expands the research on far-right populist discourse in the Iberian Peninsula and argues that populism is fragile, versatile, and malleable as an ideology and a discursive approach. Beyond the traditional discursive framework that associates the political class with the elite and working-class, and native citizens as members of the people, this paper contends that the categories of 'the people' and 'the elites' serve mostly as empty signifiers (Laclau, 2005). This is especially valid regarding the latter, as distinct populist parties populate them in numerous ways. Furthermore, it highlights how assorted contexts produce varied outcomes in the populist discourse.

There are a few important limitations to consider. Given that the dataset is confined to a specific time frame, the discursive constructions identified in this study are inherently influenced by that period's political and social context and may have evolved since. While the study provides a framework that can be applied to comparative analyses, the results should be viewed cautiously when generalized to other political parties or countries, as differing national contexts and political dynamics could generate divergent outcomes.

As a prospect for future studies, and still, within the discourse-historical approach domain, there are interesting possibilities in exploring the discursive strategies employed by Chega and Vox in their respective social media communication process. Although this study did identify some strategies of positive-self and negative-other presentation, research on this topic should be performed in the future. Longitudinal studies analyzing how both parties' discursive focus shifts over time would also provide valuable insights.

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Post-migrant Voices in German and Swedish Podcasts

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Abstract: In the early 2020s, a quarter of the population in both Germany and Sweden had a migrant background. Post-migrants are increasingly claiming the right to participate in the public sphere by producing their own media, which mainstream media (MSM) rarely recognize. This study used the theoretical concept of voice and listening to analyze German and Swedish podcasts that deal with issues of life in a post-migrant society. Which frames are privileged in these podcasts? How do corporate media respond to these media productions? Through the generic frames of human interest and responsibility, the podcasters draw attention to the living conditions of marginalized people, which they argue have an impact on society as a whole. In particular, the recurring theme of racism in society has provoked a certain response from the mainstream media, i.e. the inclusion of these issues in media coverage and the podcasters in MSM production.

Keywords: post-migrant media; podcasts; racism; voice and listening

INTRODUCTION

In the early 2020s, a quarter of the populations of both Germany and Sweden have a migrant background (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023; SCB, 2023). Germany and Sweden are thus post-migrant societies, or immigration countries, where migration affects all parts of society (Hill & Yildiz, 2018). Despite this, mainstream news media systematically talk about immigrants, but rarely with them and often in a negative way (d'Haenens et.al., 2019; Esser et.al., 2017; Georgiou, 2018; Georgiou & Zaborowsky, 2017; Szczepanik, 2016), and consequently,

immigrants become an anonymous and „voiceless" group in the broader public sphere (Malkki, 1996).

The technical prerequisites for speech, e.g. for participation in the public sphere, are enhanced by digital communication technologies, which provide spaces where post-migrants can counter the dominant mainstream media (MSM) discourse. Post-migrants are increasingly claiming the right to participate in the public sphere by producing their own media. The challenge for marginalized communities is therefore not necessarily to be denied a voice, but to find a wider audience beyond their own community that will listen.

The aim of this article is to explore the role of post-migrant media in the public sphere by examining selected podcasts that address issues of living in a post-migrant society and whether and how they receive attention from MSM. The article therefore addresses the following research questions: What narratives and frames are privileged in selected podcasts? How do MSM respond to these media productions? Do the examined podcasts matter? The term ‚post-migrant media' refers to the practice of post-migrants creating and controlling their own news content to share their stories and perspectives (Ratkovic, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature uses several terms, such as ethnic and diasporic media (Georgiou 2005), to describe media produced "by and for (a) immigrants, (b) ethnic, racial, and linguistic minorities, as well as (c) indigenous groups living in various countries across the world" (Matsaganis et al., 2011, p. 10). We use the term post-migrant (Ratkovic, 2019) media because it includes both migrants and their descendants and, unlike diasporic and ethnic media, does not focus on a particular diasporic and ethnic group (Georgiou, 2005). Post-migrants include individuals who have not migrated themselves but are still structurally categorized and perceived as migrants or foreigners in public discourse (Yildiz & Hill, 2017), even if they have citizenship and identify as German or Swedish. The prefix ‚post' refers to the "consequences and repercussions of migration" in line with Kruse et. al. (2019, p. xvi). It does not mean that migration has come to an end, but rather that migration has become ‚normal' and affects all areas of life and is a concern for society (Hill & Yildiz, 2018). As societies become more diverse, old and new narratives coexist and are contested.

Whereas some of the study's podcasters would label themselves as post-migrants, most described themselves as people of color (PoC) or belonging to a marginalized group. The term ‚post-migrant voices' is used as an overarching designation to address the process of re-negotiating established positions regarding origin, religion, skin color, as well as sexual orientation. The concept of post-migration

can be regarded as a "code for plurality" as "fundamental negotiations of rights, recognition and equal opportunities as well as of participation and belonging in society" (Foroutan, 2018, p. 25).

Bozdag et al. (2012, p. 97) argue the role of these media fills the gap by addressing "issues that are of specific interest for the members of diasporic communities" or immigrant groups (see also Budarick, 2014, 2019; Kosnick, 2007, Voronova et al., 2019). They therefore play a community role by facilitating a platform for self-expression and representation (Budarick & Han, 2017), which is seen as an alternative to homogeneous MSM. Examining the content of post-migrant media is therefore important for understanding the everyday lives and experiences of post-migrants, who constitute a substantial proportion of diverse societies' populations.

With the development of digital communication technologies, new media projects are constantly emerging as the threshold for media production is lowered. This has contributed to the rise of a participatory global media culture with user-generated content at its core. With its do-it-yourself approach, the podcast is „an open platform for communication" and „an extension of everyday discussions between hosts", where podcasters „can explore issues that interest or concern them" (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 285). As Markman (2012) demonstrates podcast producers are primarily motivated to give voice to themselves and their community. The medium enables the articulation of intricate narratives in a subjective and comprehensible manner, thereby reaching novel audiences (Schütz, 2020). Fox et al. (2020) identify intimacy and authenticity as essential components of podcasting, with hosts frequently offering insights into their personal experiences and perspectives. Given the alluring nature of podcasting (Berry, 2016), where audiences actively select podcast content, the cultivation of a loyal and engaged audience becomes imperative. This dynamic relationship is fostered by encouraging a participatory culture, where discussions are extended or deepened on other platforms such as Instagram and Facebook.

Immigrants have traditionally benefited from this technological development, using digital communication technologies „to connect within and across communities" (Yu & Matsaganis, 2019, p. 3). Research indicates that podcasters increasingly articulate the lived experiences of people with immigrant backgrounds (Gustafsson, 2023, 2024; Vrikki & Malik, 2019). Yet, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of the content as most studies focus on the producers. Vrikki and Malik (2019) and Uhnoo and Sernhede (2022) suggest that these types of podcasts can be perceived as emergent subaltern counterpublics. Gustafsson (2024) addresses how post-migrant podcasters use their podcasts to resist racist content in MSM and formulate alternatives. However, it is important to note that producing media also involves participating in the broader public sphere and can therefore play a bridging role between the ethnic minority and majority in societies. This

involvement can influence MSM, highlighting the potential for cross-cultural exchange and impact.

Yet, scholars often accuse ethnic media producers of engaging in advocacy journalism by promoting the welfare of their own community, which clashes with the ideals of impartiality and objectivity within Western journalistic professionalism (Budarick & Han, 2017, p. 48ff). "Being labelled as 'community advocates'" can negatively impact on how they are treated by MSM (Matsaganis & Katz, 2014, p. 938). Yu and Matsaganis (2019) argue that further research is needed to examine whether post-migrant media are "connected to broader society and … they actually multiply viewpoints in public discourse" (p. 4). We take on this task by examining the content of post-migrant podcasts and how they are listened to by MSM.

THE CONCEPT OF VOICE AND LISTENING

Voice is often referred to as an essential component in a democratic society (Couldry, 2010). In the public sphere, agency is often synonymous with having a voice, i.e. speaking, and is associated with the right to express an opinion (Tacchi, 2012). Agency is ultimately about inclusion into the public sphere and, hence, about participation as cornerstones of democratic societies. Inclusion in this study refers to whether the voices of post-migrants are part of and recognized and allowed to matter in the public sphere.

Moreover, voice is essential to the ideas of community media and the aspiration of giving a voice to the voiceless by providing a platform where marginalized groups can speak up or talk back to MSM (Dreher, 2012, p. 160; Georgiou 2018; Graf, 2024; Gustafsson, 2012). However, voice as an "opportunity to tell one's story can be seen as a minimum standard which does not necessarily challenge overall inequalities in how voice is valued, nor the unequal distribution of voice as a value within MSM and policy settings" (Dreher, 2012, p. 159). Thus, having a voice is not enough in itself, because voice needs to matter (Couldry, 2010, p. 1; Macnamara, 2013, p. 164) and be valued, which is only possible if it is attended to and recognized (Dreher, 2012, p. 159).

The concept of "listening" involves those who are addressed and embrace response (Dreher & de Souza, 2019). Recognizing the capacity of post-migrants' communicative participation means that their voices become relevant in the public sphere. Bassel (2017) explores the conditions for listening at the political level and states that listening, and thus understanding, is mainly dominated by "us and them" binaries. The challenge of the digital media landscape is, on the one hand, "selective audibility" and, on the other hand, "not being heard on one's own terms" (Bassel, 2017, p. 34). In this article, we conceptualize

and apply listening as the process by which post-migrant voices are recognized and heard by MSM.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The following criteria were used to select the podcasts in both countries: 1) produced by post-migrants, 2) the content should be relevant to post-migrant and therefore diverse societies, 3) the productions should be fairly well-known or have received some attention from MSM, 4) the characteristics of style, genre, and target audience should not be the same for all three selected podcasts from each country. The decision to examine podcasts (N=6) from two countries Germany (n=3) and Sweden (n=3) does not signify a comparative approach but was an effort to broaden the empirical base.

The selected podcasts belong to the interview type and consist of a mix of short and long-term productions, produced not only by trained journalists, but also by people from various walks of life such as DJs, students, civil society representatives and social workers, as well as organizations. The podcasts mainly target a younger audience. Two of the six podcasts are still active.

The selected podcasts fall into three categories based on their production conditions. The first category are independent podcasts, or at least those that started out as such. Both podcasts in this category started in 2018 and cover topics relevant to Swedish suburbs or immigrant life in Germany. Some episodes are produced in response to current events. The Swedish podcast *Edu Orten* is produced by a young Muslim woman of Eritrean descent who grew up and lives in a socio-economically marginalized suburb of Stockholm. It is still active and has, since 2018, produced 52 episodes. The German podcast *Kanackische Welle* was produced by two professional male journalists of Palestinian and Nigerian origin. This podcast does not focus on a specific geographic area, but on issues relevant to post-migrant Germany. *Kanackische Welle* started as an independently produced podcast but joined the public-service media platform „Funk" in 2021 and produced 64 episodes between 2018 and 2021.

The second category also comprises independent podcasts, but those that either or both collaborate with established institutions and are produced by organizations. These podcasts focus on stories rarely told in the MSM. The Swedish podcast *Talet* is produced by the organization StreetGäris and is an alternative version of the popular radio program on Swedish public radio "Sommar i P1"*, which gives well-known Swedes the opportunity to tell their stories. The podcast produced 29 episodes between 2020 and 2023. The German podcast, *Halbe Katoffl*, is a pioneer that a journalist of Asian descent started in 2016 and uses co-operations with varied institutions irrespective of their standing or purpose. *Halbe*

Katoffl is an in-depth conversational podcast in which invited post-migrants share their life stories. It is still active with over 170 episodes.

The third category are exclusive Spotify productions that focus on identity, PoC, racism, and taboos in society and comprise *Raseriet* (Sweden) and *Realitäter*innen* (Germany). A pair of female PoCs who had worked in the media industry produced *Raseriet,* which was an „anti-racist feminist" podcast, that between 2016 and 2022 created 233 episodes). Each episode presented the rage that exposes racism in Swedish society. The producers of *Realitäter*innen* were a pair of female DJs, known for their inclusive parties for women and queer people of colour. The podcast was active during the pandemic and produced 28 episodes.

The study's authors read summaries of all the episodes (N=576) of the six podcasts to get an overview of the themes and issues covered. Based on this reading, the authors selected 10–15 episodes from each podcast (n=70) for in-depth analysis and then conducted qualitative content analysis, inspired by framing analysis (Entman, 1993), to examine the construction of meaning. First, the authors mapped the overarching themes. Next, they explored all the frames by identifying the defined problems, responsibilities, and solutions.

The second part of the analysis explored the reaction and response of the MSM. To this end, the authors searched for mentions of the podcasts in the MSM using Retriever Research (2016–2024) and Google, which after removing duplicates and irrelevant hits, produced 68 German mentions in newspaper articles and radio and television programs. A search for Swedish podcasts, via Retriever Research of only newspapers (print and online) yielded 220 mentions, of which half referred to *Raseriet*.[1] To get an overview of the content, the authors first read all the articles and then conducted qualitative content analysis, which multiplied the viewpoints of the podcasts.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF PODCASTS CONTENT

Identity and belonging are two related and recurring themes that deal with the experience of living in an environment that is different from one's own. Issues of inequality and stigmatization based on appearance (skin color, gender identity, etc.), economic resources, and the religious beliefs that emerge from these discussions. The podcasts highlight that deep-rooted racism is often the cause of these problems, so they address racism at both the individual and the structural levels.

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[1] Citations from the podcasts by name and numbered: German podcasts are numbered #1-#68; Swedish podcats are numbered #1-#220.

The discussions in the podcasts start from a mutual understanding of the issue, i.e. „us", the affected people, the experts on the issue based on either or both „our" own experiences and scientific expertise, and „them", the ethnic majority in society, including the institutions that maintain discriminatory structures. Hence, the traditional binary opposition of „us" and „them" used by MSM is reversed. Solutions are offered to empower the community to raise its voice against inequality, especially racism.

Based on the above themes, we identified five common frames. Two were generic: (i) the human-interest and (ii) the responsibility frame, which cut across the various issue boundaries mentioned above. Three were issue-based frames: (iii) media failure, (iv) the we-the-experts, and (v) self-empowerment. The last two frames express the notion that „we," the affected, are not victims, but agents who can stand up for ourselves to demand justice.

GENERIC FRAME: HUMAN-INTEREST

As a personalized way of dealing with issues, most topics are generally approached from a human-interest perspective. Hosts and invited guests told their stories, often in an intimate style, and expressed their emotions. They encouraged each other, which made the content compelling, authentic and insightful. The intimacy of the audio media format allowed a design, in which personal feelings gained access to broader issues.

For example, a German podcaster reflected on her emotions after the Hanau shootings in February 2020, in which a far-right extremist killed 11 people in Germany:

> „I felt very depressed for many days after Hanau. But it's good to show that we are not untouched and that we are taking a stand. We are not alone. Don't be defeated" (*Realitäter*innen* #18).

Similarly, in *a* guest of a Swedish podcast explained how she dealt with her emotions after her children were shot.

> "Somewhere, I have actually forgotten my own sadness. I have somehow been able to move it. I am fighting this battle for our children, for our suburbs, for all the mothers who lose their children. So, the sadness came to me this summer when we buried him. Because I had him at home, but I decided that he should be buried and that was it, that was it. I had to let him go" (*Edu Orten* #23).

Personal experiences and feelings are at the forefront and are given importance and recognition. Moreover, in both cases, the personal connects to a larger collective, us. This generic human-interest framework provides space for moral claims by stating what is good and what is bad, which mobilizes emotions, which Wahl-Jorgensen (2013, p. 129) views as a „strategic ritual of emotionality" (2013, p. 129). However, while Wahl-Jorgensen prescribed emotions to the subjects, ours narrated their feelings.

The language the podcasts used reflected the main target audience of the younger generation. The language is informal, playful, and often full of anglicisms, incomplete sentences and abbreviations. Quotes in English from popular culture are also very common. The Swedish *Edu Orten* used *ortensvenska* – an urban slang version of Swedish, which reflects and celebrates diversity.

The podcasts created an intimate relationship with the audience by first mimicking unscripted and authentic back-and-forth conversations between friends, and secondly by inviting the audience to listen. The podcasts maintained and strengthened this relationship by encouraging the audience to participate in discussions on social media and by reading audience comments on the podcasts. Several of the podcasts devoted special episodes to answering audience questions and organized live podcasts and events to facilitate audience interaction, which enhance a feeling of a *community*.

GENERIC FRAME: RESPONSIBILITY FRAME

The personal experiences of racism that featured in the podcasts were mostly linked to the "structural level" (*Edu Orten* #35) because members of the ethnic majority of society often cannot understand this link between Essed's everyday racism (1991) and structural racism. By focusing on the structural aspects of racism, the podcasts emphasised the responsibility of both society and its institutions and often picked on politicians for their, extant or lack of, responsible actions:

> "Yes, they [politicians] have been involved in creating a social climate where people think it is okay to incite against Muslims. … They propose bills that restrict Muslims' religious freedom and demonize Muslims or people who live in the suburbs and so on" (*Edu Orten* #13).

Other podcasts view society in a general sense is the problem. In *a* Swedish commentary was formulated as a letter from a mother to her unborn child.

> "It was the second time I saw you, my dear baby, and you looked like any other 20-week baby. I looked at the ultrasound image after the appointment and

was amazed that your parents' facial structures, skin colour and hair type were dark. 'Any child', scary thought! But that you have always been and will always be, regardless. It is the society that you are born into, which is not just any society." (*Talet* #13).

Referring to society as "not just any society" in comparison to "any child" suggests that there is something wrong with the society as it will not perceive this child as any child. It is society's need to label and differentiate people, which is the underlying problem. Another societal problem the podcasts highlighted was the societal inability to acknowledge the existence of racism:

> „If you had called something racist 10 years ago, there would have been a big debate… A lot of people in Germany still think that racism has something to do with Nazis. But Nazism has been abolished. They think it has nothing to do with their life in Germany today" (*Realitäter*innen* #5).
> „In Sweden you can do racist things, but to be a racist or to say that you did something racist, it's like it doesn't work […] This self-image that we are so equal casts a pretty big shadow over it [racism] […] And this thing about Sweden being colourblind, so not talking about white and black. That people still don't see themselves as white, so it makes the conversation very difficult" (*Raseriet* #178).

The reason it is difficult to fight racism or even discuss it constructively lies in the self-image of these countries. Sweden sees itself as a humanitarian superpower and a champion of equality, while racism in Germany is conflated with Nazism, which has been abolished. Consequently, people assume that racism does not exist in these societies.

In this context, the podcasts in both countries referred to the concept of color-blindness as "the set of ideologies and discourses that uphold contemporary racial inequality by denying either its presence or its significance" (Burke, 2017, p. 857). Discussing racism becomes almost impossible in the public sphere if the definition of the term and the materialization of racism are not agreed upon in society. The podcasts underlined the unwillingness of the ethnic majority to listen and learn and how white people have yet to recognize their whiteness and privilege. These podcasts therefore aimed to educate their listeners on racism to combat this ignorance.

ISSUE FRAME: MEDIA-FAILURE FRAME

As part of the who-is-responsible frame, we identified the media-failure frame. Often, these podcasts position themselves as an alternative to MSM and criticize the journalistic practices of the MSM. For example, they were critical of MSM's use of language, which was described as „verbal violence" that „dehumanizes people" (*Edu Orten* #22). One episode of a German podcast examined racist attitudes in sports journalism and highlighted the use of racist attributions in sports journalism, such as „white players are level-headed and intelligent" and „black players are good runners but hot-headed", which reduce black players to physical virtues (*Kanackische Welle* #36).

Even the debate culture of MSM talk shows, i.e. the demand for balance, was criticized as „totally stupid" (*Realitäter*innen* #5*) because the concept was understood as an invitation to people with opposing viewpoints. In addition, personalizing racism prevents informed discussions about it:

> "We believe, or have believed, that any opportunity to talk about it [racism] on different platforms that reach different types of people is a win for anti-racism in general, but what it also does is it keeps the conversation about racism at a very basic level. Because people who have not experienced racism always want to talk about the same things. And when you talk about racism with these people, for example, it is a focus on your own experiences" (*Raseriet* #178).

The lack of diversity among those working in the MSM was also regularly highlighted. An entire episode of a German podcast was dedicated to this issue and concluded: „Diversity in talk shows and in the media in general is a rarity. This is a structural problem that starts with the internship" (*Kanackische Welle* #38). Lack of diversity impacts how media covers migration, and racism because the latter „affects people who are not usually in newsrooms" (*Realitäter*innen* #5). Interviewees also stressed the role model function of migrants who are visible in media because „visibility and representation of people with a migration background has its own value and that is very important" (*Halbe Katoffl* #85).

The podcasters clearly distinguish themselves from the MSM by criticizing its journalistic practices and showing alternative ways of dealing with issues as the next section will show. Podcasters question the ability of MSM to deal with the ambiguity and ambivalence of post-migrant society without negative devaluation. They have suggested MSM change their positions and listen to marginalized groups.

ISSUE FRAME: WE-THE-EXPERTS FRAME

The rationale behind this frame is the claim that "we", post-migrants and people of color, know what it means when speaking about immigration and racism. "We" as a collective or community have experience of stigmatization and the the ethnic majority should therefore consult us.

By demonstrating how a societal problem can be dealt with, the podcasts offer a solution to combat racism. It starts with the use of language. For example, the hosts of *Realitäter*innen* (#10) argued that the often-used label „Fremdenfeindlichkeit" (literally: hostility towards foreigners) when referring to hostility, discrimination and supremacist practices was wrong because the people affected, despite having a history of migration in their families, are no longer foreigners but fellow citizens. Therefore, it is more correct to call it racism.

Including the whole of society emphasizes that racism is not just an issue for those who experience it, but a concern for everyone (Hill & Yildiz, 2018):

> "There are always two sides. There are no unaffected ones. That's our problem, because those white people, who are the potential perpetrators, often tend to argue for white people in the case of doubt, because they say: of course, that can't be racism, because in my house, in my office, in my team racism doesn't exist. They are already affected when saying: it is not our concern." (*Realitäter*innen* #5).

Racism affects everyone and podcasters urge 'white' listeners to be aware of potential racist behavior and how they are part of the problem. Some of *Raseriet* episodes were labelled as *folkbildning 2.0* (non-formal adult education), where guests discussed different aspects of racism. In one episode, a journalist and a comedian, both PoC, discussed the use of the word "negro". By labelling these episodes *folkbildning*, the intention of teaching and informing the listeners about racism is explicit. Implicitly, it targets white people or people with limited previous knowledge and experience of racism.

The podcasts also showed that post-migrants have expertise beyond racism and migration. For example, the guests of a German podcast included a sociology professor of Arabic background, a psychologist PoC, a writer and activist of Polish background, and a journalist of Turkish background (*Realitäter*innen* #20). The concept of *Edu Orten* is to bring local expertise into the podcast. The guests were often young people from marginalized suburbs who were active in civil society, inspiring listeners to follow their dreams and get involved in various organizations.

This framework emphasizes that post-migrants should be involved, consulted, and listened to more, to contribute with new useful knowledge. The podcasts

illustrated the diversity of post-migrant society and what inclusive representation might look like.

ISSUE FRAME: SELF-EMPOWERMENT FRAME

A general solution to the problems of the individual in contemporary society is to be found in self-empowerment. Issues of identity and belonging were often discussed in relation to self-empowerment, self-confidence, and self-determination, as this missive to an unborn child shows:

> "Never forget that you have a family tree whose branches won't fit on the paper at school. That most of the experiences and the lessons are there. Climb [upwards] and squeeze out the wisdom of the resin. Go ahead my dear child" (*Talet* #13)

Heritage is perceived as strength, and there is nothing wrong with being different: "I've just been in the wrong rooms, in ones that didn't appreciate me" (*Talet* #10). However, being different can be advantageous: "I know baklava, but I also know currywurst – and that's really cool. It broadens my horizons" (*Halbe Katoffl* #14).

Even producing a podcast is a challenge that can be overcome by believing in yourself. A German podcaster reflected on her motivation to produce episodes despite her initial lack of confidence when she compared herself with the co-producer who "always knew a lot". But she wanted "to be that person who still goes to the front and says something… we (PoC) have to dare to form an opinion" (*Realitäter*innen* #6).

The podcasters and their guests encouraged each other as individuals and their listeners to believe in themselves and stand up for their cause. By including their own hesitations and feelings in the narratives and setting an example, they show assorted ways to succeed in a post-migrant society.

MAINSTREAM MEDIA RESPONSE

Post-migrant media do not usually belong to the preferred field of coverage of MSM (Graf 2009). Mostly, they go unnoticed. However, our study demonstrates that the podcasts do receive some attention from MSM. As Altheide and Snow (1979) demonstrate, the MSM's coverage is influenced by its logic, which is shaped by the structures, formats, and practices inherent in media production.

Based on the coverage in MSM we have identified three types of media attention:

1. Media coverage
2. Involving the hosts in media production in various ways
3. Nomination for awards

The first type of media attention the podcasts receive is media coverage, which is often characterized by personalization, i.e. by focusing on the podcasters, their biographies, experiences, and purposes. For example, a German daily newspaper in a report about *Kanackische Welle*, stressed the podcaster's childhood experience of otherness:

> "Palestine is not Pakistan. In the first episode of the new podcast *Kanackische Welle* you will learn that this is not always entirely clear. There, Marcel Nadeem Aburakia, half-Palestinian, half-German, says that when he was in school, his classmates often mistook Palestine for Pakistan when he told them that his father was from Palestine" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* 24.10.2018).

The interview format is frequently used to provide an insight into the backgrounds of the podcasters and the subjects they cover. The tone of the coverage is generally positive, emphasizing the importance of the podcasts and the topics they addressed. An article in ETC, a left-wing and independent Swedish newspaper, emphasized the importance of public education for young people in suburban areas (ETC/Dagens ETC, 15/05/2020) through platforms such as *Edu Orten*, which enabled marginalized voices to speak on their own terms.

Both *Edu Orten* and *Talet* mostly receive attention from local Swedish newspapers. The former primarily featured in local suburban press in Stockholm, which reflects the focus of the podcast, while *Talet* received coverage by local newspapers reflecting the location in which the guest in each episode resides. An article in *Vetlanda-Posten Plus* (9.7.2022) focuses on a talk about the importance of networks, mentorship, and inclusion and explains the aim of the podcast while giving space to the guest to tell their personal story. Similarly, an article in *Östersunds-posten* (30.6.21) features the local librarian's participation in a *Talet* episode about her dream of making libraries more inclusive. The coverage can thus be perceived to celebrate local profiles and give them an opportunity to tell their stories to encourage and inspire the local audience.

The coverage of *Realitäter*innen* suggests that the more unusual the aspects of the podcasters and the stories, the better. Most of the MSM coverage focus on the insider parties that the two female DJs organize. The MSM also emphasized the singularity of the topics discussed in the podcast by stating that „they offer a very unique way of looking at the world" (*RBB Kultur* 23.10. 2021) and in a nod to the broader audience that the podcast was „inclusive but not insidery" (*TAZ* 31.03.2020).

In other words, the media coverage of the podcasts focus not only on the ordinary and the life journeys of the podcasters, which the audience might be able to relate to, but also the strange and exotic to attract the attention of the audience.

Another way the podcasts find their way into the limelight of MSM is when the content of the podcasts accords with and speaks to current debates and events. In the context of hostility, racism, and feminism there have been several references to the study's selected podcasts. For example, several German media discussed a popular children's rhyme that the podcaster of *Halbe Katoffl* labelled as racist, which initiated an examination of racist cultural heritage by showing other examples, explaining what the problem is and how it could be solved. Echoing the argument of the podcast, one MSM article reads: "It's about understanding how hurtful certain ways of addressing people or images can be, even if they are connected to good memories of childhood and fun songs" (*Tagesspiegel* 16.01.2021).

During 2020, when racism was on the public agenda thanks to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement several of the podcasts became resources for MSM. *Raseriet* not only increased its audience by 600 % in 2020, it also received much more attention from MSM. The MSM not only interviewed the podcasters of *Raseriet, Kanackische Welle,* and *Halbe Katoffl* but also recommended their audiences listen to the podcasts to learn more about the subject. The producers of the podcasts were no longer just podcasters but positioned as experts:

> "Especially in these weeks, when the topic 'Black Lives Matter' also dominates the German media, Malcolm Ohanwe changes from journalist to expert. After this interview he has to go straight to the next one with the RBB media magazine. Precisely because he is black and does a podcast about it, his perspective is in great demand" (*Deutschlandfunk* 11.06.2020).

This leads us to the second type of attention from MSM, involving the podcasters in MSM productions in various ways, for example, by inviting them as experts. In 2020, the podcasters of *Raseriet* were regular guests and experts in MSM to discuss BLM and racism. Their experience of these productions, the questions they were asked and how the MSM framed racism caused them to publicly state that they would no longer discuss racism with white journalists. This statement also received attention in several Swedish articles. In a Swedish MSM's article the rationale behind the duo's decision was explained and the hypocrisy of Swedish media houses was revealed by quoting the podcast's Instagram account: "The same media houses that claim to protect and work for diversity, inclusion and representation still do not hire outside the white homogeneous group" (*Dagens ETC* 12.02.2021). An article by *Dagens Nyheter* elaborates further by stating that the decision partly stemmed from the podcasters' perceived need to protect

themselves from negative interview situations, and was also related to the ongoing debate concerning racism on Swedish radio. The article continued: "This is just an attempt, as a practitioner, to put pressure … to influence in some way. And what would happen if several people did the same?" (Dagens Nyheter, 13.03.2021). In other words, the podcasters used their position to criticize negative media practices and stand up for colleagues who might not be in a position to do so.

Several of the podcasts demonstrated their competitive edge and ability to keep listeners tuned in, which caught the attention of MSM. *Raseriet* has strengthened the hosts' brand and thus their position in the media industry. The two main German public-service broadcasting organizations, Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (ARD) and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), co-developed their own podcast platform called *Funk* and invited the producers of *Kanackische Welle* to move their podcasts to this platform. The move led to an increase in the funding of the podcast. Since public service media has lost touch with younger people, the platform specifically targets a younger audience. Meanwhile, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), a regional broadcaster within ARD's network, invited the producers of Realitäter*innen to produce a live podcast, which is available on YouTube. Both *Realitäter*innen* and *Raseriet* became Spotify exclusive podcasts, which reflects their success and increased their resources.

Thirdly, several of the podcasts have been nominated for awards, and some have won. This has led to more media coverage and recommendations of the podcast. For instance, *Halbe Katoffl* was nominated for the Grimme Online Award (2018) and the German Podcast Award (2021/2022); *Raseriet* was nominated for *Stora Feministpriset* (a major feminist award) in 2017 and for *Guldöra* (Golden Ear) for best podcast of the year in 2021. In 2020, they both received *Veckorevyn*'s equality award.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the analysis we will discuss the implications of these podcasts on the individual, the community, and the public sphere level.

On an individual level, the podcasts provide a platform for individuals (producers and guests) to articulate and share their life experiences often using personal stories to discuss structural social problems. Podcasting opens career doors and can be seen as a stepping stone experience. For example, the two producers of *Kanackische Welle* now work in the MSM with permanent contracts. The producer of *Halbe Katoffl* can make a living off the podcast and has established several co-operation projects. The co-producers of *Raseriet* have, thanks to the success of their podcast, quit their jobs in the MSM to work more

independently and choose which projects to work with. One of them is now a well-known media personality who hosts various galas.

On a community level, these podcasts undoubtedly offer a space of recognition. The podcasters emphasize commonalities when discussing inequality, for example, and seeking alliances in society, between groups of post-migrants but also with allied members of the ethnic majority. In this way, the podcasts strengthen the community and lay the foundation for cooperation between groups within the post-migrant society.

In the public sphere, there is a wide range of media productions, especially podcasts, that address issues of migration and its social consequences from a variety of angles. This underscores the relevance and timeliness of the issue. The global „Black Lives Matter" movement provides a significant platform for raising awareness of racism, with producers asserting that this issue is not limited to the USS but extends to countries like Germany and Sweden as well.

The issue of racism is now widely discussed not only within the post-migrant community and its media, but also within MSM, which has for example, influenced the political system in Germany. In July 2022, a journalist with a Turkish background, who has extensively covered issues of racism, was elected as the Independent Federal Anti-Discrimination Commissioner. In 2023, the Federal Government presented a report on racism in Germany and acknowledged:

> "… that racism in all its manifestations has for far too long been swept under the carpet… Too little has been done, in politics as elsewhere, to protect people affected by racism…" (Minister of State 2023, preface).

Thanks to the many bottom-up initiatives, of which these podcasts are only one example, racism is currently being addressed on all levels of society.

It is also important to underline that at the same time as debates that acknowledge the prevalence of racism in our society have emerged, a parallel development is on the rise. Due to increased popularity of the right-wing populist parties Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Sweden Democrats (SD) racism has also become more socially acceptable. Sweden Democrats (SD), the second largest party in Sweden, is actively collaborating with the sitting government and has suggested several policy changes that specifically target post-migrants in Sweden, for example, the proposition to abolish Sweden's anti-discrimination law. This clearly illustrates the element of conflict that often characterizes post-migrant societies and highlights the importance of these podcasts today.

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The Right to Information in Poland in the Context of Political Influence

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Abstract: The article addresses the issue of the media's access to public information in the context of their informational and monitoring roles vis-à-vis those in power. The hypothesis is that the normative framework in Poland was not a sufficient guarantor of such access for the media and journalists because, in practice, the authorities did not implement the statutory legal requirements in terms of providing access to public information. The case study method used in the article enables the authors to show that the barriers to access to information in recent years are mainly due to the instrumental treatment of information policy as an effective tool of governance and the perception of the media as a competitor in the creation of the public narrative.

Keywords: Poland; media law; access to information; journalism

INTRODUCTION

In a democratic state, citizens have the right to participate in the most important decisions and to exercise control over the activities of political actors of the public sphere, "where access to information affecting the public good is widely available, where discussion is free of domination […]" (Curran, 2002, p. 233). Trends in media policies in some Central and Eastern European countries indicate the possibility of further destabilization of normative foundations of democratic media systems (Bayer, 2017, p. 39; Štětka & Mihelj, 2024).

In recent years, especially since 2015, Poland's media system has undergone gradual deregulation and political instrumentalization. As Michał Głowacki (2017, p. 176) observes, the Polish model of media transformation has been challenged

by instability and contradictions "when it comes to assessing its characteristic features concerning media/politics relations in a comparative perspective."

Media systems theories, such as the Four Theories of the Press (Siebert et al., 1956), the well-known concepts of media systems devised by Hallin and Mancini (2004), the hybridization of media systems (Chadwick, 2013), or transitional societies (Sparks, 1998, pp. 180–182), expose issues of the relationship between politics and the media as a crucial point for the independence of the latter. In this aspect, the fragility of the system framework of post-communist countries is evident (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). There is no doubt that recent political shifts and changes in government policies and regulations have created new trends in media policies, such as de-democratization or even a re-transition to an illiberal model (Balčytienè, 2017; Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). The effect of creeping de-democratization in the "post-truth" era, manifested in a voluntarist approach to law and civil liberties, and in the devaluation of the authority of knowledge and institutions, devalues trust in media and journalism (Splichal, 2022, p. 119).

For the present discussion, the most relevant issues are those related to regulating the media's access to information, which consequently cuts the citizens off from pluralistic sources of information. The barriers and restrictions arising from limiting this access allow political power to diminish the power of the media and "manufacturing consent" instead (Koivunen & Vuorelma, p. 393–408).

The article presents two cases that generated broad media coverage in 2021–2022, both in Poland and abroad: the migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border and the missile explosion in the small village of Przewodowo. The undertaken analysis aims to show how political influence – resulting from strong and multidimensional affiliations between the media and the structures of political and economic power in Poland in the period 2015-2023 undermined the citizens' right to reliable and objective information. In particular, the paper addresses one main research question: Can the normative framework of the democratic state be a sufficient guarantor of the right to information for the media and journalists? The paper's analysis aims to demonstrate, through these two case studies, that both access to and denial of public information act as highly effective tools for authorities to control the narrative and create a communications crisis.

THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION IN ACTS OF INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LAW

The right to information was recognized as one of the human rights in the regulations of international law much earlier than in the internal legal systems of democratic countries, including the European Union (EU). Legal regulations governing access to public information are found in three international legal

systems: the UN legal system, the Council of Europe (CoE) legal system, and the European Union (EU) legal system. The key standard in the UN system dedicated to the right to information is Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948). In Europe, access to public information is reflected in the legal system of the Council of Europe, namely in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (Convention, 1950) as a common standard, where "everyone has the right to freedom of expression" and "to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority".

The exercise of these freedoms may be subject to such limitations as are necessary in a democratic society in the public interest, in the context of state and public security, territorial integrity, the protection of order, health and morals, the reputation and rights of others, and the protection of secret information and the impartiality of the judiciary. Based on the CoE recommendations, the Convention on Access to Official Documents was adopted in Tromso in 2009 (CoE, 2009). The provisions of this document impose an obligation on public authority institutions at the governmental, regional, and local levels to make official documents available to interested parties. The convention has not been ratified by the Republic of Poland (Bednarczyk, 2014).

In accordance with the law of the European Union, all its citizens and all legal persons residing or having their registered office in a member state have the right to access the documents of the European Parliament, the Council, and the Commission, under the rules established by law. It is the duty of each of the aforementioned institutions to determine, in its rules of procedure, the specific procedure for access to its documents. This "transparency principle" was first introduced under the Maastricht Treaty. Its goals were to strengthen the democratic character of the administration and increase public confidence in it.

The consequence of this was the Code of Conduct on Access to Documents introduced by the Commission and the European Council (Regulation, 2001). Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR, 2012) guarantees freedom of expression and information "without interference from public authorities and regardless of national borders." According to Article 42, every citizen of the EU has the right of access to "documents of the institutions, bodies, offices and agencies of the Union". Citizens of the European Union gained access to the documents of the Council, the Commission, and the European Parliament under the Treaty of Amsterdam. It provides that any EU citizen or legal entity established in a member state has the right to information, including access to the institution's documents.

THE RIGHT TO PUBLIC INFORMATION IN POLAND – THE LEGAL BASIS

The Polish media system experienced, like other post-communist countries in Europe, a radical transformation in the 1990s – from a state monopoly to a pluralistic system with private and public sector media (Balčytienè et al., 2015; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012). Both public and private media have been subject to political pressure (Głowacki, 2017; Jaskiernia & Pokorna-Ignatowicz, 2017), which negatively affected the independence of the media and the level of editorial autonomy (Donders, 2021, pp. 272–288; Klimkiewicz, 2023).

The fundamental regulation of public information is provided for in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997) and in the law on access to public information (Act on Access to Public Information, 2001), as the fundamental rights of citizens. Article 61 of the Constitution entitles everyone "to obtain information about the activities of public authorities and persons performing public functions". It also includes guarantees of access to documents and the ability to enter meetings of public authorities.

For journalists, access to information is additionally guaranteed by the media law (Act of Press Law, 1984). The regulations specify both the subject and object aspects of this obligation and define the scope of the information. Restrictions on the right to public information may be imposed only on grounds and in accordance with the values outlined in the laws. These are: the protection of the freedoms and rights of other persons and business entities, and the protection of public order, security, or an important economic interest of the state.

This restriction is also related to the principle of proportionality, established in Article 31(3) of the Constitution, regarding restrictions on the exercise of constitutional freedoms and rights. Each time, the authority should assess *ex officio* whether there are statutory grounds for refusing to release public information. Refusal to provide access to information takes the form of a decision, which means that its issuance requires a special procedure (Act on Access to Public Information, 2001). The legislation also regulates the procedure for releasing public information, including the time allowed for entities – individuals, institutions, and organizations – to respond to the press.

CASE STUDY (1):
IMMIGRANT CRISIS ON POLAND'S BORDER WITH BELARUS

As indicated above, the normative basis of a declaratory nature in practice faces numerous restrictions, which, between 2015 and 2023, became increasingly severe, the most serious being the denial of information through the authority's silence. The case studies presented here illustrate the problems of access to information

faced by journalists and foreign correspondents in Poland in situations related to state security.

In mid-2021, large groups of migrants from various regions of the world appeared at the Polish border with Belarus, lured by promises from Alexander Lukashenko's regime of easy access to Europe. Groups of men, women, and children, mainly from the Middle East and Africa, gathered at the border on the Belarusian side (Reuters, 2021). The Polish government denied the refugees any right to cross to the Polish side and seek asylum, so Border Guard officers sent them back to Belarus using the pushback strategy. The growing humanitarian crisis attracted media attention from around the world, presenting the actions of the government and Poland in a very critical light. The Polish side portrayed the situation as part of a "hybrid war", waged by Russia with the help of Lukashenko's regime.

In the context of the growing migrant crisis, in the autumn of 2021, a decision was made to impose a state of emergency in the border strip, based on a presidential decree for 30 days (Prezydent RP, 2021). The parliament amended the law on the protection of the state border (Sejm, 2021) at an accelerated pace, allowing the Minister of the Interior to impose a ban on people in the border area. Various types of restrictions covered almost 200 towns and cities along a strip about 3 km wide from the border with Belarus. In the zone, by law, the ability of outsiders to stay in the zone was suspended, with no exception for the media. There was an almost complete information embargo due to the „ threat to the security of citizens and public order." After a month, the Sejm decided to extend the state of emergency for 60 days. Poland and the other Baltic states received support for border protection from the EU's institutions, which condemned the actions of the Lukashenko regime as an anti-EU action (Grzywaczewski, 2021).

The imposition of the state of emergency, although raising doubts about its actual expediency and effectiveness, was not perceived negatively by the public or legal authorities. However, the restrictions on media access to the border zone provoked critical comments and protests. The only form of news coverage from the border zone with Belarus comprised official announcements by a government spokesperson, broadcast on public media. Many editors of the largest Polish media and journalistic organizations protested against the ban on journalists working in the zone (Erling, 2022a). Media from around the world were also interested in the migrant crisis and the authorities' actions against the media (Falon, 2021). Paradoxically, foreign media were forced to organize coverage from the territory of Belarus rather than Poland, thereby strengthening Russian--Belarusian propaganda regarding the border crisis (Legucka & Bryjka, 2021).

Media freedom monitoring organizations called the restrictions arbitrary and disproportionate (IPI, 2021), while Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2021) urged the Polish parliament to assess the legality and proportionality of the

measures taken, arguing that "[a]lthough it is legitimate for the Polish state to address security risks in the border area, the media must be able to cover police and military operations and migration, which is a public interest issue."

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) stressed that restricting access to information in the state of emergency area is disproportionate to the threat's degree and nature (OSCE, 2021). Furthermore, the OSCE recommended revising the regulation, among other things, to address barriers to accessing information on monitoring and reporting human rights violations in the border zone proportionately.

The Polish Ombudsman asked Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki for an initiative to remove flaws in the State of Emergency Regulation regarding information barriers caused by the bans (RPO, 2023). In the ombudsman's view, the ordinance went beyond the limits of the State of Emergency Law and consequently violated the Constitution. Doubts about the constitutionality of these legal acts involved both the prerequisites provided by the Constitution and the effectiveness of introducing the state of emergency, its subsequent extension, and the creation of an "extra-constitutional state of emergency," which interfered with civil rights and freedoms, disregarding the statutory form (Zajadło, 2021).

The Ombudsman stated that, regarding access to information and journalists' freedom of entry into the border zone, the measures introduced were not proportionate. There was not only no provision for the media to be included in the "pass mechanism," but a "general and abstract, absolute ban on the release of information" was adopted, in addition to official government communications. The Ombudsman stressed that such a practice leads to the "exclusion from any basic social control of the actions of public bodies" and opens the field to disinformation activities, which "paradoxically can ultimately lead to additional threats to public security and order" (RPO, 2021).

In the absence of independent media coverage, the Polish public had to rely on materials prepared by the Border Guard and the Polish Armed Forces, as well as on amateur photos and videos, surreptitiously created and often at risk of repercussions from law enforcement. The government made official announcements during press conferences and via social media. The Border Guard was responsible for organizing the concessionary "media visits" after being notified via email by the editorial staff (Erling, 2022b).

The stay in the so-called zone was thus completely subordinated to the authorities' intentions, who, without public scrutiny through independent media, were free to maintain the „information cordon sanitaire". A few months later, the position of Government Plenipotentiary for Information Space Security (GPISS) was established (Rada Ministrów, 2022) to fight against disinformation and monitor activities „against the security, interests and image of the Republic of Poland", abolished by the next government in 2024 (Rada Ministrów, 2024).

The 2023 migrant crisis continued, and the issue of journalists' access to the zone remained unresolved, as government-affiliated politicians sought to dramatize the situation. The GPISS sounded an alarm on Twitter: "In 2021, Poland was attacked via an artificial migration route. Aggressive foreigners massively attacked the Polish border, officers and soldiers hoping to get to the West. This operation continues to this day" (Wprost, 2023).

The media did not have any opportunities to counterbalance this GPISS statement by either independent news reports or interviews with people at the border. This was because the border zone, which incorporated a 186-kilometer-long, 5.5 m wall saturated with cameras, separated journalists from the immigrants. It was useful for the authorities to maintain an atmosphere of fear centered on a wave of "strangers", especially since this crisis appeared to be shrouded in secrecy, which occurred in a virgin forest somewhere on the edge of Europe, which was difficult for anyone, let alone journalists, to reach (Perez-Peña, 2021). Under such conditions, acquiring information was a challenge, with the exception of perfunctory announcements by formally authorized Border Guard officers in the public media.

The atmosphere at the border was recreated in Agnieszka Holland's latest film *Green Border* from 2023. The GPISS accused her of „detachment from reality" and „insinuations that serve to attack Poland, Poles, and the government" (Dróżdż & Staniszewska, 2023).

CASE STUDY (2): MISSILE STRIKE IN PRZEWODOWO

The incident with a stray missile in Przewodowo on November 15, 2022, right on the border with Ukraine, had all the characteristics of an event of extraordinary importance, with unforeseeable international repercussions. Indeed, at stake were the possible response of NATO, Polish-Ukrainian relations with a hot war on the territory of a neighboring state, and the sense among the Polish public of the imminent threat of war. That was why the leaking of information to the public, albeit unrelated, but also disturbing, was so important. Radio journalist Mateusz Gierszewski was the first to write about it in the afternoon of November 15 on his private Twitter account: "Something has happened in the village of Przewodowo in the Lublin Voivodeship near the border with Ukraine. There was an explosion in a grain dryer. The cause is unknown. Can this be linked to the sudden convening of the committee?" (Gierszewski, 2022).

The question Gierszewski asked concerned information that GPISS gave about the sudden convening on the same day of the Committee of the Council of Ministers for National Security and Defense Affairs. The GPISS did not give

any reason for convening the committee, which sat the following day (November 16), during which President Andrzej Duda was rumored to have admitted that he was tempted to quickly announce that the missile which fell in Przewodowo was Russian, but military officials advised him to be cautious (PAP, 2022 November 18). The public media, including the evening TV services and the state agency PAP, were dominated by the GPISS' plea "not to publish unconfirmed information," which triggered a wave of speculation, especially in Poland's online media.

Foreign media initially published information about the missile—BBC World News and Al Jazeera—followed by Polish media (Onet, 2022), primarily by Polish private media, including the most popular television news channel TVN24, which reported that "Russian missiles fell on Polish territory, killing two people" (AP, 2022). US intelligence intel about two Russian missiles was also erroneously reported by the CNN, but the Pentagon had not officially confirmed this (Stepanenko, 2022). Both TVN24 and CNN belong to Warner Bros Discovery. Other major media outlets in Poland provided coverage from Przewodowo in the late evening hours.

Polish public television, which was entirely under the control of the government at that time, in a special edition on the TVP Info news channel at 22.30, reported that "according to unconfirmed information, Russian missiles fell on Polish territory." Such an approach condemned Polish public opinion to uncertainty about the actual situation and could even have potentially spread panic. Access to further information was difficult even for local journalists, because the military and police blocked off the area around the village, and most of their spokespersons remained silent. Journalists from independent commercial media were therefore unable to verify information, even when it appeared online. As a consequence, some commercial media decided to publish an amateur video of the explosion that appeared on Facebook and was later used by Poland's mainstream and foreign television channels. Nevertheless, none of the media channels published statements by the Prime Minister and the President until midnight.

The media's silence, partly enforced by the authorities and partly caused by self-censorship, was damaging and discrediting for the media. The government delayed the official announcement for too long, forcing the media to wait for official confirmation about the explosion.

Evaluating the exceptional severity of media self-censorship in this case was not easy considering the release of unverified news in a situation of possible conflict escalation. Therefore, scholars and media experts have refrain from general criticism and have expressed alternative ways of managing communications in such circumstances. Undoubtedly, here the "chilling effect" was the consequence of not only the attitude of the authorities, but also the spontaneous self-restraint of the media, which Sajor, the head of information at the RMF FM radio station, related: "I do not think that our listener was not informed.

For that, he was certainly not exposed to speculation. […] A certain restraint was not a disgrace. It was just responsibility for the word and for the listeners" (Sajór, 2023)

But speculation occurred anyway, and the mainstream media, especially the public media, adopted a "client" attitude, waiting for hours for an official confirmation of their own information from the authorities, which had repeatedly blocked journalists' access to information. The media silence was all the more incomprehensible given that social networks and foreign media reported about the explosion just minutes after the incident. Internet users noted this and deemed it discrediting for the Polish media, who, despite being able to gather information on the spot, drew it from foreign media.

The attitude of the government, which delayed confirming the information about the incident to the public, should be interpreted as a fundamental error in crisis communication. This is the assessment of media representatives and experts, who at the same time believe that the media also showed too much docility, because "the media are not for silence," so it was naive to wait for information from the government, which "is extremely effective in blocking information" (Sajór, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

The barriers to media access to information in Poland, as shown in the two examples discussed, are vexing to the media but, happily, are also ineffective. Even the enormous obstacles to journalists' access to the zone on the border with Belarus cannot completely block information. Through Polish and foreign media as well as amateur coverage, a stream of messages flowed to the Polish and foreign public. Thus, the government was unable to either completely control or impose the "only correct" propaganda narrative in the public media on the issue of illegal immigration. It did, however, consistently make it difficult for the media to carry out their news mission, and sometimes journalists were even met with violence. Examples widely reported by Polish and foreign media as well as media freedom monitoring organizations included the detention of an ARTE TV crew and the brutal treatment of three reporters, including a Czech photographer working for the NYT (Klimowicz, 2021). The journalists were questioned, searched, and handcuffed and deprived of their equipment, documents, and phones, while not given information about their situation. Human rights activists, doctors, and journalists had very limited access to events in the border zone. But despite the "information wall," journalistic reportage did breach the tight wall of insinuation and lies (Mazuś & Kołodziejczyk, 2022).

The arbitrariness of the authorities and the lack of proportionality in imposing restrictions on the media's access to information are at odds with Polish law and international standards, including the Council of Europe conventions (ECHR) and EU law ratified by Poland. It is, therefore, legitimate to conclude that the normative framework in Poland was not a sufficient guarantor of the independence of the media and journalists, as in practice the authorities did not implement the statutory legal requirements in terms of providing access to public information. Barriers to access to information in the period of PiS' governance was due primarily to the vision of "sovereign media policy" created by the authorities and public media favorable to those in power (Jaskiernia & Pokorna-Ignatowicz, 2017; Klimkiewicz, 2023). The authorities also had the useful narrative of disputes with the European Commission and in covering up real problems by hysterical reactions to illegal immigration.

At the same time, because of self-censorship, Poland's media system could not react properly and undermined confidence in itself. The Przewodowo incident exposed the cowardliness and ineffectiveness of the government's information policy. The game changer turned out to be a solitary journalist with a Twitter account and not any of the nation's large legacy media. Restricting citizens' access to reliable and credible information via media also questions one of the main fundamentals of participation in public life.

Limiting access to information for media, while authorities remain silent, may have dangerous effects, because, as Štětka and Mihelj (p. 232) argue, "the lack of independent media can encourage distrust of government crisis communication". Exerting greater control over the media landscape and the distribution of public information in the specific situation that Poland has found itself after Russia's aggression against Ukraine should be judged as not merely irresponsible but downright dangerous by exposing the public to vulnerability to disinformation.

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THE ROUNDTABLE:
Media Capture and Cultural Polarisation

Public service media (PSM) remains a cornerstone of European media systems. In an era dominated by global digital platforms, challenged by the spread of misinformation and deepening socio-political polarisation, there is a renewed urgency to strengthen PSM as a trusted space for social innovation, civic participation, and democratic deliberation across generations, communities, and nations. As part of this effort, scholars from the EU-funded CHANSE project *Public Service Media in the Age of Platforms* (PSM-AP, 2022–2025), in collaboration with members of the Horizon Europe project *Reviving, Boosting, Optimising and Transforming European Film Competitiveness* (REBOOT, 2023–2026), gathered in Warsaw, Poland in January 2025 for a three-day workshop, *The Knowledge Exchange: Reinventing Public Service Media for the Age of Platforms*.

The University of Warsaw organised the event in cooperation with Zachęta – National Gallery of Art and Polish Television (TVP). Within this framework, on 23 January 2025, the TV Studio of the Faculty of Journalism, Information, and Book Studies, located in the University of Warsaw Library, hosted a civic roundtable debate titled „Media Capture and Cultural Polarization."

The debate examined critical obstacles to media pluralism and social cohesion in Europe, while considering how these affect the role and resilience of PSM in the platform era. The debate looked beyond scholarly and industry perspectives by engaging broader civic interests. The TV Studio streamed and made the debate available online to ensure wider public access. Prof. Michał Głowacki (University of Warsaw) as the Chair invited media scholars and civil society representatives from across Europe to share their insights and proposals for reinvention strategies and models that may futureproof PSM against capture and fragmentation. The panel brought together Dr Marius Dragomir (Media and Journalism Research Center), Dr Čedomir Markov (University of Belgrade, Serbia), Jakub Wygnański (Shipyard Foundation, Poland), and Dr Bissera Zankova (Media 21 Foundation, Bulgaria). Below we present a transcript of selected ideas articulated during this civic debate.

> **Michał Głowacki: As experts on cultural and political polarisation, as well as political parallelism, I would like to ask you: how do you explore and approach the wider context in which public service media functions?**

Bissera Zankova: For many years I have been working at the Council of Europe on documents, including recommendations related to public service media. In my view, the problems of public service media are always relevant and can always be discussed, no matter what age we live in. Initially it was public service broadcasting, which then transformed into public service media, and now we speak about the relationship of public service media with platforms and the question of how content produced by PSM can gain prominence and be carried by platforms. Another important issue is the definition of the public service remit in a time of strong competition, not only with commercial media but also with different platforms. Within this broad context, public service media remain a source of educational, informational, cultural, and other types of inspiration. But we can also see the dangers they (PSM) face: questions of funding, independence, and the risks of media capture. I would say that media capture is not only a problem for commercial media, but also for all types of media, and especially for public service media.

Marius Dragomir: Much of what I will say comes from research at the Media and Journalism Research Center, hosted by the University of Santiago de Compostela. Although we are an academic institution, we often engage with civil society, and we try to make our research accessible. There is a lot of literature on media capture, but we wanted to understand how it happens in practice. We mapped patterns in several European countries and identified four key components. First, regulatory capture: when a government wins elections, it appoints members to media councils and regulators, who then act in its interest. Second, public service media: in many countries it is easy for governments to take control of PSM by appointing leadership once they are in power. Third, public funding: governments often use state advertising and subsidies, not transparently, but to reward loyal outlets. Fourth, capture of private media through ownership: often with allied businesses, governments systematically acquire private outlets. Together, these elements create strong control over media narratives. We presented this model in our research, but we are also now looking at a fifth element: technology platforms. Initially, platforms provided a space for independent journalism – as in Hungary, where outlets like Átlátszó and *Direkt36* operate online. But over the past five years, tech companies, driven by commercial interests, have increasingly prioritised government-friendly outlets. Hungary remains a textbook case: since 2010 Orbán's government has captured regulators, PSM, funding flows, and private media. Poland was on a similar path until recent parliamentary elections. The new element, collusion between governments and

tech platforms, is perhaps the most troubling, with far-reaching consequences for public service media and for independent journalism as a whole.

Čedomir Markov: My research background is a bit different, as I don't study journalistic practices or cultures; I focus more on audience-media relations. When I began, I was interested in media trust; or in Serbia's case, media distrust. I tried to distinguish between distrust, as a normative concept, and cynicism, which I felt better described citizens' relations to the media and to other public institutions. A few years ago, I joined the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade, where I worked with a group researching democratic innovations, especially citizens' assemblies. Much of the evidence on their benefits came from Western contexts, so we wanted to test what happens in hybrid regimes like Serbia. Since 2020, we have organised many assemblies on issues such as air pollution, pedestrian zones, school safety, food labelling, and access to social care. From these experiences, we learned that citizens most value two stages: the briefing stage, where they receive impartial and diverse information, often lacking in hybrid regimes, and the structured deliberation, where they discuss in small moderated groups and work toward policy solutions. These assemblies act as "schools of democracy," giving people a chance to practise democratic behaviour largely absent in the Western Balkans. One assembly we organised in 2023, in cooperation with the European Partnership for Democracy, focused on disinformation. It took place in Belgrade, with similar initiatives in Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia. Participants began with strong punitive attitudes, such as supporting heavy fines or even imprisonment for those spreading disinformation. But after deliberation, support shifted toward softer measures: civic education, support for professional journalism, fact-checking, media literacy, and self-regulation. Experts involved were initially sceptical but later impressed by the quality and sensibility of the citizens' recommendations. The main challenge remains follow-through. In Serbia, decision-makers typically ignore invitations to participate in assemblies or to consider citizens' recommendations, unlike in some neighbouring countries. Finally, I'd like to mention that our initiative has attracted attention from media practitioners in Serbia. The Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia is planning four citizens' assemblies linked to developing a new media strategy. The first, scheduled for April, will focus on public service media and how citizens can be engaged more meaningfully in shaping content and policies.

Jakub Wygnański: My background is in journalism, but most of my work has been in civic participation. At the Shipyard Foundation, we organise deliberative processes, including the first ever civic assembly in Poland: a randomised panel of 100 people on energy poverty. Politicians promised to consider the outcomes, but as always, we will see. Importantly, there is now a promise that even the existence and governance of public media should be discussed in such a civic panel.

I believe democracy cannot survive without such innovations. Even in Athens or in the Italian Republics, governance relied on random selection, not only elections. I served as chair of the programming board of Polish Television until 2014, when I resigned. Even then, before the current manipulations, I saw that the concept of "public" was very weak, reduced to quotas of airtime for left and right, as if equality of microphones was sufficient. That is not public service media. This brings me to the point: the word "public" matters. Public media should not be just about giving a platform to competing voices; it should serve the *public good*, the *res publica*. But our societies struggle with that idea. Too often, "the public" becomes a crowd or a mob, easily mobilised by anger. True public service requires citizens to think beyond their own interest, toward fairness and the common good. Civil society should play a role here; not just as a set of NGOs, but as a culture of civic behaviour, civility, and dialogue. Unfortunately, in Poland civil society is weak, and the oversight of public media is fragile. Without new governance structures that prevent capture after every election, public media risk becoming tools of the ruling party rather than serving society. I often say: either we invent such structures that truly protect public media from political takeover, or it might be safer to abandon the model altogether and invest in private or civic media. Because captured public media, controlled by a party rather than the public, are not just ineffective, they are dangerous to democracy.

Michał Głowacki: Marius, is there a geography of media capture? I know you have conducted research outside Europe, and I think it would be interesting to hear whether this depends on the nature of democracy, or whether it is connected to some other cultural indicators.

Marius Dragomir: One of the studies I mentioned is *State Media Monitor*, which we expanded to 170 countries. It is now in its fifth year. We analyse what we call state-administered media, including authoritarian regimes, based on three criteria: governance, funding mechanisms, and safeguards for editorial independence. Measuring these gives us seven models with different levels of control. We have to distinguish between state-controlled environments like China, North Korea, Venezuela, where the state controls basically everything, even your thoughts, and media capture, which appears in hybrid regimes and imperfect democracies. I believe media capture is essentially economic. Leaders want to keep access to public resources, because those resources sustain their place in the media ecosystem. Examples include Hungary, Turkey, Egypt, Cambodia, Nicaragua; so capture appears in many forms across many regions.

Michał Głowacki: Well then, what is the relationship between media capture and the broader culture of lawmaking in the media field?

Bissera Zankova: Well, this is a difficult question. I also want to pick up on what Jakub said – for example, in Poland there is a strong expectation of a new media law that would solve many issues. In my country, Bulgaria, we also expected a new law on public service media funding, but after the recent political turbulence the draft was blocked. So the big question is: can we really rely on the law? And the answer is complicated, because the law itself can be captured: not only by parties but also by lobbying groups, or through last-minute amendments that change its purpose. Marius mentioned regulatory capture – this has been a serious problem since the 1990s, and it continues. According to a 2017 Council of Europe report, fewer than half of European states had managed to create independent regulatory bodies. I don't think the situation has improved; in some cases it has become worse. Even when civil society representatives are included, bigger organisations dominate and the problem remains. So we need to look not only at improving laws, but also at the administrative practices of regulatory bodies: their internal work, transparency, reporting, and accountability. For example, what happens if Parliament rejects their annual report? Are they obliged to change their practices? Too often there is no clear guidance. Finally, I would stress that the public should not only "own" public service media but also have influence over regulatory authorities, since they are not purely governmental bodies. Like PSM, regulators should be accountable to civil society and the wider public. Whether this really happens in our countries is still an open question.

> **Michał Głowacki: So, it all goes back to the question of accountability, transparency, and public engagement in lawmaking. I would like to turn to the situation in Serbia: in recent days, large-scale protests have taken place, with civil society activists and students demonstrating against the policies of RTS. Similar movements have been observed in Poland prior to 2023, as well as in Slovakia. Čedomir, could you elaborate on the implications of this current crisis between the state and citizens in Serbia?**

Čedomir Markov: Thank you for the opportunity to speak about this issue. I don't think there has been a more consequential one for Serbia in recent years. Let me first give some brief context. On 1 November last year, a canopy at the Novi Sad railway station collapsed, killing fifteen people. This tragedy sparked widespread demonstrations, driven by fears that once again those responsible would not be held accountable. When students in Belgrade were attacked during one demonstration, and some were even arrested, they blockaded their department. Within days, ca. 60 departments across Serbia joined. For the past two months, students have staged daily blockades in memory of the victims, alongside mass protests at key institutions. Twice they demonstrated at RTS, the Serbian national broadcaster. In December, they criticised RTS for ignoring the protests

or covering them only briefly, while airing government claims that students were "funded by the West" without challenge. Later coverage remained unbalanced – for instance, a political talk show hosted four male guests, only one of whom supported the protests, despite strong backing from academics and public opinion surveys. The second protest, on 17 January, drew tens of thousands. This time RTS aired live coverage, read student demands in full, and even showed a banner on its own building: *RTS workers stand with students.* One of RTS's unions formally endorsed the protests, stressing that RTS had long failed to meet its public service obligations. What is new in this movement is that it is leaderless, self-organised, and independent of political parties, which makes it harder to delegitimise and more powerful in reminding RTS of its true role.

Michał Głowacki: Thank you, Čedomir, for bringing the Serbian case into our debate, but let us return to Poland for a concluding reflection. Civil society organisations have been actively engaged in the recent public consultations on the European Media Freedom Act. Jakub, could you briefly wrap up the Polish context? As in many other countries, society here has become deeply divided, yet at the same time there is a growing call for deliberation and for listening to one another.

Jakub Wygnański: I don't know how to solve the puzzle, but some elements give us hope while others bring despair. The first is law. Legal frameworks can be changed overnight, and without civic spirit and integrity inside institutions, rules alone are not enough. We know that better regulation is needed, but law by itself cannot prevent capture. The second issue is governance. Who appoints who is crucial. In Germany, for example, the strength of media councils lies in their size and diversity, limiting political dominance. In Poland, we have proposed oversight bodies that include representatives from politics, NGOs, academia, and journalism, with members selected randomly from large pools. Randomisation can serve as an anti-corruption mechanism. Funding is another challenge. Models such as tax allocation, where citizens directly assign a portion of income tax to trusted organisations, might also be adapted to support media. Measurement of quality is equally important – not only audience ratings, but also independent panels able to assess whether public media serve education, culture, and society. Finally, I believe resilience depends on pluralism and innovation, not on uniformity. Strong journalism must rest on the integrity of individuals, since institutions are often corrupted. Today, people sometimes trust individual reporters or podcasters more than media organisations. How we can rebuild journalism and public media around integrity and civic oversight remains the essential question.

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Marius Dragomir is the Director of the Media and Journalism Research Center, a researcher at the University of Santiago de Compostela and a visiting professor at Central European University (CEU) in Vienna. Over the last 30 years, Dr. Dragomir has specialized in areas, such as media and communication regulation, digital media, public service media governance, broadcasting, journalism business models, and ownership regulation.

Čedomir Markov is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade. His research explores audience–media relations in hybrid regimes, focusing on trust, cynicism, and anti-press hostility. He is also interested in the intersection of media and democratic innovation, especially in relation to deliberation quality and media accountability.

Jakub Wygnański is a sociologist and long-time civil society leader, currently serving as President of the Shipyard Foundation. A former "Solidarity" activist and participant in the Round Table negotiations, he co-founded key NGOs in Poland and has collaborated with major philanthropic institutions. He has been recognized with numerous awards for his contributions to civic engagement and social innovation.

Bissera Zankova is a media lawyer specialized in human rights and constitutional law. She is a long-standing Council of Europe expert in freedom of expression and freedom of the media. As a president of "Media 21" Foundation, Dr. Zankova has been working on projects spanning media and new media regulation, equality and journalism.

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KATALIN FEHER (2025). GENERATIVE AI, MEDIA, AND SOCIETY. ROUTLEDGE, 192 PP., ISBN: 9781032968735

The book 'Generative AI, Media, and Society' by Katalin Feher (Routledge, 2025) is one of the first comprehensive attempts to capture generative artificial intelligence in the context of media and society. The author explores a highly relevant topic, introducing an interdisciplinary perspective that combines media studies, sociology, political science, ethics, and computer science. The book was published at a moment of explosive interest in generative AI, when models producing text, images, or music are storming the media and public imagination. The title suggests an ambitious goal: to analyze the impact of generative AI on media and society as a whole. After reading it, I must admit that Feher provides a broad overview of the phenomenon and organizes the content into six clear chapters devoted respectively to transformations, generative AI itself, media, uncertainties, ethics, and politics.

Feher consciously narrows the scope to generative tools such as ChatGPT and other multimodal systems. This, however, helps her avoid generalizations and precisely demonstrates how these technologies affect creativity, authorship, or authenticity, which in my opinion, is key to clarifying the terminology. I also greatly appreciate her didactic approach: each chapter ends with problem questions, project suggestions, and artistic reflections.

The thematic scope is broad: from social changes linked to the development of AI, through the functioning of generative systems, to the blurring of boundaries between traditional and synthetic media. Particularly apt is her treatment of media convergence, in which she describes robotic journalism, immersive content, and the risks associated with disinformation. The chapters on ethics and politics are compelling, as the author goes beyond general slogans and refers to concrete concepts such as dual-use AI, trusted AI principles, and human rights–based regulations. This approach is particularly valuable in the context of current strategies developed by the EU and OECD. In many places, Feher introduces memorable terms and images that illuminate understanding the nature of these new tools. She writes of "statistical parrots" – language models generating text without understanding it, of the "Turing trap" that users fall into when attributing intelligence to machines, and of "generative colonization," meaning the gradual takeover of creative space by AI systems. All of this is illustrated with examples from the work of the European Digital Media Observatory

to cases of abuses revealed by law enforcement. The book also includes a glossary that organizes terminology and makes a generally unfamiliar topic more accessible to readers.

This content is impressive and comprehensive. Feher touches on most of the obvious themes related to generative AI – from technical foundations, through changes in media and business, to issues of ethics and public policy. However, I must make a few critical remarks. My main concerns relate to the book's methodological and perspectival limitations.

The biggest shortcoming is the book's brevity. Just over 190 pages is insufficient to tackle such a complex topic. Another aspect that deserves attention is the method of research itself. 'Generative AI, Media, and Society' does not present any original empirical research. There are no results from experiments, interviews, or data analysis conducted by the author. The book is more essayistic and review-based, which is not a problem itself if intentional. Yet Feher does not clearly specify her methodology. The six-chapter structure gives an impression of systematicity, but it is systematicity of organization, not of research method. She synthesizes many threads and sources: from classic concepts in media studies, through industry reports, to current ethical debates. Unfortunately, at times this synthesis seems to come at the expense of deeper critical analysis. There is a lack of rigorous testing of claims against data. For instance, when discussing AI's impact on the job market, Feher outlines scenarios and general observations but does not present new research or empirically verify how AI is currently affecting specific professions. As a result, many of the book's statements remain at the level of broad generalizations. At times, the publication resembles an expert essay, very inspiring and well-written, but without the rigor of research.

Another noticeable issue is the one-sided selection of examples and sources. Most of them come from Anglophone reports, major tech companies, or well-known futurists. It remains unclear why Feher chose these as key. This is probably tied to her geographical perspective. Almost the entire narrative is situated in the realities of the so-called Global North – wealthy, industrialized societies of Europe and North America. She scarcely steps outside this sphere. There are no references to how generative AI is perceived or used in Africa, South America, most of Asia, or the Middle East. Such Euro-American centrism is typical in tech publications, but it is a flaw here, given the book's aspiration to address "media and society" as a whole. Society does not end with the OECD. This is an important gap, as the impact of AI on society may look very different elsewhere. Consequently, the universality of Feher's conclusions is limited. She frames recommendations as if universally applicable—but are they? When she discusses human rights in relation to AI, she assumes a shared standard, while in China or other authoritarian regimes, the conversation takes place in a different framework (e.g., social control).

In short, the book lacks global imagination. In my view, this is a significant oversight. In 2025, as debates on AI ethics intensify, voices from beyond the West on decolonizing AI and the need to include local contexts are becoming stronger. Feher uses the term "generative colonization" to describe algorithmic bias and data appropriation, but only metaphorically, without engaging with postcolonial critiques of technology. That is a pity, since there is a growing body of critical literature showing how AI systems embed colonial logics and reinforce inequalities. This absence makes the book's perspective Western-centric and limits its universal relevance. For a Polish reader (or anyone outside the main AI hubs) the book may fail to address locally specific questions. This does not undermine Feher's general insights into media and AI, but it cautions us against treating them as universally valid. Perhaps her next work will fill this gap, as Feher herself (and others) acknowledge the need to study AI in diverse cultural, linguistic, and social contexts.

This geographical narrowing is tied to another limitation: the range of theoretical perspectives through which the author views AI. Feher relies mainly on mainstream frameworks: media theory (e.g., McLuhan's concept of "metamedia"), STS (science and technology studies), principle-based AI ethics (e.g., Trusted AI guidelines), and innovation management. All valuable, but we miss alternative, critical approaches that have flourished in recent years. These include postcolonial, feminist, and critical social theory perspectives on technology. Such frameworks provide sharper tools of analysis, showing AI not merely as a neutral technique but as a product of power relations, ideologies, and social structures. In Feher's book, these voices remain subdued. She briefly mentions bias and generative colonization, but only in a passing manner. There is no engagement with the work of Ruhi Chan, Safiya Noble, Joy Buolamwini, Kate Crawford, and others who analyze AI in terms of race, gender, and inequality. Their work has shown, for instance, that AI systems can reinforce racial biases (e.g., facial recognition struggling with darker skin), that voice assistants reproduce the "secretary" stereotype (nearly always female voices), and that large language models perpetuate sexist and racist associations embedded in data. Such issues are practically absent here. There is no discussion of how generative AI may reproduce structures of power, for example, English-language dominance in models marginalizing other languages (linguistic imperialism), or the embedding of Western cultural values into systems (as argued by scholars of AI coloniality).

Of course, no single book can cover everything. Perhaps the author intentionally chose a certain level of generality to appeal to a broad audience of policymakers and experts. Still, omitting these alternative theoretical perspectives makes Feher's analysis less multidimensional. The book stays within the safe corridor of mainstream AI debates, focusing on ethics, policy, and some risks, without fundamentally questioning big tech's business models. Yet critical

theorists would ask: Is "ethical AI" possible at all under surveillance capitalism? Is generative AI a tool of emancipation or a new form of cultural oppression? Such questions are absent here.

In conclusion, 'Generative AI, Media, and Society' is an important, timely, and much-needed book, especially in academia. Its greatest strength lies in its accessible, interdisciplinary treatment of the subject and its didactic structure, making it an excellent resource for teaching and discussion. For me, it was inspiring and clarifying, yet it left me hungry for deeper, more critical analysis. I see it as a solid starting point: a textbook that opens doors to reflection but does not yet provide the complete answers we still await.

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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 Štětka 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" (Štětka & 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).

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EVELINA KRISTANOVA, RAFAŁ HABIELSKI, MAŁGORZATA SUCH-PYRGIEL (EDS.) (2024). POLITICS AND THE MEDIA IN POLAND FROM THE 19TH TO THE 21ST CENTURIES. SELECTED ISSUES. BRILL, LEIDEN/BOSTON, 324 PP. ISBN: 9789004687998

The book, "Politics and the Media in Poland from the 19th to the 21st Centuries. Selected Issues", edited by Evelina Kristanova, Rafał Habielski, and Małgorzata Such-Pyrgiel, is not just a collection of case studies examining the relationship between media and politics. This volume is like a time-traveling machine. The book transports us back to the lively streets of Lviv in 1840, to Katowice in 1923, after the Silesian uprisings and the region's reintegration into Poland following decades of partitions, and then moves us to Kraków in March 1945, when *Tygodnik Powszechny* was established weeks before the end of World War II. Once you open its pages, you are immersed in the vivid history of Polish media and society, and it's a truly engaging and enlightening read.

The contributors to this unique monograph include historians, media scholars, political scientists, sociologists, and researchers of language and cultural studies. Different sections of the book concentrate on various types of both traditional and modern media, starting with the press, through books, radio, to the Internet and social media. It's a truly interdisciplinary perspective. The volume comprises fifteen chapters that illustrate the relationship of politics and various forms of media in Poland across different periods. The texts are organized chronologically, focusing on the most significant events in Polish society.

The book explores and examines the connections between the media and politics in Poland from the 19th to the 21st centuries. It begins by illustrating the immense challenges faced by a nation deprived of its statehood in the 19th century and concludes with a contemporary analysis of fake news spreading online and gender stereotypes in media coverage of the 2020 presidential campaign.

The first chapter discusses the challenges faced by the press in the mid-19th century, and the second takes us to interwar Poland. The third chapter focuses on one of the most important opinion weeklies in Poland after 1945, and this chapter begins a series of case studies examining the struggle of the media in the Polish People's Republic (PRL), which are presented in the subsequent

six chapters. These chapters explore the tensions between the media and censorship from the early days of communist rule to its final years. Six later chapters are dedicated to media in the 21st century, discussing the role of journalists and new media in covering contemporary issues. The authors take readers on a fascinating journey through different epochs, illuminating the struggles faced by Polish society, journalists, and editors as they navigated political, economic, cultural, and societal challenges. These issues are vividly contextualized in Rafał Habielski's comprehensive foreword, which provides a rich historical background.

The book begins with an excellent chapter by Katarzyna Drąg, who explores the history of the Galician press in the 19th century. She describes its challenges through the example of *Dziennik Mód Paryskich*, a periodical that successfully combined fashion, literature, and patriotism to foster political awareness. This was an extraordinary achievement given the constraints of the time and circumstances. Published in Lviv from 1840 to 1848, *The Parisian Fashion Daily* was created and edited by individuals who made every effort to preserve national identity, "at a time when Poland did not exist on the map of Europe" (p. 7).

The second chapter focuses on the interwar period, with Rafał Śpiewak discussing the challenges of that politically tense era. He examines the Catholic weekly newspaper *Gość Niedzielny*, which was founded in 1923 to raise awareness of religious and socio-political issues affecting the Church and society in Poland during a turbulent time between the two World Wars. The text explores the role that *Gość Niedzielny* played until 1939 in educating its readers and boosting morale. It provides a fresh and engaging perspective that may be valuable not only for historians of the press but also for scholars studying the history of the Catholic Church and its activities a hundred years ago.

Małgorzata Strzelecka provides an analysis of how the oldest still-published opinion weekly in Poland, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, established in 1945, navigated censorship during the early years of communist rule. In her study, she examines archival issues of the magazine from 1945 to 1953, along with collections of documents stored in the National Archives, including minutes, accounts, and reports that detail censorial interventions. The chapter focuses on the challenges faced by the Catholic socio-cultural weekly, which was subjected to stringent censorship. It explores how the magazine engaged in a strategic "game" with censors to preserve its integrity.

Building on this theme of ideological opposition, the next chapter, titled "Mythologizing the Enemy in Polish Communist Propaganda in the Years 1949–1954," by Rafał Opulski, examines how the Polish communist regime created and propagated myths about internal and external enemies to consolidate power. The subsequent chapters explore different aspects of censorship

and resistance. Cecylia Kuta describes the functioning of PAX, a Catholic publishing house in communist Poland, while Evelina Kristanova analyzes the religious broadcasts of Reverend Tadeusz Kirschke for Radio Free Europe, which was renowned for its opposition to the communist regime. The following chapter, again focusing on censorship, is written by Joanna Hobot-Marcinek, who discusses the compromises that editors and editors-in-chief had to accept to avoid bans from censors, which could target individual issues or entire newspapers. Dariusz Jarosz explores the book policy of the ruling party in the final years of the Polish People's Republic.

The Annus Mirabilis of 1989 marked the beginning of a new chapter in Polish history, starting with the Round Table Discussions and Agreements, which influenced the development of the media during the period of political transformation, as described by Anna Szwed-Walczak in her chapter dedicated to the first legal postwar magazine of the national radical camp.

The third section of the volume takes us into the 21st century, comprising six chapters that analyze contemporary issues at the intersection of politics and the media. Dominika Popielec recalls investigative journalists who uncovered pathological mechanisms within the political world and examines contemporary investigative reporting from the perspective of the image crisis faced by politicians, offering an interesting research perspective. The text by Ewa Jurga-Wosik and Inga Oleksiuk focuses on the Reliability and Objectivity of Journalists from the lens of the citizens' right to information. Rafał Leśniczak describes the relationship between politics and religious web portals, which actively participate in political debates. Monika Kaczmarek-Śliwińska examines the spread of fake news on social media and its influence on politics. The 2020 presidential campaign of Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska became the subject of two separate studies presented in the volume: one by Weronika Świerczyńska-Głownia, Jan Wieczorek, and Tomasz Walkowiak, who focused on media coverage of the candidate's campaign, and another by Monika Wawer, who analyzed gender stereotypes in media discourse around the female candidate in the 2020 presidential elections.

This collection explores numerous subjects related to the interplay between media and politics in Poland, spanning from historical developments in the 19th century to contemporary issues of media integrity and social influence. It offers an examination of the evolution of Polish media through different political regimes, describing key challenges, resistance strategies, and the changing role of journalists over time. With its interdisciplinary approach and diverse perspectives, the book provides valuable insights into how media has shaped, and has been shaped by, societal and political forces across centuries.

This volume offers a captivating journey through Poland's media history. Whether you are a historian, media scholar, or simply curious about the

dynamic relationship between politics and the media, this book provides unique material and thought-provoking reflections. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the history of media in the 19th century, during the interwar period, across Europe, and throughout communist rule. In an era where the media shape perceptions of the world and influence political decisions that impact the future of society, understanding its historical evolution is more vital than ever.

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CULTURAL AUDIOVISUAL HERITAGE FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD AND EUROPEAN COMPETITIVENESS

REVIVING, BOOSTING, OPTIMISING, AND TRANSFORMING EUROPEAN FILM COMPETITIVENESS (REBOOT) WORKSHOP, 22 JANUARY 2025, 15:00–19:00 ZACHĘTA – NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, CINEMA ROOM, STANISŁAW MAŁACHOWSKI SQUARE 3, 00-916 WARSAW

On January 22, 2025, the Cinema Hall of Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki (The Zachęta National Gallery of Art) in Warsaw hosted a workshop titled „Cultural Audiovisual Heritage for the Public Good and European Competitiveness" to discuss the film and media industry. The aim was to explore how various European film markets operate with a focus on the making of film policies and the role of public institutions in supporting the film industry.

Researchers in the REBOOT project consortium organised the event in collaboration with their peers from both the Public Service Media in an Age of Platforms (PSM-AP) project and the Zachęta, alongside the Creative Europe Desk Poland and FINA – National Film Archive – Audiovisual Institute. This workshop was part of the REBOOT (Reviving, Boosting, Optimising, and Transforming European Film Competitiveness) project funded by the European Commission under Horizon Europe. Katharine Sarikakis, University of Vienna, leads the REBOOT. For more information about the project, please visit https://thereboot-project.eu/.This three-day REBOOT Horizon Europe workshop in Warsaw was held under the aegis of the Knowledge Exchange, setting the scene for public service media to thrive in the Age of Platforms.

The goal of Poland's REBOOT workshop was to support the audiovisual and film industries by bringing together scholars, filmmakers, producers, and key state institutions. Participants discussed the concepts of Public Good and European Competitiveness in the context of global media platforms. The REBOOT initiative focused on research, societal impact, and policy-making contributions aimed at exploring the audiovisual heritage of Poland and Europe. Additionally, REBOOT sought to enhance access to archives from the pre-internet era, addressing the integration of production and distribution.

The workshop began promptly at 3:00 p.m on January 22, 2025. Approximately 60 people attended the workshop, actively engaging in the debate for almost two hours. The workshop, structured as a debate, was led by Michał Głowacki

from the University of Warsaw, who heads the Polish research team for the REBOOT project. Several experts participated in the discussion, including Tadeusz Kowalski from the National Broadcasting Council, Jacek Mikucki from the University of Warsaw, Gentiana Ramadani from the University of Vienna, Fernando Ramos Arenas from Complutense University of Madrid, Elżbieta Wysocka-Koerber from the National Film Archive – Audiovisual Institute (FINA), and Anita Zawisza from the University of Warsaw. Unfortunately, just before the event, Elżbieta Wysocka-Koerber cancelled her participation, so five panellists took part in the debate.

Photo 1. Cultural Audiovisual Heritage for the Public Good and European Competitiveness Workshop. Author: Paweł Brzeziński (UW).

The event started with a welcome address by Michal Glowacki, who provided a brief overview of the workshop and the objectives of the Reboot research project. The guests were then welcomed by the Dean of the Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies, Dariusz Kuźmina, as well as Agnieszka Pindera, the Director of the Zachęta National Gallery of Art, and Malgorzata Kiełczewska, the Director of Creative Europe Desk Poland. These institutions, along with the National Film Archive – Audiovisual Institute (FINA), were co-organizers of the event. Following a brief introduction of the panellists by Michal Glowacki, the expert debate segment of the meeting commenced.

The debate began with a critical question, posed by Michal Glowacki, aimed at offering a modern understanding of competitiveness in the film market.: "Let's try to speak about the lenses of today's competitiveness. What does the competitive mean to you in terms of film, audio, visual and in terms of history?

Gentiana Ramadani emphasised that defining the concept of competitiveness in today's rapidly changing world, influenced by technology, is challenging. This is the reason the Reboot project was initiated, aiming to redefine this concept and understand the dynamics of the contemporary film industry. Focusing

on the European film market, Ramadani pointed out that competitiveness relies on finding a balance between regulation and creativity. She also highlighted the importance of a shared understanding of competitiveness and public good among both filmmakers and audiences. Fernando Ramos Arenas noted that contemporary film competitiveness should be viewed from a historical perspective to identify both commonalities and differences. It's important to remember that the film industry is constantly evolving, affecting film production, distribution, and exposure. Consequently, the concept of competitiveness in the film market has also changed, taking into account the cultural and social differences among various film markets worldwide. Arenas also referenced research findings to support his points: "We started the conversation with our stakeholders with this idea of asking them about competitiveness, and we ended usually talking about sustainability." Thus, it is crucial to maintain a balanced presentation of content in the era of global streaming platforms such as Netflix. Jacek Mikucki pointed out the multiplicity and diversity of film markets, which also makes it difficult to have one holistic definition of competitiveness in the audiovisual sector: "Plenty of people from South America are coming to Europe to study, for example, film direction, camera operation and so on but in the end, they don't follow exactly the same path which Europe promotes." Thus, the concept of competitiveness should be considered through the lens of regions around the world.

Tadeusz Kowalski, an audiovisual policymaker for more than 40 years, stressed that due to his experience and knowledge, it is extremely difficult to define contemporary competitiveness in the film industry saying: "I think that we had to think about a very wide concept of competitiveness." He noted that at the end of the day, all film entities are competing to keep the attention of audiences, which in turn affects economic competition in the film market. This emphasis on the audience's role in shaping competitiveness not only underscores their importance but also makes them feel valued and influential in the industry. Anita Zawisza spoke about the important role of diversity in the film industry: "When it comes to the stakeholders, when it comes to the subject of the movie, of the TV series, it is very important to remember about diversity." She pointed out that the largest markets in the world are the US and China. Especially the film market in China has a completely different approach to competitiveness, because they don't consider the European or American market, due to China's internal values and policies, which differ from those of, for example, Europe. Besides, the target group is the Chinese citizens themselves, and it is for them that film policy is created.

Later in the conversation, Fernando Ramos Arenas referred to the enormous role of new communications solutions: "you have this aspect concerning production of the huge impact of VOD platforms, which amasses automation you have like this useful suspects over production, huge impact of the VOD platforms,

it amasses automation." He added that Hollywood productions heavily influence the European film market, consequently competitiveness is often only considered by these two film markets. In turn, Tadeusz Kowalski cited data showing the European market's significant role, which in 2023 produced 3300 films. He also pointed out that an average of 30 feature-length films are produced annually in Poland. Ramos Arenas acknowledged the problem in film distribution by independent filmmakers: "if you talk to them, to the producers, they may be independent producers, and they may say that's a problem of distribution, or people are not reaching the audiences because somebody's not making the job correctly." Gentiana Ramadani, on the other hand, pointed out the key role of film policies, especially European ones: "European countries provide a lot of support, of course, to their film industries, but they are motivated from an economic perspective as well. Cultural objectives and this are related." Ramadani stressed that film policies depend on cultural factors and the government's understanding of them. In doing so, she cited the example of Austria, which is in the top five European countries that subsidise the film industry with public funds. She attributed the reasons for this result to the film industry's sustainable support programs: "There are twenty-two public funding institutions in Austria, with six operating at the national level and sixteen at the regional level."

Photo 2. Cultural Audiovisual Heritage for the Public Good and European Competitiveness Workshop. Author: Paweł Brzeziński (UW).

Although a debate between the experts and the audience was scheduled for the second part of the debate the latter group had already started asking questions during the first part. A Polish film producer who was curious about the Netflix data posited: "It's a question about the methodology you used for your financial data, and I was actually really intrigued by what Professor Kowalski said". The producer added that Netflix invests large sums of money to produce films and series in Poland, perhaps even more than in other European countries. One reason

may be the existence of the large audience market (38 million citizens) in Poland. Tadeusz Kowalski noted that Netflix is reluctant to share its statistics. Still, based on conversations with policymakers and Netflix employees, it can be concluded that the streaming platform's annual budget is larger than the public budget dedicated to the development of the film industry in Poland. A media researcher from Romania, Ioana Avadani from The Center for Independent Journalism, spoke next, outlining the experience of the film industry in Romania. Ioana Avadani also referred to the creative process itself, which has changed, citing the example of a Romanian film shot with a smartphone. She noted that technological changes affect not only the film industry but also the media industry: "Photojournalism failed. The Chicago Tribune got rid of all the photo departments because reporters can take pictures with their phones. Secondly, we were so happy to support citizen journalism, but now it blows-up in our faces." With that, Avadani started discussing the role of information and communication technologies, which radically affect the labour market.

Anita Zawisza raised the issue of following new generations and their ways of using media tools: "TikTok, social media in general, video platforms, that's all changing. We are living in platform driven landscapes." Jacek Mikucki added that the Reboot project is also studying the preferences of young people – generation Z. The study is at the stage of developing results, but one visible results is the use of smartphones to watch all kinds of audiovisual content, including VOD platforms. So, one can see a shift from using large screens to the mobile and compact screens that smartphones offer. Mikucki also stressed the significant role of special effects in films, which are often expected by young filmgoers.

Michal Glowacki then steered the conversation towards the role of European cultural heritage in the field of European film. He also referred to the process of archiving audiovisual productions in the era of digitisation, which may also affect the dissemination of national films in the online sphere. Tadeusz Kowalski mentioned the difficulties of digitising films due to the copyrights of filmmakers as well as co-creators, for example, in the area of film music. He said: "If you want to do anything with old films, silent film is the one," highlighting the legal problem associated with digital archiving. Fernando Ramos Arenas referred to the key role of cultural institutions that are responsible for the dissemination and digitisation of film heritage. Given the development of streaming platforms, digitising older audiovisual productions is advisable. He added that access to digital cultural heritages for the public is important. In turn, Gentiana Ramadani stressed the important role of public service media in film exposure: "Public service media should distribute films that reflect societal challenges and identities and values, and of course, serving the public interest. It's very important."

The audience also spoke in the last part of the debate in discussions with the panellists. One of the questions was asked by Milica Pesic, director of the Media

Diversity Institute from the UK, who pointed out that film diversity in Europe is very culturally diverse. In doing so, she gave the example of the UK, which culturally differs significantly from continental Europe. Jacek Mikucki also said that budgets for film productions vary considerably due to the economic situation in each country. He cited the results of a survey, which indicates that Polish producers have to save on many elements when making a film, citing the term "Ikea Glass productions," which was used by a respondent during the study. Mikucki said: "We want to make better quality movies, but the reality is different." He added that one solution is international co-productions, which increase the quality and value of films and foster European ties.

Another audience member, Alicja Waszkiewicz-Raviv of Warsaw University, referred to the younger audience: "About creating a link between this tension of technology that we see as accessible for youngsters (while) their approach to movies is something else." She also emphasised the role of film education among young people. Later in the debate, Bissera Zankova of the Media 21 Foundation from Bulgaria spoke, stressed the need for audiovisual education for young people. She also referred to the key role of public service media in distributing and exposing films. She noted that Hollywood productions often dominate many European public service media. In contrast, public service media should follow their principles and values more closely, promoting indigenous and European productions. One of the last to speak was Tadeusz Kowalski, who summed up the debate with the following sentence: "I think that maybe we should also bear in mind that it's not only about competitiveness. It's also about the protection of diversity, of language, of history, of culture, of each generation."

The debate moderator, Michal Glowacki, thanked all the workshop participants and panellists for coming and sharing their knowledge and experience. After the event, all participants were invited to a short tour with a curator of the art collection at Zachęta – National Gallery of Art. Then, it was time for networking and sharing insights. Participants and panellists had a lively discussion, expanding on the topics raised during the debate.

The workshop was an excellent place for practitioners, academics, researchers, policymakers, and workers from the film industry who want change and improve the film industry in Europe to come together. The arrival of people from public institutions that support film production, filmmakers, researchers, and experts from the audiovisual sector created a common and safe space for presenting research results and exchanging insights on good and bad practices in the creation of audiovisual productions.

Jacek Mikucki
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND

THREE PUBLICATIONS NOMINATED FOR THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY KAROL JAKUBOWICZ AWARD 2025

Three outstanding scholarly publications have been shortlisted for the 2025 edition of the Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award.

On April 7, 2025, the Selection Committee reviewed proposals submitted for the 8th edition of the Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award, which honors significant academic contributions to media systems, policies, ethics, and public service media. Members of the Leadership team of the International Association of Public Service Media Researchers (IAPMR), Editors, and Associate Editors of "Central European Journal of Communication" (CEJC), previous Award winners and the Selection Committee submitted scholarly contributions published in 2024 and 2025.

The Committee assessed submissions based on three interrelated criteria:
- methodological correctness,
- contribution to media knowledge,
- impact on democratic society.

Based on this evaluation, the following works and authors have been nominated for the 2025 edition of the Award:

VÁCLAV ŠTETKA & SABINA MIHELJ (2024). THE ILLIBERAL PUBLIC SPHERE: MEDIA IN POLARIZED SOCIETIES. CHAM, SWITZERLAND: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN.
Nominated for their unique perspective in research on media, communication, human rights, and democracy, as well as for their meticulous analysis of the role of media in the rise of illiberalism, based on original theoretical frameworks and extensive empirical research conducted in Eastern Europe.

MARIUS DRAGOMIR (2025). MEDIA CAPTURE MONITORING REPORT. VIENNA, AUSTRIA: INTERNATIONAL PRESS INSTITUTE (REPORT CO-AUTHORED WITH ZSUZSA DETREKÖI).
Nominated for the originality and thoroughness of his research, offering a systematic and pioneering perspective on media ownership, regulatory frameworks, and the complex relationship between media and politics.

TALES TOMAZ (2024). MEDIA OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL IN EUROPE: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH. EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION, 39(5), 498–511. HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1177/02673231241270994
Nominated for his theoretical and methodological contribution to research on media ownership transparency by applying a broader understanding of media control that goes beyond public policy and market structures.

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Established in 2018 by Małgorzata Semil-Jakubowicz and the Polish Communication Association, the Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award commemorates the legacy of Dr. Karol Jakubowicz, a prominent scholar in media and democratic communication. The winner of the 2025 Award along with the justification are announced publicly on April 28th – marking the anniversary of Dr. Jakubowicz's passing. For more information, please visit the Polish Communication Association's website: https://www.ptks.pl/en/awards/the-media-and-democracy-karol-jakubowicz-award.

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