



The Illiberal Turn?

News Consumption, Political
Polarization and Democracy
in Central and Eastern Europe:

First Annual Report

May 2019 – April 2020

The Illiberal Turn: 1st year report

May 2019 – April 2020

In accordance with the project's timeframe, the first year of The Illiberal Turn has been devoted predominantly to an intensive process of data collection within the first two work packages: WP1, a quasi-experiment conducted during the European Parliament election campaign in the Czech Republic, and WP2, a comparative study conducted in all four countries of our sample.

This report summarizes the research process so far (including dissemination and impact-related activities), highlights some of the most interesting findings and outlines plans for the second year.

Key takeaways from the report:

- Results from WP1 – **exposure to immigration-related news on commercial television** and on news websites was related to the **higher likelihood of voting for populist parties** and to worsening of attitudes towards immigrants; consumption of **public service TV improved attitudes towards immigration**, and made people less likely to vote for Eurosceptic parties;
- The qualitative strand of WP1 revealed a **significant role of chain emails as sources of (anti-immigration) news**, especially among older participants, and also pointed to the relative diversity of sources among people with strong anti-immigration views (contrary to the notion that their media diet is restricted to a handful of sources);
- WP2 revealed **correlation between consumption of news media that are captured by the government** (especially public service media in Poland and Hungary) and **illiberal attitudes of their audiences** (towards democracy, immigration, Muslims, gay marriage); their audiences are also inclined towards **believing in conspiracy theories**;
- Data suggest a link between **consumption of disinformation and ultra-conservative media, and support for authoritarianism** of their audiences across the sample;
- The qualitative strand of WP2 data collection partially adapted to the COVID-19 situation, by adding questions on the **news consumption habits of the participants during the pandemic**.

Please quote as: Stetka, V., Mihelj, S. and Toth, F. (2020) The Illiberal Turn? News Consumption, Political Polarization and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: First Annual Report, May 2019 – April 2020, Loughborough University.

WP1 – Quantitative strand

The work on the first work package had to commence even before the official launch of the project, in order to prepare for data collection right at the beginning of the May 2019.

Following the signing of a contract with the Czech polling company Median, we distributed the first wave of our questionnaire to the panel of 981 respondents, whose news consumption habits were at the same time being tracked by Median on a continuous basis via state-of-the-art, cross-media consumption measurement technology called adMeter.¹ The same respondents were again surveyed in the second wave, immediately after the EP election date. Parallel with this, 30 respondents were selected for a qualitative strand of this work package, consisting of two waves of semi-structured interviews (before and after the election), complemented by media diaries that were filled out over the same time period. We were also able to gain access to a dataset of over 17,000 news stories published or aired over the course of the studied period in more than 300 Czech news outlets and websites, to establish what kind of content our respondents were exposed to (though we did not carry out a full content analysis).

Overall, the research has been driven by the main RQ: How did news consumption and exposure to both general and specific media content impact on political attitudes and voting behaviour during the 2019 EP election campaign?

Following this research design, we collected several sets of data which were subsequently cleaned and analysed over the summer months. The quantitative analysis has so far focused on the impact of news consumption during the 3-week campaign period

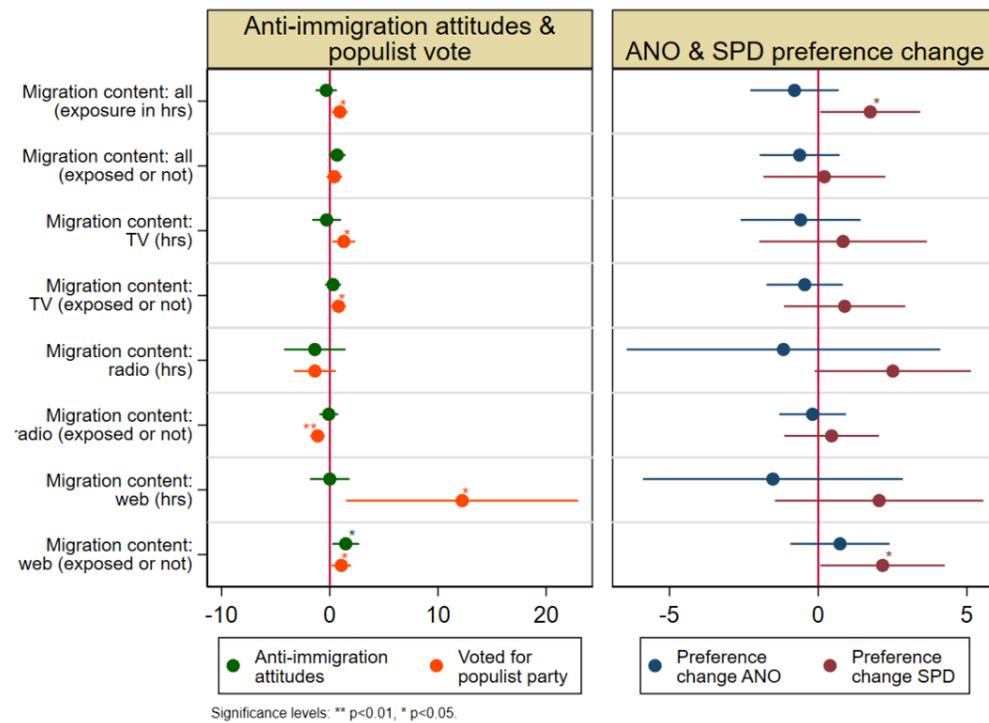
and a) attitudes to immigration; b) attitudes towards the European union; in both cases combined also with electoral behaviour in the 2019 EP elections. These two topics were selected mainly because they are both an important part of the agenda of the Czech populist parties (rallying against immigration and being critical of the EU), and we expected them to feature prominently in the 2019 EP election campaign.

What did we find?

Our data suggest that **certain types of media diet can have an effect on the attitudes towards immigrants**, as well as on the electoral choices and affinity towards populist parties:

- higher **exposure to commercial television** proved to be related to the **higher likelihood of voting for populist parties**, and particularly for the far-right anti-immigration Freedom and Direct Democracy party; this is in line with existing research suggesting the link between commercial television and populism;
- on the other hand, **consuming more public service television** over the course of the campaign was linked to **less negative attitudes to immigration** at the end of the campaign;
- consuming **migration-related news** (especially on commercial TVs and on mainstream news websites) was associated with higher chances of voting for populist parties, and with a hardening of the anti-immigration stances of their viewers; but **consumption of migration news from PSM television was linked to reduced anti-immigration prejudices** at the end of the campaign;
- contrary to our expectations, with **diversity of outlets** our respondents used during the campaign – across platforms, and online sources in particular – **appeared to increase anti-immigration attitudes and chances of voting for a populist party**

¹ AdMeter is a mobile phone application (synchronized with other devices such as PC, laptop or tablet) that, apart from tracing consumption of online sources (websites and social media), constantly listens to its surroundings and sends the recorded data (in an encrypted format) to a server that is simultaneously processing samples from live streaming of the major Czech television and radio stations. The two data sources (from adMeter and from radio/TV streaming) are subsequently matched and analysed by the computer which then determines whether or not was the respondent exposed to the particular channel.



This graph shows that exposure to migration-related news content is a significant predictor of voting for populist party (ANO or SPD); particularly on TV and on news websites, both of which also increase the anti-immigration attitudes.

When it comes to the other stream of quantitative analysis, focusing on the impact of news exposure on EU attitudes and votes in the 2019 EP elections, the results have been more fragmented and less conclusive; this might have been affected by an overall low exposure to EU-related content (according to the adMeter data, people have on average been exposed to less than 20 news items that dealt with the EU). We did not observe any significant changes in the assessment of EU performance, and neither the intensity of exposure to news nor the diversity of sources has played any role in terms of the impact on EU attitudes or voting for Eurosceptic parties. The EU-related media content did not affect EU attitudes or voting patterns either. Notwithstanding the notorious Euroscepticism which the Czech public is generally known for and which some of the parties tried to play into, the EP election campaign did not seem to have influenced the already established attitudes and voting preferences; very much the sole exception was the finding that **more intense public service TV exposure made it less likely to vote for Eurosceptic party**. Overall, however, both the low exposure to EU-related news, and their low impact on audiences that we measured over the 3-week period can be interpreted as broadly

confirming the “second-order” status of the EP elections, which traditionally does not manage to attract a comparable level of attention by the voters and media as the national elections.

Nevertheless, while there has been little evidence of changing attitudes, we have still established some interesting correlations between news media consumption and political opinions as well as media trust, e.g.

- Czech **public service media audiences** tend to be **centrist / moderate in their political views**; a higher intensity of consumption is linked with being more conservative;
- **heavy consumers of Czech public service media evaluate EU membership more positively**, and do not want to have a referendum about EU membership; they also **have more positive attitudes to democracy, higher general trust in media, and lower trust in social media**;
- **more intense consumption of hyperpartisan / disinformation servers is associated with less importance attributed to living in democracy**, with lower trust in media, with more negative views of EU membership, and with more demands for EU referendum.

WP 1 – Qualitative strand

As part of the qualitative strand of WP1 we conducted two waves of qualitative interviews with 30 participants – one just before the start of the EP election campaign, and the second after the election. The participants were also asked to keep a media diary for the duration of the campaign.

The analysis conducted so far focused primarily on how citizens form decisions over which news to trust, how and where they encounter news on immigration, as well as highlighted some important news sources and habits not adequately captured by surveys and data tracking.

Highlights include:

- The analysis revealed several **different attitudes to media trust**, associated with different practices of news consumption. Three findings are worth highlighting. First, a significant group of participants shared a **general distrust of all media**, combined with a sense of anxiety and disorientation, and a reluctance to trust any publicly disseminated information, including news disseminated by public service media and press agencies (see Extract 1). Often such attitudes were coupled with trust in social media and/or (identifiable) disinformation sources.
- Second, for a significant group of (older) participants, **attitudes to media trust and views on disinformation are shaped by historical experiences with communist media**; such participants typically associate disinformation with tabloid media and often do not understand

how disinformation operates in a digital and commercial media environment.

- Third, the most common strategy for navigating the complexity of the contemporary media landscape is **trust in particular news brands**, typically public service media or news outlets associated with reputable, independent owners.

Extract 1: General distrust of the media

Interviewee 4.2:

“You know, I don’t know whom to believe. I even had a discussion with my friend’s daughter who claimed that the sources I used are not credible and she sent me via Messenger a list of three types of sources, from the most trustworthy, to the relatively trustworthy to those that are not trustworthy at all.

According to this, I should not read Parlamentní listy and if I need to find out the truth about something I should go to Aktuálně or Deník, which she evaluated as the most trustworthy. But the reality is, I don’t know whom to believe, and what to believe.”

Interviewee 28.1:

“Well, any information can be fake, intentional disinformation. Even the Czech Press Agency can publish news which is biased.”

WP2 – Quantitative strand

- Both interviews and diaries drew attention to the role of e-mail as a source of (anti-immigration) news, especially among older participants, who receive and forward chain emails with news items. Several examples of such emails included anti-immigrant content from unnamed or dubious sources.
- Interviews and diaries also drew attention to the importance of memorable images and videos (shared over social media and email) in shaping anti-immigrant attitudes
- Participants with strong anti-immigrant views who rely on digital news sources are not concerned about the sources of news they consume, or their reliability. They follow the topic, regardless of source. This typically coincides with a poor level of understanding of the digital news economy, e.g. assuming that Google News is a news source comparable with an online newspaper, or a news application of a public broadcaster (see Extract 2).

These results supported our interpretation of quantitative data, as well as informed the design of research instruments for WP2. Time permitting, we will conduct further analysis of qualitative data from WP1 in the second year of the project.

Extract 2: Following the topic, regardless of the source

Interviewee 1.1

Interviewer:

“So even if you find the source unreliable, you still comment on it because you find the topic interesting. Did I understand this correctly?”

Interviewee:

“Yes. I focus on the topic, not on the source”.

Interviewee 7.1

Interviewer:

„When the news pop up in your Google News app, do you look at the source or at the topic?”

Interviewee:

“No. As I have already said, I am not really interested in the source.”

The preparations for the main empirical phase of the project – the comparative quantitative and qualitative study of news consumption and political polarization in all four countries – started over the summer 2019 and were significantly informed by input from the first Stakeholder Meeting in Budapest on 25 September 2019.

The Czech company Median was selected to facilitate the questionnaire distribution in the Czech Republic, and to supervise data collection in the other countries, carried out by NM&S (Hungary, Poland) and Mediana (Serbia). The fieldwork was carried out between 30.11.2020 – 16.1.2020.²

The data analysis has so far focused mostly on comparative descriptive statistics concerning the relationship between consumption of specific news outlets (16 main news channels in each country)³ and the key domains of the survey, namely attitudes to democracy; ideological self-placement; attitudes towards / opinions on polarizing social/cultural issues (immigration; Russian foreign policy; same-sex marriage); exposure to disinformation & belief in conspiracy theories; and media trust.

What did we find?

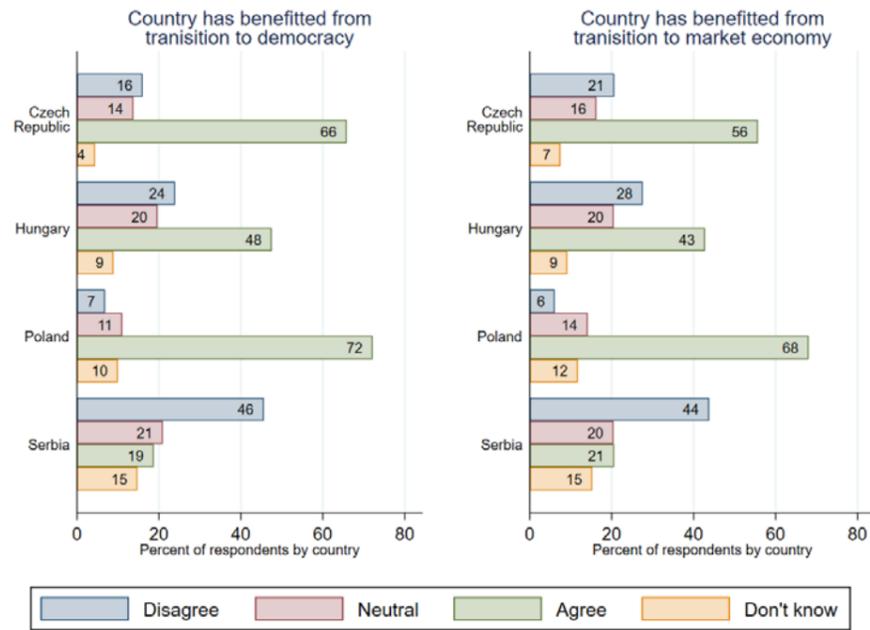
Descriptive statistics – key variables⁴:

- **Democracy still remains preferred as a political system** by the majority of population in all countries; the statement “Democracy is preferable to any other form of political system” is most supported in Poland (69%), followed by the Czech Republic (61%), Hungary (59%) and Serbia (58%); preference for authoritarian government over democracy (“under some circumstances”) is the highest in the Czech Republic (24%), the lowest in Poland (19%);
- When it comes to opinions on **transition to democracy after 1989**, the **majority of Czechs (66%) and Poles (72%) agree that it has benefited the country**; Hungarians are more split (48% agree), while **more Serbs disagree (46%) than agree (19%)**; similar patterns are observed for the opinions about their country’s benefit from the transition to market economy;

² In all countries the survey was based on a representative quota sampling, combining online and face-to-face interviews (70:30), the sample size was between 1001 (Hungary) and 1042 (Czech Republic).

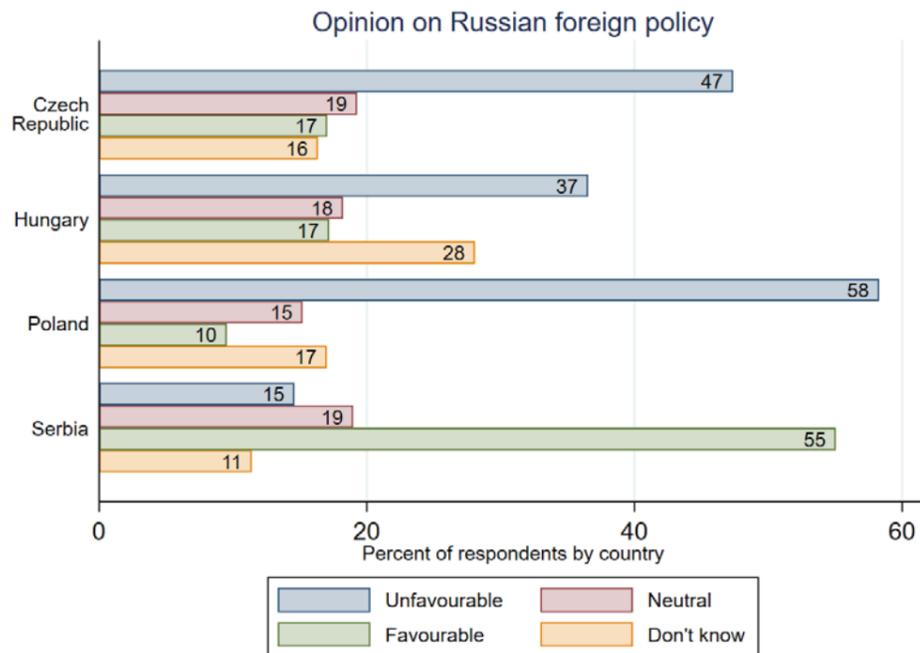
³ As the adMeter technology for cross-media consumption measurement, used in WP1, is only available in the Czech Republic at the moment, news consumption in the WP2 survey was measured as self-reported use of specific news media outlets.

⁴ The data have been weighted by age, gender, education and region.



- Only in Poland, the majority of people display unfavourable opinions on Russia's foreign policy (58%, vs 10% favourable); more Czechs and Hungarians are critical than those who are supportive, but with a large proportion of "neither/nor" + "don't know" (35% and 46%, respectively), while the % of answers in Serbia are inverse to those in Poland – more than 50% of Serbs assess Russia's policy favourably, and only 15% are critical of it;

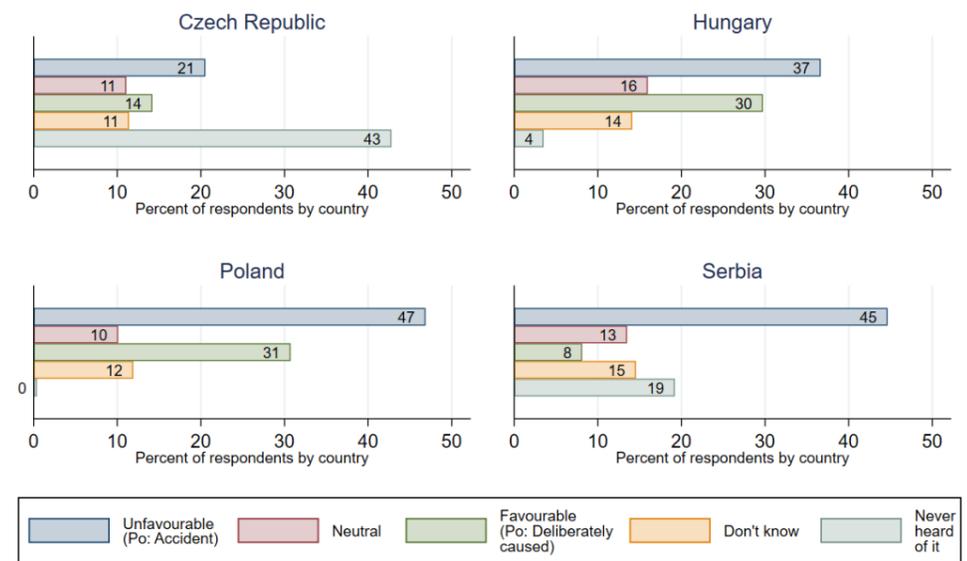
- Same-sex marriage is only supported by Czechs (and overwhelmingly so – 58% vs. 29%), while more Serbs (71%), Poles (48%) and Hungarians (42%) are against it than those who are not (16% / 36% / 40%);



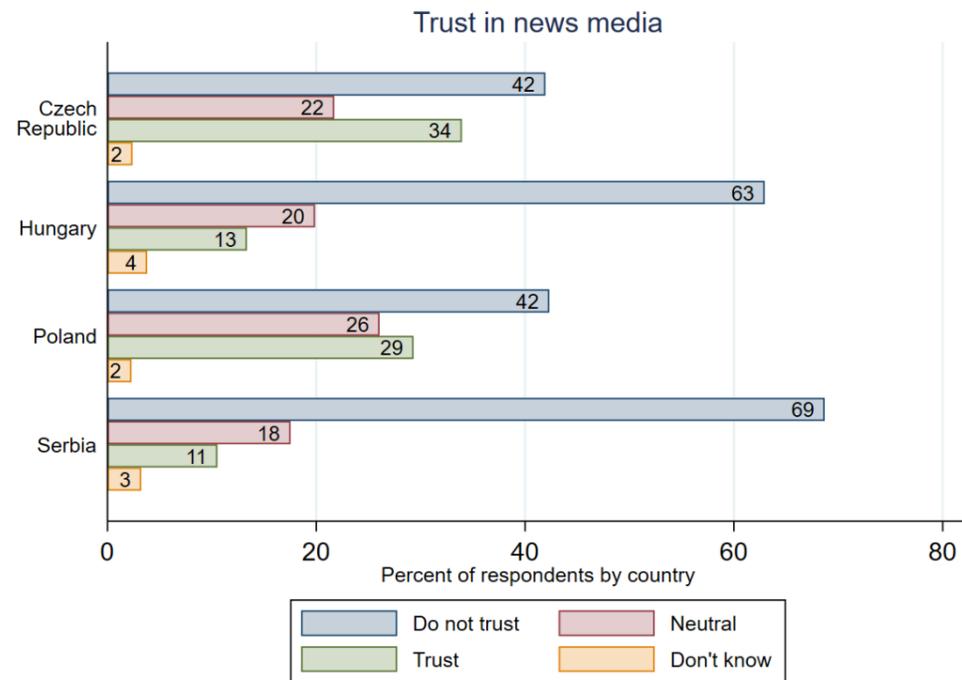
- Similarly, the prejudices against LGBT people are the strongest in Serbia, where 45% of people would mind having gay or lesbian neighbours (in all other countries the majority would not mind, led by Czechs – 75%);
- People in Serbia are also opposed to having immigrants as neighbours (59% would mind, followed by the Czech Republic with 56% and Hungary with 51%); for Czechs, having Muslims as neighbours is most unacceptable (opposed by 60%), closely followed by Roma (57%), which is very similar to Hungary;

- For conspiracy theories, we have taken opinions on George Soros as a proxy in three out of the four countries; the opinions are most unfavourable in Serbia (45%), followed by Hungary (37%) and the Czech Republic (21%, however 43% of Czechs said they have never heard of him); in Poland we asked about people's opinion on the 2010 Smolensk air crash, which 47% believe was an accident and 31% believe it was deliberately caused by someone;

Conspiracy theories Opinion on George Soros (Cz, Hu, Srb) Smolensk air crash (Po)



- With regards to **generalized news media trust**, the difference between people who trust media and those who don't is the biggest in Serbia (11% vs 69%), followed by Hungary (13% vs 63%) and Poland (29% vs 42%), while in the Czech Republic the difference is the smallest (34% trust vs 42%).

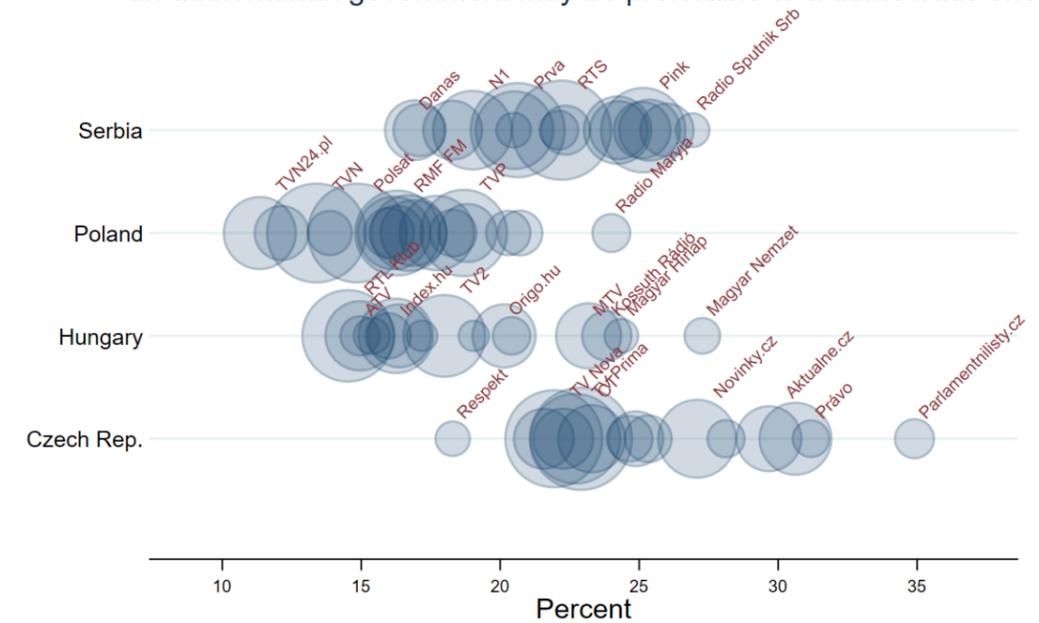


The relationship between news sources and political attitudes

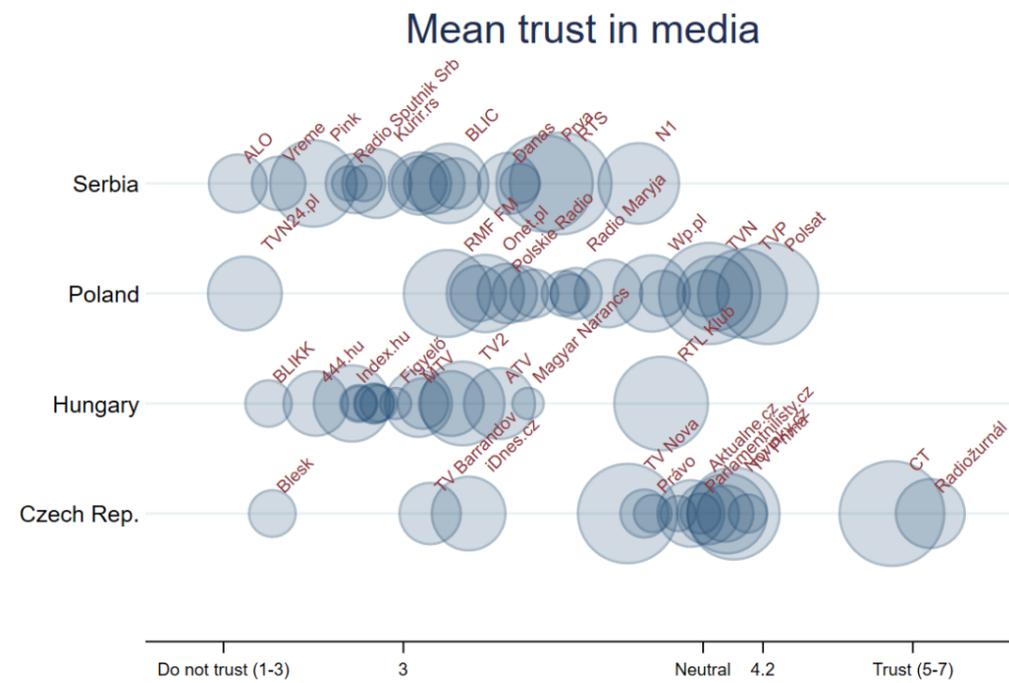
The analysis is still at a preliminary stage, mostly consisting of descriptive statistics. From the outcomes so far we can highlight that:

- There is a **correlation between consumption of news media that are captured by the government** (especially public service media in Poland and Hungary) and **illiberal attitudes of their audiences** (towards democracy, immigration, Muslims, gay marriage); their audiences are also inclined towards **believing in conspiracy theories**;
- Most **support for authoritarianism** has been found by **audiences of disinformation and ultra-conservative media** (Radio Sputnik Serbia, Parlamentnilisty.cz; Radio Maryja in Poland);
- In the Czech Republic, public service media are the most trusted ones (by far), while in Serbia, Poland and Hungary, it is the private/oppositional media that are trusted more than PSM;

Percentage of people who think that under some circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one



WP 2 – Qualitative strand



As mentioned, the correlation analysis and data modelling are still ongoing. Further analysis will also be focusing on perceived media bias; relationship between news channels use and with voting behaviour; as well as on media repertoires (multiplicity of news sources / news diets) and political attitudes.

At the next stage of analysis, the data from the population survey will be complemented by data from an **expert survey** that is being completed at the moment; its purpose is to obtain independent assessment of the

ideological position, independence and trustworthiness of the same set of news media channels in each country that the respondents have been evaluating. In each country we have approached 15-20 experts (academics, media NGO representatives, independent analysts and commentators), whose assessments of the news media will be juxtaposed to those of the general public – this way we will be able to better determine the impact of people's own ideological positions and political attitudes on their perceptions of media bias.

At the start of 2020 our project team was joined by four full-time Research Associates whose main task is to collect and analyse qualitative data in the four countries.

Data collection started in February, following an intensive training workshop. The interview protocol was informed by suggestions provided by Advisory Board members in June and by participants of our stakeholder meeting in September. We have recruited 120 participants for the study, 30 in each of the four countries. **Data collection is still ongoing**; we conducted the first wave of qualitative interviews in February, followed by a month of media diaries in March, and we started conducting a follow-up second wave of interviews in April. All interview data is being transcribed and translated into English, to facilitate subsequent comparisons.

The analysis of the **first wave of interviews** is currently under way, and focuses on a range of themes, including: (a) reasons for choosing (or not) particular news sources; (b) media literacy, covering issues such as data literacy, awareness of different forms of disinformation, understanding of media ownership and its impact of news etc.; (c) different types of engagement with news and their importance to participants – including sharing, commenting, comparing, discussing with family and friends. In addition, we also used these interviews to explore a set of answers to survey questions, in order to better understand why participants chose to answer the questions in a particular way, and how they understood some of the key terms used in the survey (e.g. 'news', 'conservative', 'liberal' etc.).

The media diary period unexpectedly coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak, and we were forced to adapt our data collection accordingly, including switching to remote interviewing for the second wave of interviews. Fortunately, most of our

participants were able to continue with their diaries throughout March and during the initial period of lockdown. As a result, the diaries we have collected provide a detailed record of how news habits changed over time from a relatively normal period in early March to the extraordinary period of lockdown, **offering in-depth insight into how citizens have experienced these dramatic changes in their daily lives.**

The **second wave of interviews**, which is currently under way, focuses on topics such as (a) changes in news consumption over the course of the pandemic; (b) preferred information sources used during the pandemic, and reasons for using these sources; (c) awareness of, and attitudes to, conspiracy theories about the pandemic; (c) use of, and attitudes to, official/government communication during the pandemic; (c) perceptions of the impact of the pandemic on the state of democracy. The interviews also included several follow-up questions on selected items from the media diary.

In sum, due to the fact that qualitative data collection coincided with the pandemic, this strand of our research will provide not only important qualitative insights into news consumption habits and their involvement in shaping democratic life, but also elucidate how routine news consumption habits change during a major public emergency. In addition, this strand will also enable us to track the **impact of the pandemic on the state of democracy and media freedom in the region.** In three of our four countries, elites have used the epidemic to impose unnecessarily harsh restrictions on civil liberties, and sought to obstruct the free flow of information and critical debate. The prominence of disinformation and conspiracy theories has increased, and in all of our countries, China quickly emerged as a saviour, while the EU received highly negative coverage.

Dissemination and impact activities

The results of the project (particularly from WP1) have so far been presented at four academic conferences:

- The interim conference of the **Political Communication Section of ECREA** in Poznan, 12-13 September 2019;
- **The International Journal of Press&Politics** conference at Loughborough, 16-17 September 2019;
- **Eight Annual Screen Industries in East-Central Europe Conference**, Prague 23 November 2019
- **Has Eastern Europe really turned away from liberal democracy?** Symposium at the Kings College London, 9-10 March 2020

The project was also promoted at the conference titled “(Last) call for quality journalism”, co-organized by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia and the Council of Europe, which took place in Ljubljana on 28-29 November 2019 and which brought together over 50 media practitioners, regulators, politicians, NGO and media industry representatives. Dr Vaclav Stetka was invited to chair the panel titled “How to win back public trust: ethics, quality, accountability”.

Hosted by the Centre for Media, Data and Society at the Central European University in Budapest, the project’s **first Stakeholder Meeting** took place on 25 September 2019. Apart from our project partners from EPRA and CMPF, the meeting was attended by over a dozen representatives of media regulators, journalistic organizations and media NGOs from all four countries, as well as from the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom and from the Ethical Journalism Network. The meeting gathered ideas for the WP2 research design as well as for the impact activities.

With regards to **academic publications**, we have submitted a paper based on the WP1 findings to a high-ranked journal, and are awaiting the outcomes of the review process right now; other papers are in various stages of preparation.

Plans for the second year

The ongoing COVID19 pandemic has brought additional challenges to our project; however, we are optimistic that it will not derail us from the planned schedule for the second year. We are on course to finish the data collection for the qualitative part of WP2 by May, with the analytical work set to continue until autumn 2020.

In December 2020, the final work package (WP3) will start, integrating and contextualizing both qualitative and quantitative datasets from WP2, and moving towards the final synthesis. In terms of dissemination plans, we will be presenting two papers from our research at the upcoming **International Communication Association** conference in late May 2020 (taking place virtually), and a paper plus special panel were **accepted for the European Communication Conference** organized by ECREA in Braga in October 2020.

In November, two of the project team members should be taking part in the **Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies** in Washington, D.C.

The second Stakeholder meeting is scheduled to take place at the beginning of next year (January or February 2021) in Warsaw, in collaboration with the project partners from Res Publica Nova; the exact date will be decided in the coming months.

The project’s closing conference, which will coincide with the second (and final) Advisory Board meeting, is planned for September 2021.

We would like to thank our partners for their continuing support of the project, and are looking forward to the collaboration over the course of 2020/21!

Please continue to follow the project’s website www.illiberal-turn.eu and our Twitter account [@illiberal_turn](https://twitter.com/illiberal_turn)

Project Team



Dr Václav Štětko
Principal Investigator
V.Stetka@lboro.ac.uk



Professor Sabina Mihelj
Co-Investigator
S.Mihelj@lboro.ac.uk



Dr Katherine Kondor
Research Associate
K.A.Kondor@lboro.ac.uk



Dr Fanni Tóth
Research Associate
F.Toth@lboro.ac.uk



Dr Damian Guzek
Local Research Assistant
damien.guzek@gmail.com



Dr Ana Stojiljkovic
Local Research Assistant
ana.stojiljkovic@gmail.com

Dr Markéta Doležalová
Local Research Assistant
M.Dolezalova@lboro.ac.uk

Contact

Loughborough University
Leicestershire LE11 3TU UK

www.illiberal-turn.eu

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@illiberal_turn