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THE ILLIBERAL PUBLIC SPHERE: MEDIA IN POLARIZED SOCIETIES

Václav Štětka, Sabina Mihelj: *The Illiberal Public Sphere. Media in Polarized Societies, Springer*, Cham 2024, pp. 266.

Democracy theorists have long pointed out that there is an internal split in the concept of liberal democracy between the key principle of democracy, namely the rule of the people (in practice the rule of the majority), and the protection of individual rights and freedoms, which is the basis of liberalism. The success of democracy observed in East-Central Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain is currently being overshadowed by the loss of trust in democratic institutions by societies and the gradual decline in the quality of democracy itself, and even the reversal of the democratization process in some countries. In their latest book, "The Illiberal Public Sphere. Media in Polarized Societies", published by Springer, Václav Štětka and Sabina Mihelj point to three main reasons for this state of affairs: the rise of populism, political polarization, and the changing communication ecosystem, which is characterized, among other things, by the spread of disinformation. The authors, following Ivan Krastev (2020), define the negative trends present in contemporary political communication as illiberalism, indicating that one of the main areas of its spread is East-Central Europe, including Poland, where democracy is not yet as advanced as in the West. In the book, illiberalism is defined as a view that does not reject the basic principles of liberalism, such as freedom, but at the same time does not make this ideology a central element of the organization of the state. Instead, it is characterized by a more extreme, often nationalist approach to statehood, which includes, for example, subordinating the judiciary to the authorities, transforming public media into a tool of pro-government propaganda, or conducting campaigns against alleged 'social enemies', such as migrants and LGBTQ+ people (p. 10–11).

The year 2023 has brought a change at the highest levels of government in some East-Central European countries, including Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia, in which a return to liberal democracy seems to be taking place. However, Štětka and Mihelj believe that the region is still at a crossroads, facing the challenges of illiberalism. The authors aim to reflect on the role that the media have played in the development of illiberalism. This approach has to date remained

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marginal in studies on the decline of liberal democracy, and the reviewed work fills this gap. It consists of nine parts: an introduction, seven chapters, and conclusions. The authors conduct their considerations using several research methods: a case study of four Eastern European countries, i.e. Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Serbia, as well as surveys and interviews conducted among residents of these countries and an analysis of their diaries. The book does not make a clear division into theoretical and empirical parts – instead, Štětka and Mihelj combine the conceptualization of key concepts and a literature review with examples of the issues described, which allows the reader to more easily understand the importance and significance of the issues discussed for contemporary social and political processes.

In the first main chapter, it was assumed as a starting point that illiberalism has three basic features: (1) it is paradoxically related to de facto liberalism; (2) it has a dual nature, i.e. it is both an ideology and a set of practices and institutional arrangements; (3) it has a dynamic nature that changes within a continuous process. The first feature means that illiberalism is both the opposite of liberalism and dependent on it, i.e. it contributes to the erosion of liberal democratic institutions and undermines liberal values, but it does so by relying on the very institutions and values that it tries to question. A clear example of this is the invocation of the concept of "freedom of speech" by those in power to legitimize various forms of hate speech (e.g., targeting minorities), as well as to restrict the freedom of media outlets critical of the government. Second, illiberalism should be understood in two ways: while it is an ideological and symbolic phenomenon (it is based on certain values and beliefs, such as opposition to migration, abortion, or LGBTQ+), it also encompasses various institutional practices and regulations that undermine liberal democracy, such as limiting professionalism and independence of key institutions, including civil services, police, justice, and media, accompanied by increasing government control over them. A third characteristic of illiberalism is its dynamic nature, which, in contrast to liberalism, is static. Illiberalism constantly challenges the liberal democratic status quo and seeks to implement fundamental legislative, institutional, and ultimately social and cultural changes.

On this basis, the authors draw the following definition of the illiberal public sphere: "a communicative space comprising both traditional and new media that promote and amplify illiberal actors, views, and attitudes" (p. 31). In the first, initial stage, it is relatively limited in scope, and its reach extends only to the activities carried out by smaller, peripheral, and dispersed media, as well as by social media users. In the second stage, the illiberal public sphere begins to show signs of a certain dominance and becomes comparable to its liberal counterpart. The means of communication, used by the illiberal actors, become consolidated and often find their way to the media mainstream. There is also a gradual takeover of public media by illiberal authorities, as well as changes in the ownership of previously independent media, which are passing into the hands of oligarchs and other individuals allied with illiberal political actors.

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In the third and final stage, the illiberal public sphere becomes a hegemony that colonizes most of the mainstream news media channels, including primarily public media. Liberal media are typically a marginal segment, primarily limited to online activities, and often foreign-owned.

The chapter continues with a case study of the illiberal public sphere in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Serbia. The most important findings on the situation in Poland will be presented below. The authors see the year 2015 as the turning point, when the Law and Justice Party came to power and Andrzej Duda became president. Since then, many actions have been introduced, which followed the steps previously taken in Hungary, including, first and foremost, the domination of public media: a new body was established in the form of the National Media Council, which was granted regulatory powers over public media, previously held by the National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT). At the same time, the KRRiT itself became gradually politicized and was repeatedly accused of acting in the government's interest. The public broadcaster itself was subordinated to the government – both in terms of content and its ownership and editorial structure. As in Hungary, Polish authorities have also launched attacks on opposition media, as exemplified by the attempt to remove Discovery, the owner of TVN, from the Polish market. Another example of the illiberal actions of the Law and Justice government was the indirect subsidy of media that were sympathetic to it through state advertising (cf. Miżejewski, 2018; Kowalski, 2021; Klimkiewicz, 2023).

In the next chapter, the authors discuss the impact of media polarization on the diverse media content. They present conclusions from their research on media recipients in all four countries, and review the activities of the largest media in individual countries (both traditional and online) in terms of their potential bias and political independence. As a result, the authors assess media polarization, which shows that the most polarized media tend to be in Hungary and Serbia, while in Poland the media landscape remains relatively diverse, although some key outlets tend to be at the ends of the political and ideological spectrum. The authors cite public television as an example of such a medium, but it should be noted that the book generally refers to events before the elections in October 2023, after which the new government significantly rebuilt the public media. However, this takeover also raised legal doubts due to a potential violation of Council of Europe standards (Klimkiewicz, 2024). Moreover, currently, media that fit the definition of the illiberal public sphere, such as the television stations Republika and wPolsce24, tend to be gaining viewers at the expense of the public media, which declared a return to reliability and objectivity (in February 2025, Republika was the most watched news station in Poland, ahead of TVN24 and TVP Info [Pallus, 2025]).

The next two chapters concern the connections between polarization and communication habits, sources of information, and audience's trust in the media. In the face of the progressive degradation of objectivity and reliability of the media, the public is forced to use sources of information that it does not consider

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credible. For some recipients, this becomes a motivation to look for other, more diverse sources, but in numerous instances, it leads to getting used to a one-sided message and closing oneself off to content other than the one coming from the illiberal mainstream media. However, the authors rightly point out that consuming information from different sources is not always beneficial, as exemplified by the multitude of narratives about the war in Ukraine, a significant part of which is disinformation, and their dissemination only strengthens polarization, as Joanna Szostek (2017) wrote about already five years before the Russian full-scale invasion. This issue is further discussed in the next two chapters: the authors focus on the importance of social media in the illiberal public sphere, and then move on to the connections between illiberalism and disinformation. The final chapter includes another case study, this time on the shape of the illiberal information sphere in the face of the challenge of information noise related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the study, the authors conclude that people who express their opinions and engage with political content on social media tend to be more pro-democratic and liberal-oriented, and social media itself may prove to be an important channel for mobilizing opposition activities.

At the same time, however, the authors see threats in social media, including disinformation. Especially in the early stages of illiberalism, the Internet is the primary place where alternative sources of information tend to be disseminated. As the illiberal public sphere enters an advanced phase, disinformation channels diversify and also include some traditional media, especially public media, if these tend to be taken over by an illiberal government, as we have seen in Poland. Finally, when the illiberal public sphere reaches a hegemonic phase, as is the case in Hungary and Serbia, the mainstream media take on the most important role in the dissemination of false content and conspiracy theories, but also create them themselves. Previous research has primarily emphasized the central position of social media in the phenomenon of disseminating disinformation, but according to the authors, this conclusion applies to a greater extent to Western than to Eastern Europe; in the latter, "digital platforms tend to be not necessarily the only—or even the most important—part of the local disinformation ecosystems" (p. 204). Therefore, the authors recommend that fact-checking organizations expand the scope of their activities to check content from traditional media as well, especially in countries with an advanced or hegemonic illiberal public sphere.

The dangers of disinformation, polarization, a decline in trust in the media, and other harmful phenomena in the media ecosystem characteristic of the illiberal public sphere were demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is the subject of the last chapter. The authors conclude that where illiberalism is at its peak, citizens tend to be reluctant to respond to restrictions, information from mainstream media, and expert recommendations, instead seeking knowledge and advice on social media, where they tend to be exposed to false information and conspiracy theories. In Poland, although citizens initially responded to the government's crisis communication with a fairly high level of trust, the situation

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worsened during the vaccination phase, when the far-right Confederation party began to spread conspiracy theories and support anti-vaccination protests. Concerned about losing votes, Law and Justice politicians refrained from explicitly promoting vaccination campaigns, which probably contributed to the fact that vaccination rates in Poland fell behind those in many other European countries (Rachwol, 2023).

The authors are undoubtedly right that the issue of social communication should be much more prominent in research on illiberalism. Štětka and Mihelj skilfully move between the theory of the illiberal public sphere and empiricism, which provides extremely valuable conclusions both from the point of view of further research and recommendations for the media in terms of better counteracting the polarization and erosion of public debate. Among the recommendations proposed by the authors, we can mention: (1) developing standards specifying ways of dealing with divisive content and not deepening polarization; (2) limiting the time and space devoted to actors spreading polarizing content; and (3) focusing more on facts and avoiding showing support for either side of the political scene. At the level of regulation, greater importance should also be assigned to media education, which ought to be introduced not only in schools, but encompass all members of society. In Poland, unlike in Hungary and Serbia, even before October 2023, illiberalism had not reached the peak stage in which it would dominate public life in its entirety. It seems, therefore, that it is not too late for the media to regain the trust of the public across political divides.

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