The Illiberal Public Sphere. Media in Polarized Societies

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While illiberalism has been an extensively researched subject, the role of media and communication in its recent rise has lacked an overarching framework. Moreover, existing research tends to focus on Western countries where illiberalism is emerging, often neglecting countries where it is already firmly established. *The Illiberal Public Sphere: Media in Polarized Societies* explores four Eastern European countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Serbia—each representing a different stage of illiberalism. Building on both quantitative (population and expert survey) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews and media diaries) findings, the book develops a comprehensive framework that demonstrates how illiberal public spheres emerge and evolve in media and political systems.

The concept of the public sphere has long served as a foundation for analyzing political communication and today's social media-dominated environment. However, with the rise of populism, extremism and hostility a key question arises: how can we adapt the concept of the public sphere to account for the more negative, illiberal aspects of society? To answer that, the authors introduce the concept of illiberal public sphere as "*a communicative space comprising both traditional and new media that promote and amplify illiberal actors, views, and attitudes*" (p.31).

Three stages of the illiberal public sphere are defined in Chapter 2: (1) *Incipient stage*, where the scale of illiberalism is relatively limited and confined to a few minor, fringe, or hyper-partisan outlets and political actors; (2) *Ascendant stage*, when the illiberal public sphere expands to rival its liberal counterpart and competes for dominance; and (3) *Hegemonic stage*, which occurs when the illiberal public sphere becomes dominant and forces the liberal public sphere into retreat. The three stages are used throughout the book to emphasize the variation between the selected countries, as well as to challenge the often homogenous or normative assumptions present in current research. This offers a key contribution, by providing a new framework for future media and communication research on populism, polarization, and democratic decline. By applying this framework in future comparative studies, scholars can draw more in-depth conclusions.

The variety of illiberalism is also visible in Chapter 3, which explores how audience media repertoires are shaped not only by personal preferences but also by the structure of the media landscape. In countries where the illiberal public sphere has already reached the hegemonic stage—such as Hungary and Serbia— people increasingly turn to media that reflect their existing beliefs. This is partly because neutral or balanced outlets are largely absent; therefore, no alternatives exist—an issue that became especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, in Poland and especially Czechia, where illiberalism is still in the early stages, audiences tend to consume a more diverse mix of media sources. However, this does not necessarily suggest greater tolerance. Some individuals engage with opposing views not to build understanding, but to prepare counterarguments. These differences across countries underscore the importance of the book's framework, which avoid one-size-fits-

all assumptions and instead emphasizes how different stages of illiberalism shape both the structure of media systems and the ways in which people engage with them. The need to move beyond the normative lens often employed in research is further emphasized in Chapter 4, which focuses on media trust. Trust is often treated as an indicator of a healthy democracy, and its decline is typically viewed by both researchers and policymakers as a democratic threat. However, by comparing Czechia with the other three countries, the authors argue that media trust must be understood in relation to each country's political and media context. For instance, while Czech public service media are still perceived as relatively neutral and independent, Hungarian public service media are largely regarded as mouthpieces for the ruling party. Trust in one, therefore, does not equate to trust in the other. By distinguishing between the stages of illiberalism, the authors prompt us to reconsider how we interpret variables such as trust. Evaluating the situation of specific media—such as their independence or ownership—becomes crucial when looking at media trust as an indicator for democracy.

This exposure and further selection of biased media outlets are then linked to what the authors call a *Spiral of Polarization*. This mutually reinforcing process, occurring at both systemic and individual levels, erodes the neutral center and leads to an even more pronounced selective exposure. Polarization, they argue, has become a business strategy by illiberal political actors as well as sympathetic news media. This trend is examined through two case studies: LGBTQ+ rights and migration. In both areas, illiberal narratives were not only promoted by political figures but also further propelled by a growing number of sympathetic media outlets, leading to the normalization of illiberal attitudes.

Often unable to find trustworthy sources in mainstream media, citizens turn to social media or other online sources for answers. Current research often connects social media use with the dissemination of disinformation as well as the spread of illiberal attitudes. With the recent development of abandoning independent fact-checkers and the reversal of previous disinformation policies, social media organizations are increasingly perceived as a threat to democracy. However, Chapter 6 presents a more nuanced picture. In contexts where official media already promote illiberal views—such as Hungary and Serbia—social media can provide voice to liberal actors, becoming a space of resistance against illiberalism. Therefore, considering the stage of illiberalism is crucial also in social media research. By understanding which stage a country is in, researchers and policymakers can better analyze the dynamics at play and recognize how behaviors shift as illiberalism progresses.

This is also true for the dissemination of mis- and disinformation, which is often perceived as primarily occurring on social media. However, in countries where mainstream media are state-controlled, official channels play a major role in spreading distorted narratives. This was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when citizens relying on traditional broadcasters were exposed to the government's version of events and solutions. The book also draws attention to less-

studied channels, such as chain emails in Czechia, pointing to the need for broader research on how disinformation circulates across different national contexts.

In the end, the authors outline a rather pessimistic future, suggesting that the prospects of reversing illiberalism in countries that have reached the hegemonic stage —such as Hungary and Serbia—are unlikely. But even in countries where liberal actors have recently regained power, the pendulum often swings back, as seen in the U.S. in 2024 and more recently in Poland. In the latter, although a liberal coalition won the parliamentary election under Donald Tusk, the presidency was secured by a candidate with illiberal leanings. In Czechia, which remains on the brink of the incipient stage, the upcoming parliamentary elections will indicate whether the country can maintain its liberal trajectory or if populist forces will return to power. The ongoing popularity of parties like ANO shows that even in opposition, illiberal actors remain vocal, using communication channels not only to criticize their opponents, but also to undermine trust in the political system as a whole.

Although the authors do not propose specific solutions, they offer several recommendations to counter the rise of the illiberal public sphere. In response to the *Spiral of Polarization*, they call for resisting commercial or political strategies that exploit audiences' interest in polarizing content. Concurrently, they emphasize audiences' often-overlooked preference for balanced and neutral reporting. Journalists, especially those in public service media, are encouraged not to give undue space to illiberal actors for the sake of ratings, and to maintain their credibility—particularly on social media. Finally, they advocate strengthening citizens' media literacy and civic competencies, especially among groups often excluded from these conversations.

As illiberalism continues to gain ground globally, this book provides an essential lens for grasping how media systems both reflect and reinforce illiberal values as well as political polarization. Throughout the book, the authors demonstrate how identifying and analyzing the different stages of illiberalism—incipient, ascendant, and hegemonic—helps to reveal the wide variety of effects this phenomenon has on media use, audience trust, and public discourse. The introduced framework is a significant theoretical contribution, but its value extends beyond theory: it offers practical tools for researchers, journalists, and policymakers alike.

For researchers, the stages provide a clearer way to compare different countries and understand how media trust, audience behavior, or polarization unfold in each context. For policymakers, the framework can help identify which countries face similar challenges—or which ones they might wish to avoid emulating—enabling more targeted interventions. Journalists and media professionals can also benefit from this approach. In countries where public service media still enjoy public trust—such as Czechia—efforts can be made to further support and protect these institutions. In more advanced illiberal contexts—such as Hungary—calls to support alternative outlets may be more urgent. By recognizing the stage-specific nature of illiberalism, this book encourages a more targeted and realistic approach to both research and the strengthening of democratic resilience.