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Evidence & lessons from The Illiberal Turn project

56th Annual EPRA meeting, Antalya 13/10/2022

“Dis/Misinformation, Plurality & Trust”

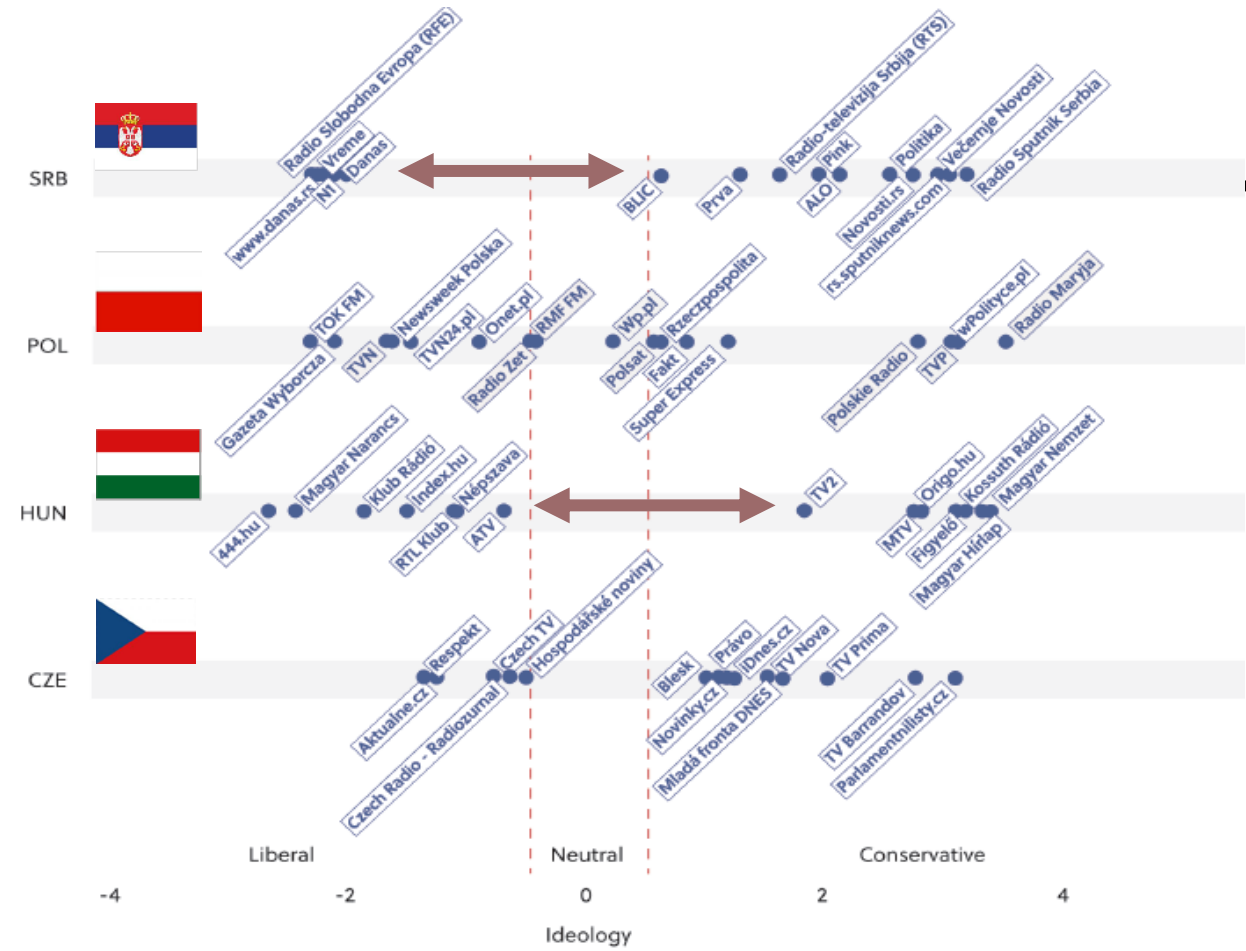
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The Illiberal Turn: News consumption, political polarization and democracy in CEE

- Funded by the ESRC, UK (May 2019 – October 2022)
- Main aim: to carry out the first-ever systematic, comparative study of news consumption and political polarization in Central and Eastern Europe
- Sample: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Serbia
- Multi-method research strategy:
 - population surveys; expert surveys; semi-structured interviews + media diaries; digital tracking of media consumption (CZ only)
 - **data collected between November 2019 – June 2020**
- Project partners including European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and EPRA



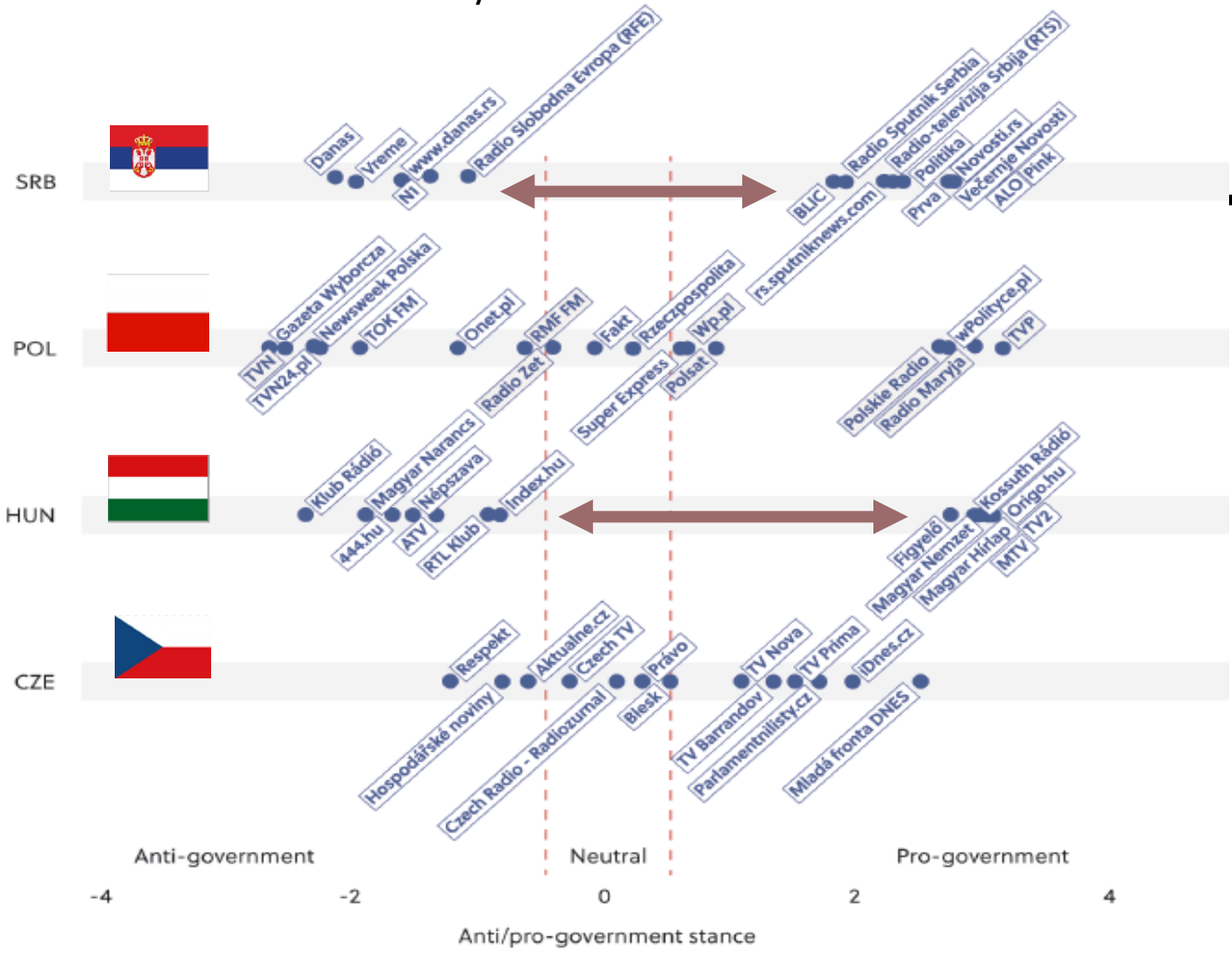
Data collection: March – May 2020



Polarization of cultural values and media systems

- There is a significant **political and cultural polarization** in most countries, as the public is divided on various cultural issues (esp. immigration, LGBTQ)
- Polarization extends to media systems, though **the extent of polarization differs across the region**
 - longer history of democratic backsliding & illiberal tendencies → deeper polarization

Data collection: March – May 2020



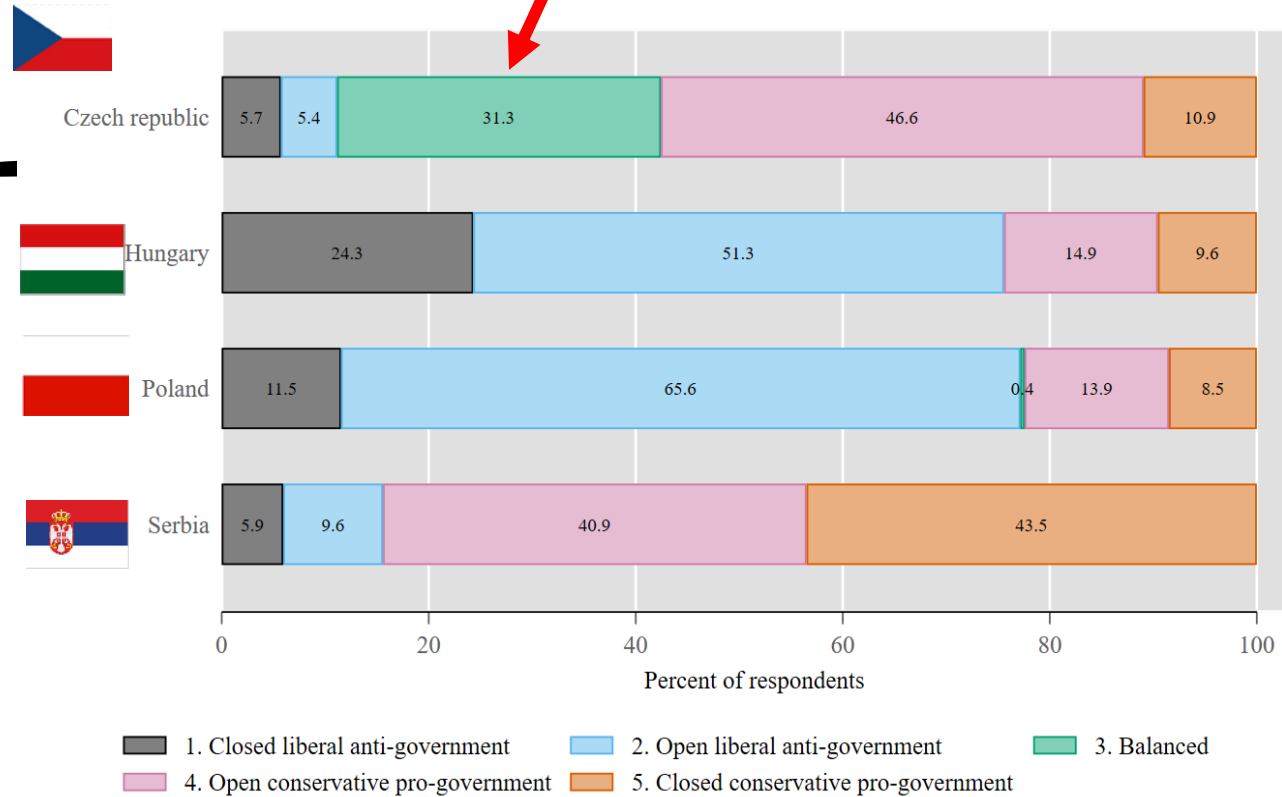
Political polarization

- Strongly polarized media landscape in Serbia and Hungary
- BUT more media brands in the “neutral” zone in Czech Rep. and Poland

Q: “To what extent would you say the following media outlets cover the news in a neutral way, or in a way that is anti- or pro-government?”

Audience polarization: news repertoires

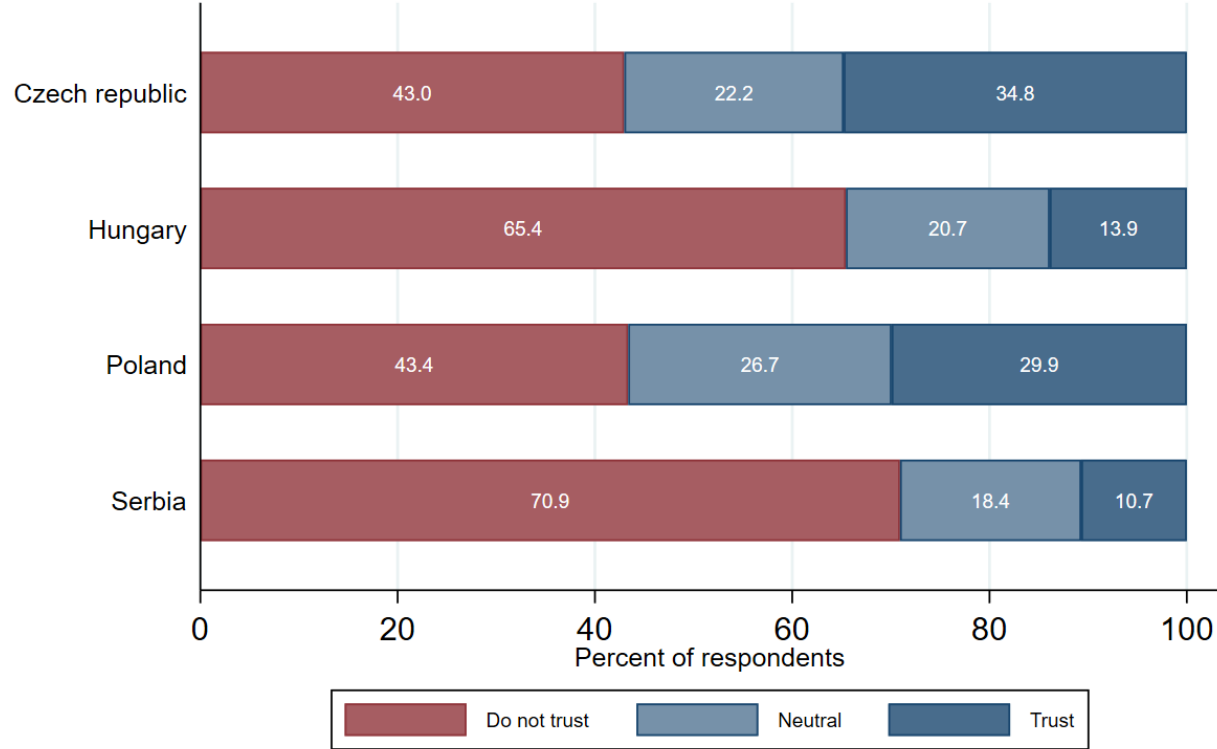
- Media repertoires – “the entirety of media a person regularly uses” (Hasebrink and Dörmeyer 2012)
- 5 media repertoires, distinguished by the extent of their political/ideological homogeneity or heterogeneity
- Czech Republic: The only country with a sizeable proportion of audiences with a balanced news repertoire



Notes: Weights for demographics applied.

Data collection: November 2019 – January 2020
(population survey); – March – May 2020 (expert survey)

To what extent do you trust following institutions in your country?
News Media - 3 categories



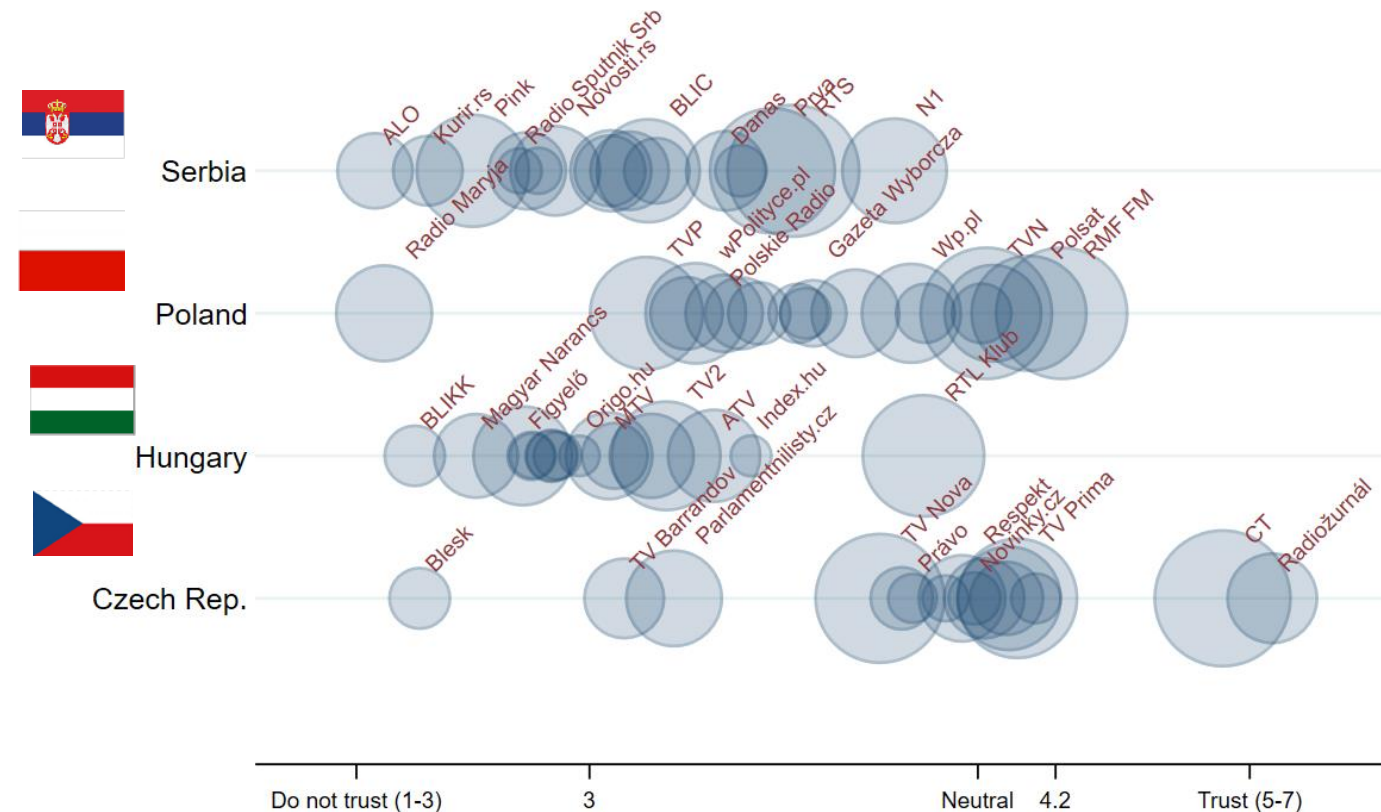
Do not trust = 1-3; Neutral = 4; Trust = 5-7
Percentages weighted by demographics

Polarization & generalized media trust

- Trust in media is significantly lower in Hungary and Serbia – the two countries where media systems are most polarized, and news consumption repertoires less diverse

Data collection: November 2019 – January 2020 (population survey)

Polarization & news brands trust



- In the **Czech Republic**, public service media are the most trusted (by far)
- In **Serbia**, **Poland** and **Hungary**, it is the private /oppositional media that are trusted more

How does media polarization affect the *nature* of media trust?

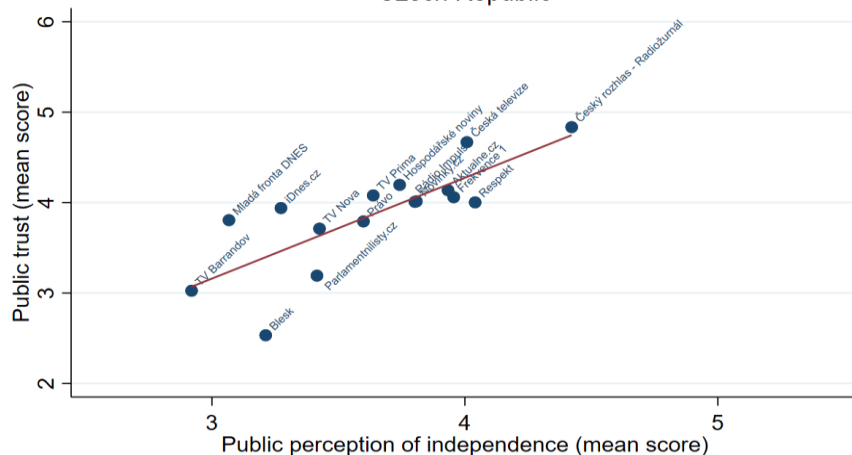
- Reasons common among participants with ideologically & politically 'closed' repertoires:
 - Preferred news sources are seen as more trustworthy
 - However, **the normative basis of trust varies:**
 - Trustworthiness = objectivity and/or independence of news sources
 - Trustworthiness = alignment with own views, links with one's own preferred party/politician (Excerpt 1)
- The tendency to trust sources that align with own views are likely most common in Serbia, where almost half of respondents have 'closed' repertoires

Excerpt 1: "I think *MI* is objective, even though they say it is biased, I think...public service media should report on the government's work, and this is what they do...Of course, they say that *HirTV* is biased, it is true that it is a right-wing channel but since my way of thinking is also similar, so... [laughs] This is what I want to listen to."
(Hun-14)

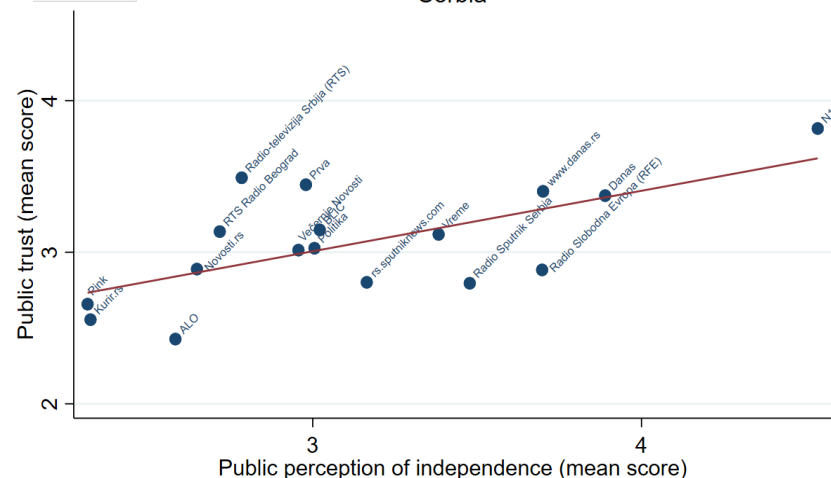
Does polarization change the normative basis of trust?

To what extent is trust associated with independence?

Perceived independence vs trust in media
Czech Republic

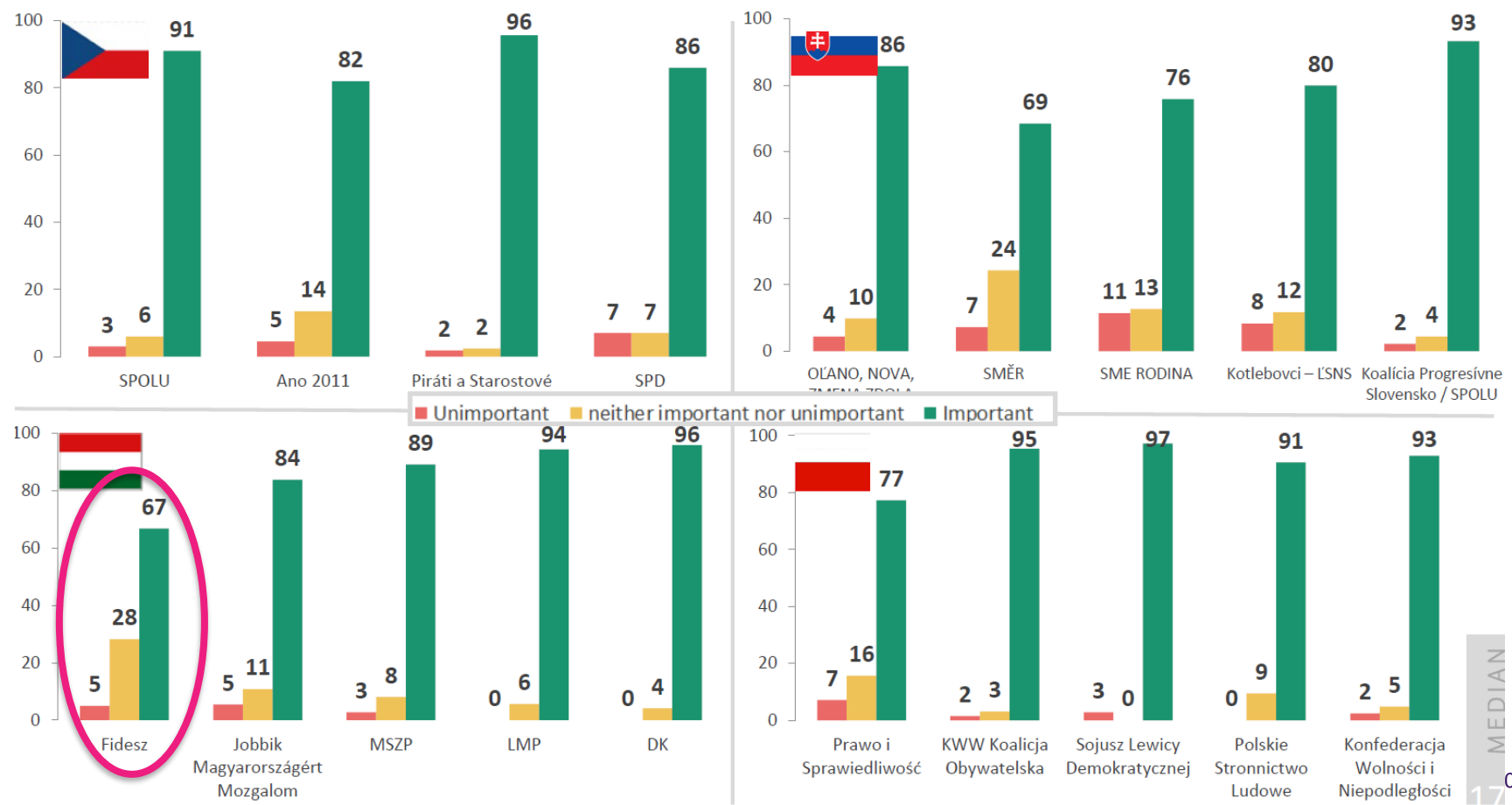


Perceived independence vs trust in media
Serbia



Strong correlation between perceived media independence and trust in media in the Czech Republic – but weaker in Serbia

Attitudes to Media Freedom Poll (2022): importance of having independent media



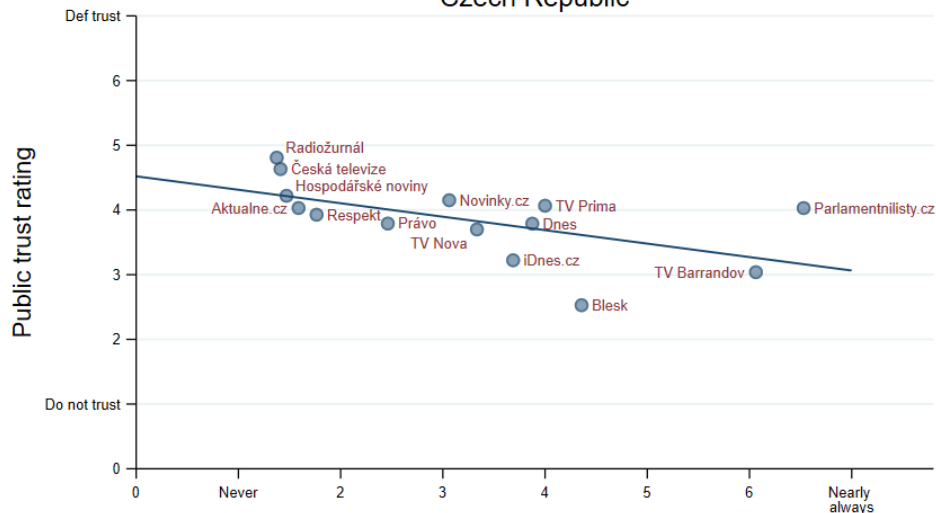
Does polarization change the normative basis of trust?

To what extent is trust associated with professionalism?



Correlation between public trust in media and frequency of disseminating disinformation (expert rating)

Czech Republic



Expert rating: frequency of spreading disinformation

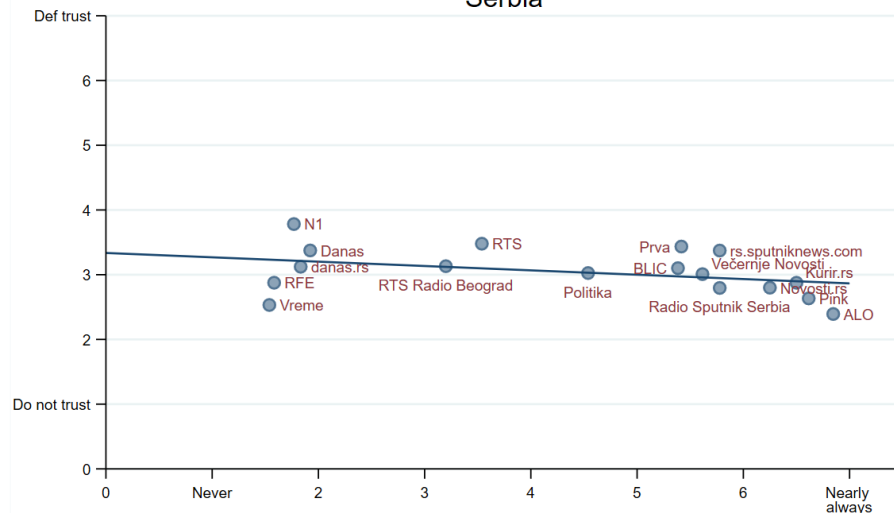
Strong negative correlation, borderline significant ($r = -0.58$, $p < 0.05$, $N = 14$)

Czechia - a strong match between public trust in major news media brands and the expert assessment of their professionalism; much less clear-cut relationship in Serbia



Correlation between public trust in media and frequency of disseminating disinformation (expert rating)

Serbia



Expert rating: frequency of spreading disinformation

Weak, medium strong, non-significant correlation ($r = -0.37$, $p = 0.15$, $N = 17$)

Data collection: November 2019 – January 2020 (population survey); – March – May 2020 (expert survey)

Summary

- In Central & Eastern Europe, media trust is intertwined with polarization, which itself is affected by illiberalism & democratic backsliding
- More polarized media systems → more divided audiences & higher levels of selective news exposure
- Ideological and political polarization, reinforced by selective news exposure, leads to the changing of the normative foundations of media trust
 - From perceived adherence to professional journalistic values (objectivity, accuracy, impartiality etc.) to alignment with one's own ideological / political views
 - This change is more intense in countries without strong, independent and politically impartial PSM
- Attempts to improve media trust must go hand-in-hand with efforts to de-polarize media ecosystems, as well as to safeguard editorial independence, including – and especially – of public service media.

MEDIA POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



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Rebuilding trust and countering polarization in (post)pandemic times

Recommendations for media policies
and journalistic practices
from The Illiberal Turn project

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Katherine Kondor and Fanni Tóth

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Thank you!

Visit our project website for more information, publications & reports:

<https://www.illiberal-turn.eu/>



New project: PANCOPOP – Pandemic Communication in Times of Populism

- Funding: ESRC/T-AP COVID-19 (2022-24)
- Four countries: Brazil, Poland, Serbia & USA
- Mixed-methods: surveys, interviews, policy analysis, big data + qualitative framing analysis of media coverage
- <https://www.pancopop.net>

