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**Populism and illiberal democracy in Romania: The role of media in the erosion of Romanian democracy**

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**Abstract**

The complex relationship between populism and illiberal democracy could be explained with reference to the main characteristics shared by both. Recent electoral success of populist parties in Central and Eastern European countries and the accession to power of so-called illiberal democratic regimes in Hungary and Poland have raised numerous questions that are yet to be answered. One of the main issues that the combination of populism and illiberal democracy has brought to scholarly attention refers to the degree to which media discourse has contributed to the success of these two interrelated phenomena, by means of instilling into people’s hearts the core values of populism and illiberal democratic regimes: the centrality of the pure people and the threats posed by out-groups (especially corrupt elites, rich people and immigrants) to the ordinary citizens. In this paper, we present the characteristics of the Romanian media system that may explain the country’s accelerated democratic backsliding. We focus on media ownership and media politicization to account for the lack of market plurality and political independence in the Romanian media landscape. This is to show how a key element of a democratic society – the media – can become a threat to the well-functioning of democracy when vulnerable to political pressure.

Keywords: illiberal democracy, populism, media politicization, Romania

**Introduction**

Far right movements and ideologies are becoming popular in some Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and among their most striking consequences is the rise of ‘illiberal democracy’. The latter in closely intertwined with populism, especially right-wing populism, since their promises are quite similar, namely to stand up for ordinary people, to fight corrupt political elite, to put a stop to immigrants entering their countries. As Mudde [1] noted, populism might be viewed as an “illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism”. Exposure to populist messages in/ by the media seems to be one of the success factors for the rise of populism (and of illiberal democracy) and/or the success of mainstream parties using populist arguments in their discourse. This holds true particularly for former communist countries, such as Romania, in which the consolidation of media freedom and the transition to liberal democratic values represent constant challenges. Romania is an interesting case study, given the country’s constant swinging between democratic and less democratic political choices. In this paper, we present the characteristics of the Romanian media system that may explain the country’s accelerated democratic backsliding. We focus on media ownership and media politicization to account for the lack of market plurality and political independence in the Romanian media landscape. This is to show how a key element of a democratic society – the media – can become a threat to the well-functioning of democracy when vulnerable to political pressure.

**Illiberal democracy in Central and Eastern European countries**

The collapse of the communist regime in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 meant the “return to Europe” [2] for many of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) situated on the other side of the Iron Curtain. This moment represented the “ultimate victory of democracy and rule of law over the legacy of totalitarianism in these countries” [3]. Consequently, as Zielonka [4] suggested, nowadays the old member states and the new ones bare close resemblance mainly in terms of democratic and liberal values. Despite this optimistic approach, others view the big picture in a more prudent way. Specifically, even though the CEE countries started the democratic transition in 1989 and many of them were proclaimed consolidated democracies after entering the European Union, these newly established democracies “are experiencing ‘democratic fatigue’ and some seem vulnerable to an authoritarian turn” [5]. In other terms, CEE countries are regarded as having a poor quality of democracy compared to their Western counterparts, given not only their different historical evolution, but also their different patterns of economic and political development, which entitled authors to discuss an “East-West divide”, in terms of economy, social rights, politics, mechanisms of democracy, etc. (for details about the East-West divide see [6], [7], [8], [9]).

According to Isaac [10], common characteristics shared by all forms of illiberal democracies all over the world include: enormous obstacles (i.e., electoral, bureaucratic, financial and ideological) to the formation of new parties; material inequalities that favor some privileged groups and disadvantage others; “private and public media oligopolies and monopolies that magnify some voices at the expense of others”; authoritarian forms of policing; a partisan conception of citizenship (i.e., one that excludes some groups of people or treats them as criminals); legally based forms of patriarchy, especially in domains related to family law and gender-based violence. Illiberalism in CEE countries is essentially a “return to the political practices of goulash communism, in which individual persecution may be relatively rare, but independent institutions are non-existent, and the party and the state are one” [11]. Or, as Krastev [12] indicates, “falling into illiberalism is the common sin of many newly emerged democracies in East-Central Europe”. Here, the sin has real religious connotations – the term “backsliding”, usually used to describe the decline of democracy and the rise of authoritarian regimes in CEE countries, refers to the process through which an individual who has converted to Christianity reverts to pre-conversion habits and/ or falls into sin.

Nations in Transit report [11] places Poland and Hungary among the CEE countries which registered the most significant declines regarding their democratic quality (also see [13], [14], [15], [16]). Specifically, in Poland, the government’s takeover of the judicial system, politicization of public media, smear campaigns against nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and violations of ordinary parliamentary procedure have resulted in a dramatic decline in the quality of Polish democracy. On the other hand, Hungary registered the largest cumulative decline in Nations in Transit history, after its score has fallen for 10 consecutive years. These examples are not isolate cases; therefore, a more in-depth analysis of CEE countries illiberalism is needed in order to be able to understand the “democratic fatigue” [5], the regression and “backsliding into various forms of constitutional authoritarianism” or why “the return to Europe” is not yet complete [3], [17].

CEE countries are often called the “lands in between”, mainly with reference to their precarious and vague position on the political map of Europe [3]. Among the profound, structural causes which might explain the crisis in CEE are the absence of a tradition of rule of law in this part of the world (see [18]), the shallow institutionalization of rule of law institutions and the “ahistorical approach of the one-size-fits-all ideology of transitional constitutionalism” [3]. During the last five years, the superficial roots of liberal democracy in CEE countries have become obvious and, therefore, the illiberal, authoritarian ideologies have gained momentum in the whole CEE region. The European Union, the best provider of success and stability, turned out to be “less whole and free, democratic and efficient than had been expected at the early stage of the journey two decades ago” [5].

**Romania’s democratic backslidings**

In the academic literature, there are few references to the illiberal democracy in Romania and, of these references, the majority present the situation in Romania compared to that in Bulgaria and/ or Hungary [19], [20], [21], [5], [22], [23]. Despite limited research on Romania’s case, this part of the paper seeks to offer some insights into the most relevant characteristics of democracy in Romania, by placing the country in the CEE context. As explained above, CEE countries, including Romania, seem to suffer from the same syndrome – not so long after being “treated” after the “European liberal democratic recipe”, they started to manifest signs of semi-authoritarian and diminished democratic regimes, thus oscillating from purely liberal to purely illiberal democracies.

Specifically, over the past decade, Romania found itself very close to the political patterns from CEE countries. Accession to the European Union in 2007 helped the country reform institutions and reduce levels of corruption, in the context of implementation of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism that “was set up at the accession of Romania to the European Union in 2007 to address shortcomings in judicial reform and the fight against corruption” [24]. However, formally established democratic institutions have continued to work “in the shadow of informal ‘networks’ and persistent patterns of political culture” [5]. Shortly after entering the EU, Romania lost its motivation to apply and respect the democratic rules and, at the same time, Brussels weakened the external pressure with regards to respecting democratic values and the rule of law. Therefore, Romania’s democratic system registered a regression or a “backsliding” to illiberal democracy – one significant moment happened in 2012, when then Prime Minister Ponta tried to impeach then President Băsescu and curb the independence of the Constitutional Court [5]. Another example refers to the 2014 elections, when thousands of people from diaspora were denied their right to vote, the Romanian government being accused of infringement of civil rights, oppression, and electoral fraud. More recent events, from 2017, used to exemplify the dangers of Romania’s backsliding to illiberal democracy, include essential justice law changes that strongly and negatively affect the independence of Romania’s judicial system and its capacity to fight corruption effectively.

Although Romania seems to have made significant progress towards the compliance with the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism since its EU accession in 2007, ten years later, the country still faces some important shortcomings [24]. According to [24], shortcomings are influenced by the extremely rapid changes in the government (from January 2017 to January 2018 Romania has had three different governments), while growing tensions between state powers contribute to the difficult cooperation among them; the adoption of a Government Emergency Ordinance to decriminalize certain corruption offences, such as abuse of office and the proposal for a pardon law (which, after being widely contested through street protests, was abrogated by the Government and also repealed by the Parliament; however, even though the ordinance did not come into operation, the events left a legacy of public doubts); criticism against the judiciary and judicial decisions that remain problematic in the public debate (e.g., public statements from the authorities that the whole judicial system is dysfunctional or that the status quo needs to be brought “back to normality”). Another set of shortcomings of the Romanian democratic system comes from its electoral system – the electoral majority uses pervert strategies during the electoral campaigns such as bribing the electorate with minimal increase of the lowest pensions and salaries, populist promises and buying votes with cash [21]. All these problems contribute to “the country’s imperfect and semi-consolidated democracy” [20], [23]. Undergoing a troublesome period, it remains questionable if Romania would be able to stick to the premise that democracy is “the only game in town” [25].

**Media as catalyst of post-communist transformations in Romania. A brief overview of the contemporary Romanian media system**

As is the case with other CEE countries, Romania’s media system has been reshaped by the groundbreaking experience of post-communist political, economic and social transformations. However, the process of political restructuring and democratic adjustment is yet to be completed and the country’s struggle to become democratically stable impacts on the consolidation of a strong, legally regulated and ethical media system [26], [27]. In this section, we outline key aspects of the contemporary Romanian media system and we highlight the country’s specific media-politics complex and dysfunctional relationship [28], which renders the media highly vulnerable in terms of market plurality and political independence [29].

Despite an exponential growth of the print media in the early ‘90s [26], [30], television is the most consumed media in Romania, dominating the media market. According to a recent study, print media market makes up for only 5% of the entire Romanian media market, one of the lowest share in the region; by comparison, print media has 28% of the media market in Hungary, whereas in the Czech Republic it has 21%. Commercial TV channels PRO TV, Antena 1 and Kanal D occupy the top positions on the television market, followed by the news channel Antena 3 [29]. The public service broadcaster, TVR, has registered a gradual audience loss over the years, culminating with the average ratings fall of TVR 1 (the main channel of TVR) primetime newscast from 7.9 to 2.2 % in the early 2000s [31]. This massive drop of TVR’s ratings and market share has never been recovered and the Romanian flagship public service channel, TVR1, despite its nationwide reach, has lost most audience, also due to mismanagement of politically appointed directors and the excessive immixture of politics into the editorial policy.

Radio audience has managed to remain quite stable across the years, with Romanians showing loyalty to their radio listening routine [32]. In terms of programs they prefer, news bulletins come second after music and entertainment for most radio listeners [31].

Not surprisingly in the digital era, the internet has become a major source of information and news, especially for young people. Benefiting from a good penetration of the internet in the Romanian households and from the best average broadband in the EU [32], a substantial component of the media sector has moved online. The proliferation of news websites, such as www.hotnews.ro or, more recently, www.g4media.ro, has not, however, led to an increase of high-quality journalism. Many of the topics covered are insufficiently verified, their authenticity is rarely checked and, similarly to TV news, the reporting of certain topics is sometimes aligned with the interests of influential public individuals (politicians, businessmen).

A major challenge for the consolidation of a quality, independent Romania media is ownership concentration. Basically, the Romanian media market is controlled by the so-called “big five” [31] media trusts: PRO TV and CME Media Enterprises, Intact Media Group, Realitatea-Cațavencu, Adevărul Holding and Ringier Romania. Each of these media conglomerates owns several TV channels, radio stations, daily newspapers, tabloids, specialized magazines and websites. The problem with ownership concentration is that it facilitates the use of the media as a political tool to push specific interests of the owners and their inner groups. Furthermore, the owners of these trusts have become “media tycoons”, who neither cared for balanced reporting nor showed any remorse in “fixing” the news coverage to serve their interests. In addition to being controversial businessmen, many of these media moguls have received sentences for corruption and other serious offences: e.g. Dan Voiculescu, former owner of Intact Group before appointing his eldest daughter president of the media trust, has been jailed for corruption, Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, former owner of Realitatea-Cațavencu, is currently serving a sentence in jail and is waiting for a final ruling on others, Dinu Patriciu, former owner of Adevărul Holding and one of the richest men in Romania, was tried for corruption when he died in 2014.

The growing concentration of media ownership in Romania has had a negative impact on the political independence of the media. Editorial autonomy, political control over media and independence of public service media governance and funding are high risk indicators [29] of the excessive politicization of the Romania media. Media tycoons eagerly exploit the legislative void regarding the incompatibility between politics and media ownership in Romania. In fact, politicians, parties and partisan groups can own directly or indirectly any type of media in the absence of any legislation or regulatory framework. Any politician can push his own interests by manipulating the public agenda, and there are many examples that in Romania this happens often. Antena 3, a member of the Intact Media Group, is the textbook example of a biased TV news channel used as a political tool for pushing specific group interests. The editorial policy is far from autonomous and balanced, which reflects in the poor quality of the news programs delivered and of the political talk-shows it hosts. Antena 3 is a constant and voracious supporter of PSD (Social Democrat Party), the current party in power, whose leader, Liviu Dragnea, a politician found guilty of abuse of office, allegedly tries to weaken the justice system and make it subservient to his and PSD’s interests. PSD’s crusade on the judiciary has caused massive street protests in Romania in the last two years. By offering PSD and Dragnea himself a platform to convey their message to the people, Antena 3 helps foster the populist discourse of this party and his leader, exploiting the lack of either legal provisions for or a self-regulated editorial independence. Furthermore, an example of the negative influence of the concentration of media ownership on political competition is the use of the news channel România TV by its owner, Sebastian Ghiță, to advance his political agenda. A wealthy businessmen and former deputy in the Romanian Parliament, Ghiță has used his channel to blatantly support his nationalist party, PRU (United Romania Party), in the 2016 parliamentary election campaign and to denigrate his political opponents [33]. In 2018, Ghiță was still avoiding justice by hiding in neighboring Serbia, after being sentenced to jail for corruption, money laundering and influence trafficking.

Moreover, as the 2011 study on Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe shows, in Romania, “while the media were not important sources of patronage jobs, it had happened that media elite members had received patronage jobs (as senior public administrators or senior political advisors) as a reward for their loyalty—a clear indicator of clientelistic linkages between political elites and media elites” [34].

In this context, the Romanian media landscape has gradually become highly polarized, which became particularly evident during political campaigns [35]. It has been recently acknowldedged that in Romania „the strong polarization in newsroom has led to continued scepticism, frustration, and low trust in the media from audiences” [36]. Romania’s efforts to consolidate its democracy and media system are currently suffering some setbacks triggered by the polarized political competition. These impacts negatively on the media independence from politics and on the democratic performance of the media. By frequently being used to serve the specific interests of politicians and political parties, the Romanian media fall short in their duty to be fair, objective and equidistant when informing the citizens.

**Illiberal democracy and populism. The role of the media as a political force**

This section of the paper does not intend to define populism, but to describe its connection to illiberal democracy (for a better understanding of populism and populist communication, see [37], [38], [39], [15]). Our aim is to provide a clear understanding of two interconnected phenomena – illiberal democracy and populism – which are on the rise not only in CEE countries, but all over the world. The idea that (il)liberal democracy and far right movements and ideologies (especially populism) are strongly connected is not new. For example, Mudde [1] suggests that there is a complex relationship between populism and liberal democracy, which “includes the good, the bad and the ugly”. In short, the main good aspect of populism is that it puts forward issues that the mass population cares about, issues that are quite often left behind by the political elites or issues that are painful yet very real problems of the whole society. The main bad aspect is that populism excludes the existence of divergent points of view, meaning that the populists are the vox populi, while the others, the non-populists, are often regarded as anti-populists, mainly because of their different views. The ugly side of populism becomes apparent when populism is in power since it can seriously “undermine the checks and balances of liberal democracy” [1]. This means that, when in power, populism might severely contribute to one country’s turn from liberal to illiberal democracy (see, for example, the cases of Hungary and Poland), being labeled as “a pathology of democracy” [40].

This complex relationship between populism and (il)liberal democracy could be explained with reference to the main characteristics shared by both. For example, material inequalities that favor some privileged groups and disadvantage others and a partisan conception of citizenship (i.e., one that excludes some groups of people or treats them as criminals) are some features characterizing illiberal democracy [10] and populism as well. These features might be translated as exclusionism – the distinction between us and them, the exclusion of the people from the outside (immigrants, unemployed, people from other religion/ race/ ethnicity), and the clear divide between the people as “in-group” and the other as “out-group” – which often go hand in hand with populism. In fact, some scholars view exclusionism as a third dimension of populism, along with people-centrism and anti-elitism [41]. In this context, it becomes rather difficult to find a “democratic enough” [42] response to populist-related dangers. Instead, scholars could try to analyze the main factors contributing to both the creation and the amplification of these phenomena – illiberal democracy and populism. One obvious candidate for a common factor are the media, which have proved to be an influential political force.

Media development and their role in building Eastern (il)liberal democracies is subject to debate. Rupnik and Zielonka [5] reveal that, during the last twenty years of democracy, the media in CEE countries have witnessed a large number of “wars”. The “media wars” [4] between media and political power holders have resulted in public detachment from politics (political cynicism) and declining trust in the media. Moreover, evidence shows that both the political and business elites have struggled to get control over the media and that, during these “wars” the media did not act as spectators, but as active entities trying to obtain material and political gains, in a way that did not prove democratic. The media from these countries did not seem to act as “independent watchdogs”, but, instead, as partisan forces, often favoring manipulation, propaganda and misinformation (see [43]).

Another controversial debate launched by Rupnik and Zielonka [5] refers to the role of media owners, whose concentration in the region is growing. The main issue concerning these local owners is that some of them are actively engaged in politics, thus favoring the political parties they belong to or candidates from the same political party. Others, who are not directly engaged in politics, tend to use the media as vehicles for generating profits for their business, “with detrimental implications for the independence of their media outlets” [5]. However, the influence is not unidirectional. Mainly because political parties from CEE countries lack a solid ideological base, they do depend on the media, “hence their attempts to colonize the media” [5]. Stetka [46] argues that “the development of ownership internationalization of news media sectors in Central and Eastern Europe did not follow a universal pattern, and its outcomes displayed important differences across the regions”. In the Romanian context, as argued in the previous section, the media ownership related to the concept of “media moguls” [47] or “press barons”, “tycoons”, “industrials” (for an overview see [46]) is central to understanding the national media landscape.

Besides these interests coming from the media and/ or media owners and the political parties, there are also some informal networks of politicians, lobbyists, celebrities, media owners, and journalists, who contribute to the well-functioning of (il)liberal democracy. These networks are necessary, often transitory and contingent [34], but they “are never transparent, institutionalized, or subject to accountability” [5]. Instead, they operate in a partisan environment, by exchanging favors and limiting competition. All these elements are signs of a rather political dependent media landscape, which, in the absence of serious consideration and concern, could seriously threaten the preservation of pluralism within the public space, having, therefore, consistent implications for both the quality of democracy (also see [48], [49]) and the evolution of media populist discourse.

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**Conclusion**

Fourteen years after their triumphant “return to Europe” in 2004, CEE countries are put to test again. This time, the situation seems even more complex – there is a combination of populism and illiberal democratic values intertwined within CEE societies. In this worrying context, there is a consensus among scholars that the media discourse significantly impacts people’s populist attitudes.

As other former communist countries, Romania is a so-called “young” democracy, constantly swinging back and forth between (liberal) democratic and less (liberal) democratic values. For instance, in the last two years, Romania’s democracy has been challenged by both massive street protests against various legislative measures meant to support leaders of the ruling party (the last protest occurred in August 2018) and a high degree of polarization in the newsrooms [50].

This constant fluctuation between different degrees of democracy is associated with other specific country characteristics that might explain the reasons why the media frame populist discourse in a certain way (not as “independent watchdogs”, but as partisan supporters) and how people understand those messages and further develop or change specific attitudes. The Freedom House’s Nations in Transit scores for Romania show variations in the Independent Media indicator from 3.75 in 2009 to 4.25 in 2018, with a “partially free” label for the Romanian press, and a regime classification of “semi-consolidated democracy” [51].

The highly polarized media discourse in Romania favors the emergence of specific populist messages which, therefore, influence people’s populist attitudes. At the same time, because of rather low welfare standards and high levels of corruption, the “young” democracy in Romania does not seem to have good prospects for developing into a “mature” one. Even though populist parties have not been successful in the last years in Romania, the mainstream political parties’ discourse is more and more infused with populist messages, which, we argue, may develop into polarized, sometimes exclusionist and anti-democratic views.

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