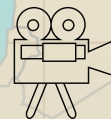


Media Polarization Turbulences in **Georgia** and the **Visegrad States**: How to Depolarize?



Tbilisi
May, 2024



Founded in early 2011, the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research, and analysis organization. GIP strives to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia. It also encourages public participation in civil society-building projects and democratic processes. The organization has quickly become a major center for scholarship and policy innovation, not only for Georgia, but for the wider Black Sea Region as well. To this end, GIP sets itself apart through relevant, incisive research; extensive public outreach; and a brazen spirit of innovation in policy discourse and political conversation. Since December 2013 GIP has been a member of the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions and the Network of Think Tanks on the EU's Eastern Partnership launched in September 2020 by the German Council of Foreign Relations (DGAP) with the support of the European Commission.

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Forward text

Polarization has been among the most pressing challenges for democracy in recent years. Across many countries, we have seen the deepening of political and societal divides, often simultaneously with the rise of populist and illiberal actors who have been purposefully utilizing divisive rhetoric and exploiting existing societal cleavages to mobilize the electorate. It is of course true that such strategies have, to some degree, always been part of democratic politics, and that ideological or party-political polarization is not a completely new phenomenon, especially in countries with two-party systems. However, alongside increasing ideological polarization, that splits countries into two opposing camps during elections – a trend which arguably intensified following the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election – researchers have also been observing a sharp increase in affective polarization. This is polarization based upon strong emotional identification with an in-group and negative sentiments towards an out-group. Facilitated by the rise of negative campaigning and open hostility towards political opponents, this tendency significantly limits the possibility of reaching any political consensus, as politics becomes tribalized, and people become further radicalized in their beliefs and attitudes towards the “other side”. While this tendency is clearly detrimental to democracy, undermining its civil core, it undoubtedly benefits those actors who thrive from conflict, from the weakening of democratic norms, and from the erosion of trust in democratic institutions – including news media.

Over the last decade, Central and Eastern Europe has served as one of the most prominent global examples of polarization, and specifically one that has been dividing societies along the liberal vs illiberal axis. However, the factors that contribute to this process, remain understudied, particularly with regards to the role of the media. This report makes a valuable attempt to fill this gap, bringing fresh and original data from expert surveys, and interviews from five countries that shed light on the potential determinants of political and media polarization in a comparative perspective, enabling a more systematic and detailed understanding of these processes across the region, whilst accounting for differences in political and media systems. It also shows that apart from analyzing the roots and catalysts of polarization, it is also important to explore remedies and mitigation mechanisms which could potentially contribute towards bridging those gaps that are so eagerly exploited by populists and authoritarian leaders. It is a first step, but one that will hopefully inspire others – in Europe and beyond – to follow, and to seek a way to reverse the vicious circle of polarization which those actors have currently been spinning.

Reviewer and International Consultant

Václav Štětka is media scholar, since 2016 based at Loughborough University in the UK, where he currently holds a post of a Reader in Comparative Political Communication. Previously he worked at Masaryk University, Charles University and the University of Oxford. His research interests encompass political communication, the role of media in the rise of illiberalism and polarization, and the relationship between media and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. He is an active contributor to several international research projects and networks, including the Digital News Report (Oxford University) or Media Pluralism Monitor (European University Institute in Florence)

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István Hegedűs is the chairman of the Hungarian Europe Society, a Budapest-based NGO. Since the turn of the century, HES has organized numerous conferences and workshops on current international affairs, focusing especially on European Union issues. Hegedűs has become politically active at the very beginning of the Hungarian regime-change. In 1989 he participated at the national roundtable negotiations on the transition to democracy as a delegate of the opposition groups. He was a permanent member of the media committee during the talks. He became a liberal member of the first free elected Hungarian Parliament in 1990 and also served as the vice-chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Following this period, Hegedűs worked as a free-lance scholar and lecturer in several higher education institutions. Amongst others, he taught courses on Hungarian and European politics for students participating at the Education Abroad Program of the University of California located at the Eötvös Loránd University of Sciences in Budapest. He received his Ph. D. in sociology at Corvinus University of Budapest in 2004.

Erik Uszkiewicz is a lawyer, who earned his law degree from the Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Law in 2011 and his Ph.D. from the same university in 2022. In the recent past, Erik worked for various civil society organizations as a researcher and project manager. Currently, he is one of the vice-chairpersons of the Hungarian Europe Society and working as a senior researcher of the EU-funded DIACOMET project. Erik is involved both in domestic and international research projects, which are related to the rule of law, media freedom, fake news and disinformation. Since completing his legal studies, he has been a guest lecturer at Hungarian higher education institutions and has authored and co-authored numerous publications. Apart from Hungarian, he speaks English and Spanish.

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Petra Bošková is a Project Manager and Researcher at the Strategic Analysis Think Tank. Petra studied International relations at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic. She was a Program Assistant at Euro- Atlantic Centre in Banská Bystrica. During her studies, Petra interned at Jagello 2000 during NATO Days and Czech Airforce Days at the VIP department, also at the Representation of European Commission in Slovakia at the Political and Media Department. Moreover, she participated in the project University Debates, organized by MESA10, during which they debated the role of the European Union and NATO in the Western Balkans. Her research interests include Russia's influence in Western Balkans, Disinformation and Media Literacy and European Union's neighbourhood policy.

Miloš Gregor serves as an advisor to the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic on information literacy and combating disinformation. He is also an assistant professor at the Department of Political Science at Masaryk University, where his research focuses on two areas: political communication and marketing, and disinformation and propaganda. Gregor has authored or co-authored several publications on manipulative techniques and the spread of disinformation in the online space, including the book 'Challenging Online Propaganda and Disinformation in the 21st Century. In addition to academic publications, he is also the co-author of the popular book "The Best Book on Fake News, Disinformation, and Manipulation!"

Katarzyna Chimiak is a senior analyst and project coordinator at the European and Migration Policy Programme of the Foundation Institute of Public Affairs (Warsaw); She studied history at the University of Warsaw (with special focus on the 20th century European history) and received her Master's degree in 2008. Then she continued her studies in this field at the universities in Leipzig and Duisburg-Essen. She was also a scholarship holder at the Leibniz Institute for European History in Mainz. Having returned to Warsaw in 2012, she worked for the German Historical Institute in Warsaw and got involved in the activities of various NGOs promoting cooperation between Poland and Ukraine, as well as fostering dialogue between civil society in Poland and the Russian democratic movement. She the team of the Institute of Public Affairs in 2019, focusing on research projects related to migration policy, Polish-German relations, and organizing the electoral process in Poland.

Summary

The report examines the domestic and external causes of political polarization in Georgia and the Visegrad Four (V4) states Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, and Poland. It also analyses the major factors stimulating media polarization, as well as the consequences of political polarization and its impact on democracy. The report also includes suggested solutions for decreasing media polarization and ensuring that the electorate makes informed decisions.

Several data collection methods were employed in the production of this report. Firstly, existing literature and reports were surveyed, including indices of media freedom, democracy and polarization, as well as public opinion poll results. Secondly, media experts and editors were interviewed, and, finally, there were surveyed experts and journalists in Georgia and V4 states.

The findings from the study indicate common trends in terms of the level and roots of polarization in Georgia, Hungary, and Poland. Slightly different trends were captured in the case of Slovakia and especially in Czechia. In particular, while media polarization is mainly caused by the political instrumentalization of media agencies by political parties and by state capture of media in Georgia, Hungary and Poland, the “societal fragmentation” and “fragile political landscape in the country” are named as the most acute issues in Slovakia. In the case of Czechia, the main causal factor was found to be “editorial policy” and “lack of competence of journalists.” However, in the case of all five countries, it was revealed that since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, foreign policy and relations with Russia have become the main factors of both political polarization and resulting media polarization. This is reflected both in the rhetoric of politicians and Russia's powerful propaganda in these states, which has significantly increased the level of polarization and societal tension.

Given the key role of the media in political polarization, the results of the expert survey conducted for this report suggest that Western donors should prioritize making the media landscape more independent in order to liberate media outlets from dependency on political funding. The experts believe that if the public sees that the media is not engaged in political propaganda, the media will gain more trust which they do not have nowadays and they will be able to make informed choices based on objective reporting.

Keywords: *Polarization, Media, Georgia, and V4 states, democratic backsliding, media freedom, disinformation*

Main Findings:

Georgia



1 Shift of government towards anti-Western rhetoric as the main polarizing factor according to surveyed experts - Since 2022, the level of polarization in Georgia has increased significantly, and the majority of surveyed media experts consider the domestic political atmosphere to be more significant cause of polarization than external factors. Namely, they identified the "rhetoric of the ruling party" as the major factor in fostering political polarization. However, as this refers mainly to harsh rhetoric towards Georgia's Western strategic partners and Ukraine, a phenomenon accompanied by a softening of rhetoric towards Russia, it can be assumed that domestic political turbulence in Georgia has been significantly driven by foreign political factors.

2 Relations with Russia as the most acute polarizing external factor according to both Georgian experts and interviewed journalists - The Georgian government has not joined sanctions against Russia imposed in the wake of the start of full-scale war in Ukraine. It has also accepted thousands of Russian citizens in Georgia, and restored direct flights. These moves have increased political and societal tension in a way that has been reflected in the media too.

3 Political instrumentalization of media outlets by political parties is a major reason for media polarization according to both experts and journalists - Due to the lack of financial resources, media organizations often receive funding from people affiliated with political parties, which greatly reduces their independence and thus stimulates political polarization in the media field as well. Those media outlets that are financed through donor grants are also unacceptable to the government and by reinitiating the so-called "Russian law", the ruling party intended to suppress such critical media.

4 Financial investment from donors and non-partisan businesses in the development of independent media is a solution that would help decrease media polarization and enable voters to make informed decisions - Media polarization can be reduced by donors and independent businesses investing more in increasing media literacy, which in turn will enable meaningful issue-based political debate. This will help the electorate to make decisions at the ballot box free from the influence of misinformation.

Hungary

1 Media polarization in Hungary is not a side-effect or collateral damage: entrenching political polarization is a main objective of the current regime in accordance with its broader strategy of creating a stable majority for its policies within the Hungarian electorate. Since 2010 the Orbán government has introduced new measures in the media sphere as part of their mission to establish a new type of hybrid, illiberal political system. Market interventions, regulatory measures, administrative decisions, business instruments have together resulted in a distorted, highly polarized media market. Only a small free and independent segment of the media maintains a traditional journalistic ethos in this hostile environment.

2 Following the dramatic change in Orbán's political line towards Russia around 2014, the pro-Fidesz part of the media has adjusted to the new course called Eastern Opening that serves as both an instrumental and ideological basis to close ties between the Hungarian government and Putin's regime. The mouthpieces of the government have moved from their former critical position to open admiration of Putin over the last decade. Pro-Russia argumentation and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, which can be easily observed in the "official" media coverage of the war, have successfully transformed the attitudes of the Fidesz camp. Even after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has been often portrayed as the real victim in the conflict provoked by Western powers, while reports neglect to cover the brutality of the Putin's regime's military actions. Such coverage has become the norm in the non-free part of the Hungarian media.

3 The government's monopoly of the media sphere has had a devastating impact on political culture and general trust in Hungarian institutions. According to journalists participating in our survey, the most important domestic factors of polarization are the rhetoric of the ruling party, disinformation, and corruption. Regarding the external factors of polarization, Russian aggression/the war in Ukraine and relations with Ukraine and Russia were considered the most relevant, followed by EU policy. Dialogue and deliberation are largely unviable political notions in this illiberal state.

4 There is scant hope for short-term change that would include the mitigation of political and media polarization. Neither a shift in Orbán's political course, nor defeat for his party at forthcoming (probably unfairly conducted) elections is likely. Nevertheless, as the government has maneuvered itself into an isolated position and Hungary has lost influence at the European level, critical voices, including moral arguments, have become louder on the opposition side of the political spectrum and in the free parts of the media. There is an urgent need for media education as well a renewed campaign against disinformation and fake news. This development, however, cannot be separated from the fundamental need for a renewal of the general political environment. In general, Hungarian liberal-minded media and political stakeholders are advised to co-operate with European and global actors to curb illiberal and authoritarian tendencies in Hungary.

Slovakia

1 Political turmoil and governance issues - The most significant domestic factor contributing to polarization in Slovakia is political instability, particularly during the period leading up to the early elections in September 2023. This political turmoil and uncertainty led to a loss of trust among citizens in the political system and institutions. Another aspect is the exploitation of illiberal tendencies by power-seeking politicians, which has become a troubling trend. These political maneuvers and uncertainties have resulted in deeper scrutiny of political parties and candidates, causing citizens to perceive the political scene as corrupt and ineffective. This political instability and abuse of power has contributed to societal divisions and created an environment in which citizens feel dissatisfied and uncertain about political decisions. Therefore, it is necessary for political parties and the national leadership to take measures to restore credibility in the political system and rebuild public trust in political institutions.

2 Conflict in Ukraine: The conflict in Ukraine is a significant external factor contributing to polarization in Slovakia. While it may not be the primary driver, its presence has injected volatility into societal discourse. The ongoing conflict has reverberated across borders, influencing political narratives and shaping perceptions within Slovak society. The proximity of Slovakia to Ukraine, both geographically and historically, means that developments in the conflict have a direct impact on public sentiment and political dynamics. Additionally, the war in Ukraine has been utilized as a narrative during presidential elections in Slovakia (April 2024). Candidates exploited the narrative of “sending Slovak troops to Ukraine”, even though such decisions fall under the jurisdiction of parliament and the government, and are beyond the scope of the president’s powers. Politicians leverage their authority to instill fear in people and propagate narratives against supporting Ukraine, unfortunately contributing to Slovakia's growing isolation in foreign policy from its significant partners, such as the Czech Republic.

3 Pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns have been identified as key factors that reinforce divisions and spread false narratives, thus contributing significantly to the polarization of the societal environment in Slovakia. In addition, the political use of illiberal policies, corruption, and divisive government rhetoric, serve to further deepen media polarization. Limited media literacy among a significant proportion of Slovaks, evident in their belief in conspiracy theories, highlights an urgent need to improve critical media literacy skills. In addition, the significant role played by social media platforms in spreading disinformation, creating information bubbles and reinforcing existing prejudices deepens media polarization and exacerbates social divisions.

4 Media polarization mitigating mechanisms and ways to ensure informed decision-making:
Support of Fact-Checking Initiatives: Initiatives such as Konšpirátori.sk and the Center for Media Education and Monitoring focus on combating disinformation and enhancing media literacy through fact-checking and educational programs.

Strengthening Civil Society Engagement: collaboration between civil society organizations and the government, exemplified by initiatives like the Guide for Public Administrations, demonstrates a concerted effort to strategically communicate and enhance media literacy.

Enhancing Media Literacy: Implement comprehensive media literacy programs in schools and communities to equip citizens with the critical thinking skills necessary to evaluate information sources and recognize disinformation.

Czechia



- 1 Populist rhetoric and the promotion of identity-based cleavages over ideological ones are most salient domestic factors of polarization in Czechia.** Political issues are often transformed into culture wars between elites and ordinary people, which is a common tactic used by populists. Populist political actors tend to emphasize identities over ideological preferences. Opposition parties use Czech support for Ukraine as means to criticize the government. This trend was particularly noticeable during the 2023 presidential election when one of the candidates, Andrej Babiš (ANO), openly deployed disinformation and adopted the rhetoric of Kremlin propaganda in his campaign.
- 2 The role of Russian propaganda in the Czech information environment is significant.** President Miloš Zeman was its most influential spokesperson between 2013 and 2023, supported in parliament by the Communist Party and the SPD. Only the events of February 2022 forced Zeman to stop being an active supporter of the Kremlin. However, his activity and rhetoric have significantly influenced public debate and polarized opinions in society over the years. Moreover, Russian propaganda is spread not only by political actors but also through various media outlets on the internet. Furthermore, Russian propaganda and some domestic political actors promote opposition to the European Union and its policies. Skepticism towards EU politics in the Czech Republic can be traced back to the era of President Václav Klaus (2003-2013), who remains the most prominent critic of the EU and an advocate of Kremlin narratives in the country. His historical influence is still evident today.
- 3** There is a significant difference in perception between experts from academic and political communication backgrounds and those in the media industry. **Media professionals have identified the editorial policy of Czech media as a primary weakness while experts often criticize journalists for their incompetence** in reporting on certain topics or for being influenced by politicians. A common criticism is that the media focuses too much on scandals and sensationalism. The biggest difference in perception between the two groups is in their views on external influences, such as Kremlin propaganda, and the fragility of the political environment in the Czech Republic. Both are perceived as more problematic by experts. However, the Czech Republic performs well in international press freedom rankings. This is reflected in the low relevance given to state-capture of the media by both experts and journalists.
- 4** The situation in the Czech Republic is relatively positive in terms of international rankings and in comparison with the other countries surveyed as part of this project. As such, maintaining the status quo is more important than implementing major changes. To ensure that the situation does not worsen, it is crucial **to educate people in information literacy and to preserve the current independence of the media.**

Poland



- 1** Domestic factors of polarization include the **deliberate actions of certain politicians aimed at deepening political conflict** and thereby mobilizing their voters, as well as the promotion of political myths portraying political opponents as national traitors. The lack of adequate civic education in Poland and the associated widespread lack of sufficient adherence to democratic standards is also a problem. A significant part of the Polish society, including opponents of the Law and Justice party, believe that using disinformation is permissible if it helps their favored politicians win elections (“the end justifies the means”).

- 2** The most acute external factor of polarization is **EU policy, followed by relations with Ukraine**. Apart from this, as the study revealed, external factors of polarization include the effect of social media tools in trapping people in filtered bubbles of those with similar opinions. There is also a deficit of high-quality traditional media.

- 3** Key stimulating factors of media polarization include **media capture and the weaponisation of public TV and radio** by the Law and Justice party after winning the elections in 2015; Apart from this, there is a belief held by some influential political leaders that the media is never entirely impartial and that partisanship in media coverage is thus totally normal.

- 4** Key mechanisms for mitigating media polarization and promoting informed decision making include programs aimed at **fostering media literacy**. Apart from this, supporting independent journalists specialized in **investigative journalism and fact-checking** is important. Moreover, the creation of legal mechanisms that make it difficult for the state to take control of media is identified as another solution for protecting the independence of private media.

Introduction

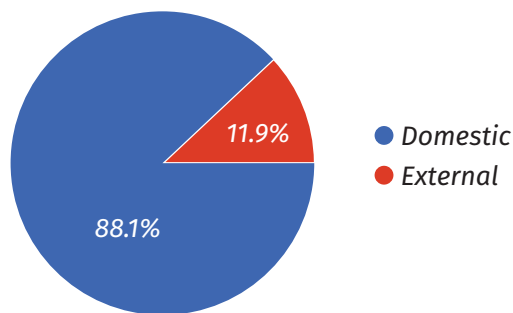
Political polarization directly affects the media, which in turn fosters the division of the population into two different camps. Political polarization became especially problematic after 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which engulfed the entire world's media space, and initiated major geopolitical changes. This gave rise to the internal and external political changes, and hybrid war became more intense with increased levels of propaganda and disinformation.

The roots of media polarization are similar in Georgia, Hungary and Poland. In recent times, the situation in Slovakia has also begun to follow a similar pattern. This has so far not been the case in the Czech Republic, which has followed a different pattern. As part of this study, out of the 109 surveyed experts and journalists in Georgia, Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia and Poland, the vast majority (96 respondents) stated that they believed that media polarization arises from domestic factors rather than from external ones (See figure 1). In the case of Georgia, Hungary and Poland, respondents attributed this mostly to the political instrumentalization of media agencies by political parties. While in Slovakia, they believe that it happens due to both “societal fragmentation”, and the “fragile political landscape in the country.” Respondents from Czechia gave answers that differed considerably from those of the other four countries, and identified “editorial policy,” and a “lack of competence of journalists” as the main factors of stimulating media polarization in the country.

Figure 1.

Is media polarization mostly caused by the domestic, or external factors?

109 responses



According to the World Press Freedom Index 2023, Georgia with a score of 61.69, alongside V4 states like Hungary (62.96) and Poland (67.66), holds a score that falls into the category of “Problematic Situation” due to documented cases of abuse and acts of violence against journalists (Reporters Without Borders 2023). Slovakia has a score of 83.22 and Czechia has one of 83.58, which place them into the “Satisfactory” cluster of countries. Journalists in Georgia as well as in three of the V4 countries (Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland) have been subject to violence (BBC 2020; The Guardian 2021; IPI 2020; Civil.ge 2021). In some cases, extremist far-right groups are enabled by passive law enforcement authorities to attack journalists. In some countries, critical media have been the direct target of government authorities. Therefore, this report analyses the key internal and external drivers of political polarization and their impact on media polarization. Solutions aimed at decreasing media polarization and assisting the electorate to make informed decisions are also outlined.

Research Methodology:

The goal of the study was to (1) assess internal and external political factors that aggravate polarization in the context of the war in Ukraine; (2) Identify solutions to help mitigate deepening political and media polarization in support of fostering informed decision-making by voters in Georgia and the V4 states.

The research took place in the period between the start of the war in Ukraine and the end of the project implementation period. The paper was written by researchers from all project-implementing organizations: Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) - Georgia, Hungarian Europe Society - Hungary, Strategic Analysis Think Tank - Slovakia, Masaryk University - Czechia, and Institute of Public Affairs (ISP) - Poland. The research focus was on Georgia and comparative analyses have been driven with the target Visegrad states.

In this report, we used the following definition of polarization: “A political tool — articulated to demarcate frontiers between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and to stake out communities perceived as moral orders. Polarization is a situation in which two groups create each other through demarcation of the frontier between them” (Palonen 2009). However, as a specific form of polarization, affective polarization is best suited to the contexts of Georgia and the Visegrad countries. The term “affective polarisation” is a “tendency among party supporters (partisans) to view other party/parties as a disliked out-group(s), while holding positive in-group feelings for one’s own party”(Reiljan 2020).

Research design was based on mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. For research purposes, the methods of data collection were:

- **Desk research:** literature review, statistical data analyses, existing public opinion polls.
- **Expert surveys (See the survey questionnaire as Annex 1):** in Georgia and V4 states, two categories of respondents were targeted: journalists and experts/CSO representatives. Overall 109 respondents were surveyed in 5 countries and in each country there were approximately 20 respondents. Overall, 55 media experts and 54 journalists from Georgia and V4 states were interviewed.
- The respondents had to mark their answers on a 5-point scale (where 5 was very relevant and 1 very irrelevant).
- The average assessment score for each survey question was calculated, providing a consolidated view of the collective opinion. This method offers a systematic approach to revealing patterns in respondent opinions, and enables us to identify consensus or divergence across the surveyed topics.
- The survey also contained two open questions. The responses to these were used for the qualitative analyses. Thematic coding tools were used and grouping of the responses in Matrix was done.
- **In-depth interviews (See the interview questionnaire as Annex 2):** 3 interviews were conducted in each country with media representatives and experts. The selection of the respondents was purposeful. Interviews were analyzed using the Matrix program, with the use of thematic categories and cross-country thematic data analyses. Vivo and color coding methods were used.

Research Limitations

There are a few important methodological limitations to be acknowledged. Firstly, the survey results are not representative, and the analyses are mostly based on the perceptions of the experts and journalists. Secondly, the survey is not representative in the statistical sense, given that the study used a purposive sampling method. There was also a difference in methodology between the countries, In Poland, survey responses were received from journalists only, while in the other four states (Georgia, Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia) responses came from both media experts and journalists. However, it should be noted that the Polish researchers managed fill this gap by conducting in-depth interviews with media experts in Poland.

Chapter 1: Mapping the domestic and external causes of polarization in Georgia and V4 states

Georgia

The Georgian media landscape is highly polarized as a result of wider political polarization. The Georgian media is affected by political polarization and at the same time it is one of the stimulators and sources of deepening political and societal division in Georgia. After the 2020 parliamentary elections, media polarization increased dramatically, and now Georgia is a country characterized by “sharp polarization” in the way its everyday politics is conducted as well as over societal values and the direction the country is taking (Gegeshidze and De Waal 2022). The Georgian media has become a reflection of Georgian political processes. Few non-partisan media outlets exist, which makes electoral decision-making difficult.

Polarization previously mainly related to domestic political developments in the country, but since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, foreign policy has also become a source of polarization. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has had profound negative effects on Georgia and its Europeanisation process. These issues have now even overshadowed the domestic issues around which the society was already polarized. This situation has fundamentally reshaped some critical assumptions about politics and security. Therefore, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the situation has become more sensitive and coverage of the Ukraine situation partly overshadowed the socio-economic problems Georgia faces (UNDP 2022). Although all media sectors were focused on developments in Ukraine, their coverage was influenced by deep political divisions in Georgia’s society. The war has exacerbated political polarization and radicalization in Georgia. Against the backdrop of the developments in Ukraine, far-right media agencies began to more openly and boldly spread pro-Russian narratives in society. Consequently, the rhetoric of anti-Russian media has become more critical and radical too.

It is apparent that the perceptions of experts and media representatives coincide in terms of identifying domestic and external factors of polarization. In terms of domestic factors, the majority of them name “rhetoric of the ruling political party” followed by “pro-Russian propaganda” and “disinformation” (See figure 2). Although these are named as domestic factors of polarization, all these are related to foreign policy, in particular to Russia. This is also reinforced by the fact that when we asked them to name foreign political factors, the most acute factors were named as “relations with Russia,” “war in Ukraine, and “relations with Ukraine” (See figure 3). This correctly reflects the fact that the internal or external factors driving the polarization are ultimately echoes of what has developed since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

Figure 2.

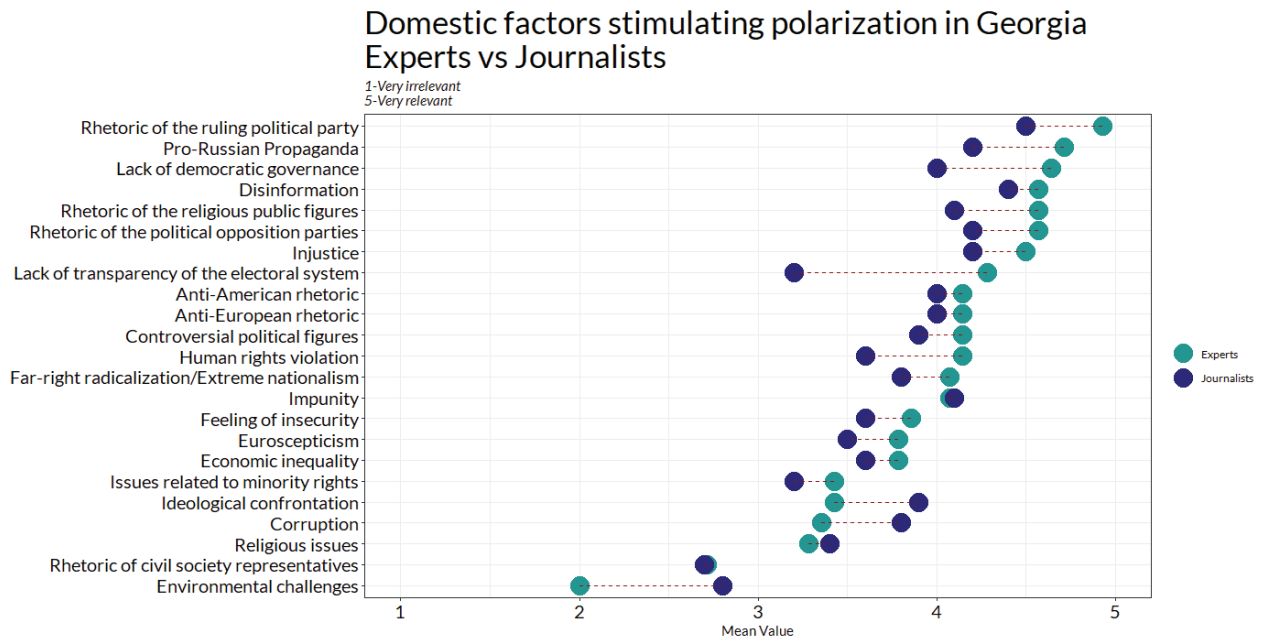
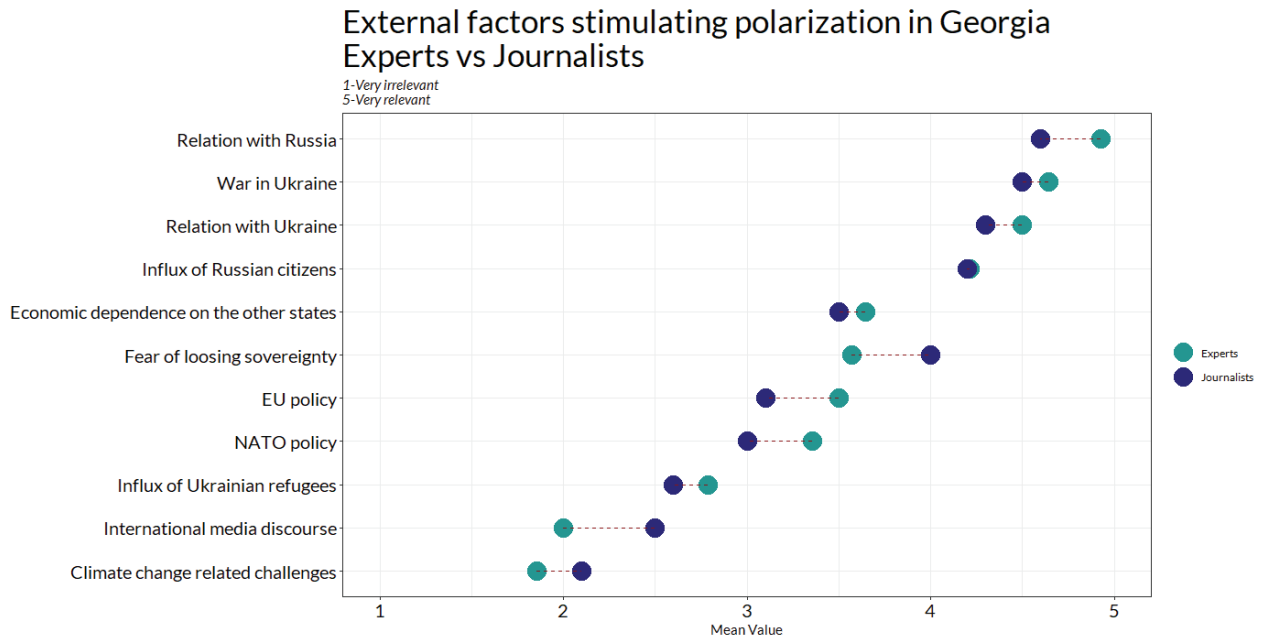


Figure 3.



According to the World Press Freedom Index 2023, Georgia lags behind the V4 states with an overall score of 61.69 and falls into the category of “Problematic Situation” based on the evaluated examples of abuses and acts of violence against journalists. In Georgia, cases of government or opposition politicians influencing editorial policies of media outlets, and a high level of hate speech were identified (Reporters Without Borders 2023). There is also an emphasis on the high level of media polarization in Georgia in the report. Therefore, this chapter analyzes key stimulators of polarization in Georgia and proposes ways to mitigate it in support of voters’ informed decision-making.

Polling shows that the vast majority of people believe that the key actors dividing the country are politicians, followed by Russia and then by the Georgian media, which to some extent coincides with the expert survey results conducted under the framework of this research in which a major domestic factor stimulating polarization is named as “the rhetoric of the ruling party” followed by “pro-Russian propaganda.” In particular, according to the latest NDI poll results, public trust towards the government and generally towards political elites decreased. The majority say neither the ruling party nor elected opposition parties act in their interest. Moreover, based on the NDI 2022 September study, polarization remains a challenge, as most citizens feel that democratic institutions are pushing people apart, instead of bringing them together (Radio Liberty 2022). Georgians believe multiple forces are dividing their country, including politicians (87 percent) the country’s leaders (79 percent), Russia (83 percent), the Georgian media (82 percent), and the economic system (80 percent), among others (NDI 2022). The public's frustration and loss of trust in political parties might have a negative impact on the results of future elections. Along with political parties, the media is also responsible for this because they do not allow the public to make informed choices due to the one-sided broadcasting tradition that they follow.

Hungary

The Hungarian media sphere suffers under numerous structural tensions. Among them are extreme media ownership concentration, distorted media market, captured media, politically biased state advertising, government propaganda, strongly polarized journalism and a low level of trust in the media.

As a consequence, Hungary falls significantly behind in media indexes: according to the latest World Press Freedom Index, the country ranked 72nd with one of the worst results in the EU (Reporters Without Borders 2023). Additionally, since 2022 internet freedom in Hungary has been ranked in the "partly free" category (Freedom House 2022). In the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023, Hungary was among the worst performers as well, with only 25% of respondents saying they trust most news most of the time, which is the worst result in the V4 countries (Newman 2023).

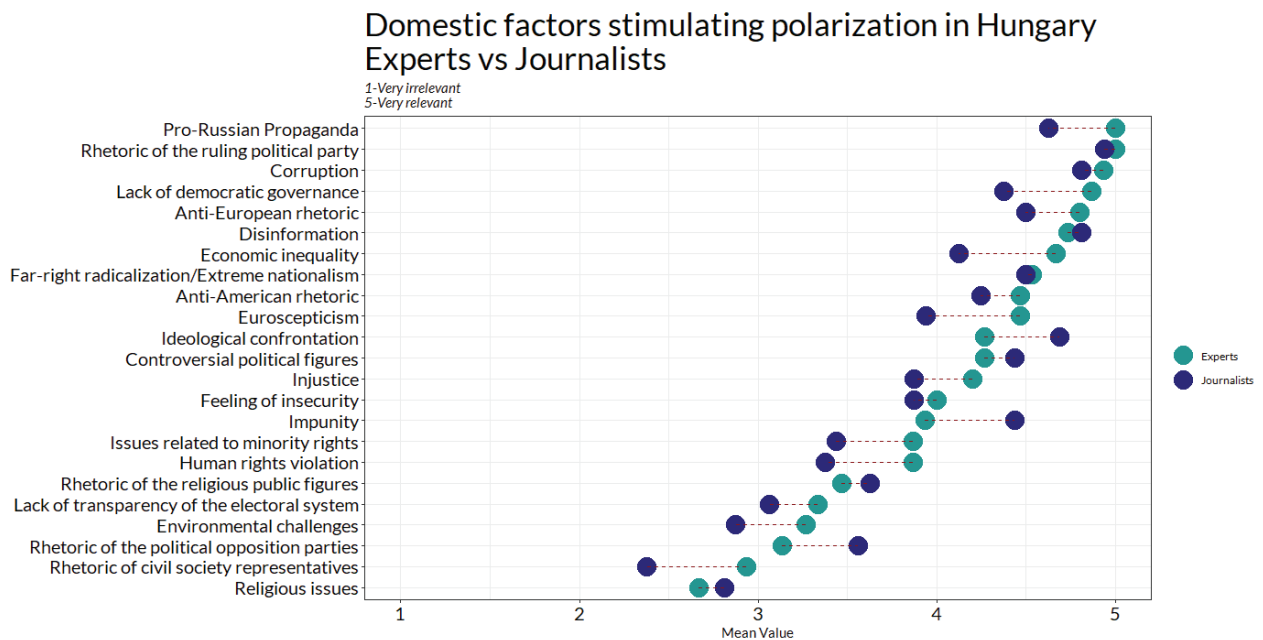
Additionally, since February 2022, the media empire of the ruling party has started to echo propaganda claiming that Hungary stands on the side of peace in a war of two foreign nations. Russia has been often portrayed as the real victim in the conflict, provoked by Western powers. Echoing fake news rooted in Russian disinformation, avoidance of the subject of Russian military brutality has become characteristic of the non-free part of the media (Molnár and Kreko 2023).

In this research project, Hungarian journalists and media experts gave the highest number of answers amongst the respondents from the participating V4+ countries. The outcomes of the survey, however, cannot be taken to be representative. Especially as the consequence of extreme polarization between political camps in the country, supporters of the government would not react and reply to a questionnaire run by an independent NGO.

We can detect from the comments of the Hungarian respondents how discontented they are with the current state of affairs. Pro-government media not only dominates the field, but functions as a propaganda machine that deprives people of the opportunity to make informed choices whilst turning them against each other. Citizens often live in different virtual alternative realities. The isolation of the independent press from the majority of society blocks dialogue between citizens with differing stances on political issues. Further dividing and polarizing factors include regular smear campaigns by pro-government outlets – owned by government-aligned businessmen – targeting critical public intellectuals, domestic and foreign out-groups, “Brussels” and the Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros. Pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian attitudes, which can be easily observed in “official” coverage of the war, have also been identified. Moreover, fake news has had a devastating impact on political culture and general trust in the institutions.

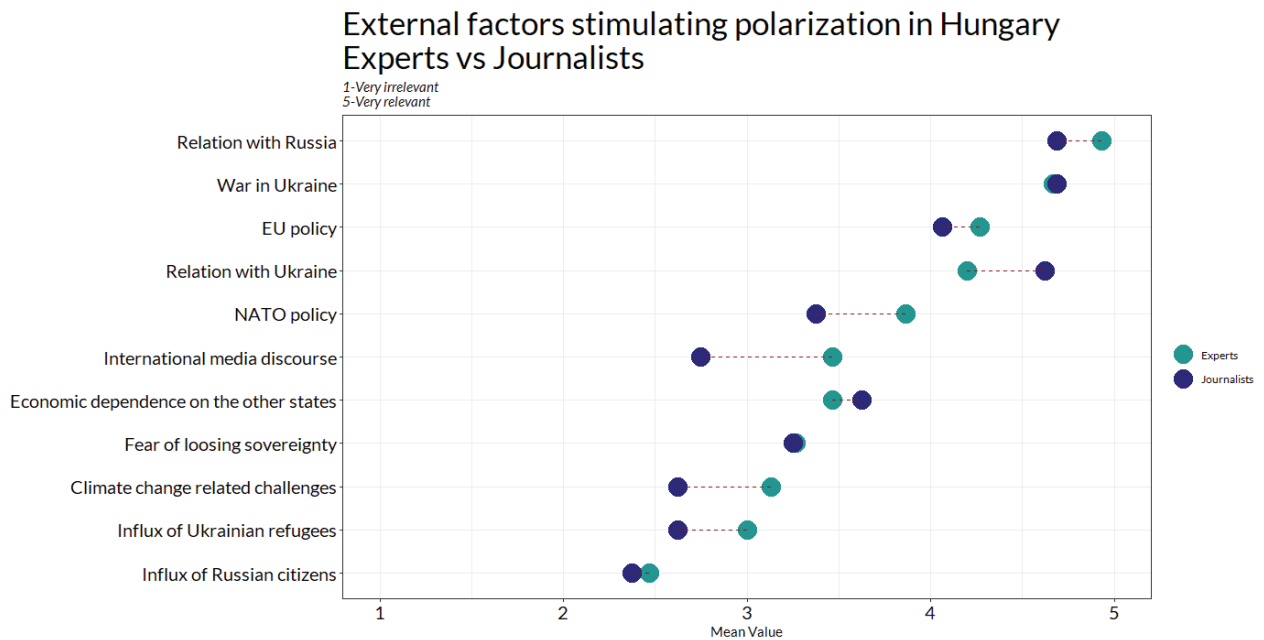
According to the respondents, the most important domestic factors of polarization are the rhetoric of the ruling party, disinformation and corruption. The least relevant aspects were the rhetoric of civil society representatives, religious issues and environmental challenges. (See Figure 4).

Figure 4.



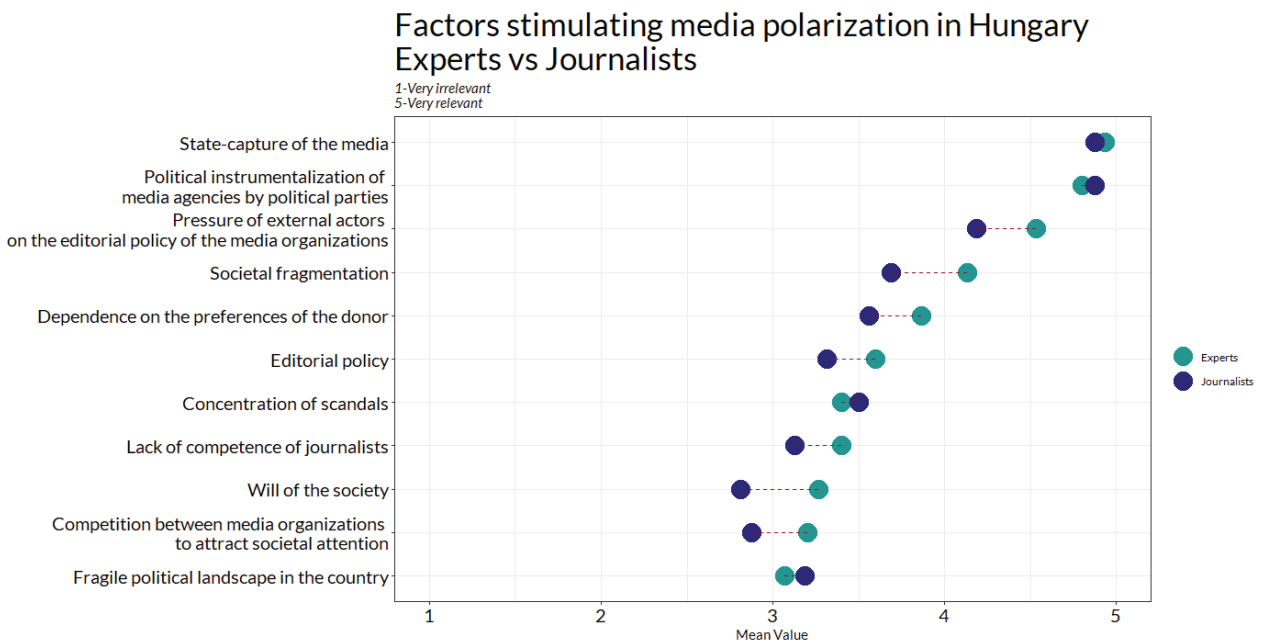
Regarding external factors of polarization, the Russian war in Ukraine and relations with Ukraine and Russia were considered the most relevant, followed by EU policy. The influx of Russian citizens and, somewhat surprisingly, Ukrainian refugees in Hungary were seen as the least significant external factors. (See Figure 5).

Figure 5.



In terms of media polarization, journalists believe that it is state-capture of the media, and the political instrumentalization of media agencies by political parties (presumably the ruling party) which mostly influence the current situation. Social expectations have a limited role in perceived media polarization: the will of society as well as competition between media organizations to attract societal attention had the lowest scores. (See Figure 6).

Figure 6.



As expected, experts and journalists have very similar/overlapping views about the most and least influential factors that determine political and media polarization. Amongst the external factors, journalists tended to give lower scores than experts. Otherwise, both groups think that pro-Russian propaganda (often simply echoed by pro-government media outlets) have a decisive role in shaping public discourse. Overall, both journalists and experts found almost all the listed factors relevant (i.e. mean scores above the mid-point). It is noteworthy that anti-American and anti-European sentiments in the mainstream pro-government media also have a relevant impact on the attitudes of citizens.

Slovakia

The role of independent media as a crucial guardian of democracy came sharply into focus in Slovakia following the tragic murders of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018. This unsettling event triggered significant societal and political transformations, highlighting the importance of media freedom as a cornerstone of democratic values. However, against the backdrop of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the results of early elections in September 2023, Slovakia finds itself at a critical juncture.

As Slovak society grapples with widespread frustration, growing distrust in institutions, and political apathy, this study aims to discern the consequences of these phenomena on democratic processes. Additionally, it investigates the measures taken to combat disinformation, emphasizing initiatives like fact-checking and media literacy programs. Against the backdrop of the lowest historical trust in institutions and an increasingly polarized political landscape, this paper assesses the influence of the war in Ukraine on public opinion and political narratives.

Ultimately, the dynamics of media polarization in Slovakia involve an interplay between political developments, societal attitudes, and media integrity.

Slovakia's media landscape is marked by polarization, driven by a polarized society, political turmoil leading up to the early elections in September 2023, and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The nation has witnessed a decline in citizen engagement in political life, exacerbated by challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, rising inflation, and frequent changes in government leadership over the past three years. The exploitation of illiberal tendencies by power-seeking politicians has become a troubling trend (GLOBSEC 2023).

Experts attribute media polarization in Slovakia to pro-Russian propaganda, a prevailing sense of insecurity, disinformation campaigns, and corruption. Notably, transparency in the electoral system is considered among the least relevant factors by experts. Corruption is identified as a focal point, eroding faith in the political system and fostering mistrust. Disinformation plays a pivotal role in amplifying divisions and spreading false narratives that contribute to a polarized environment (National Monitoring Center for Polarization2023).

Journalists align with experts, recognizing the significance of disinformation, pro-Russian propaganda, corruption, and politicians' rhetoric in contributing to media polarization. (See Figure 7). This shared understanding underscores the urgency of comprehensive solutions to address these challenges.

External factors, such as the conflict in Ukraine and relations with Russia, stand out as primary drivers of polarization (See Figure 8). Political upheavals preceding the September 2023 elections emerge as a noteworthy external factor injecting volatility into societal discourse. The intricate dance of international alliances and affiliations also contributes to external influences, shaping the multi-faceted nature of the issue.

Amongst the general factors contributing to societal polarization, experts point to social fragmentation, the collective will of society, and the fragility of the political system. Journalists add the concentration of scandals as an additional factor, fostering mistrust and contention (See Figure 9). In summary, the multi-faceted nature of societal polarization in Slovakia is influenced by a complex interplay of social, political, and media-related dynamics, requiring nuanced strategies to address and mitigate these forces.

Figure 7.

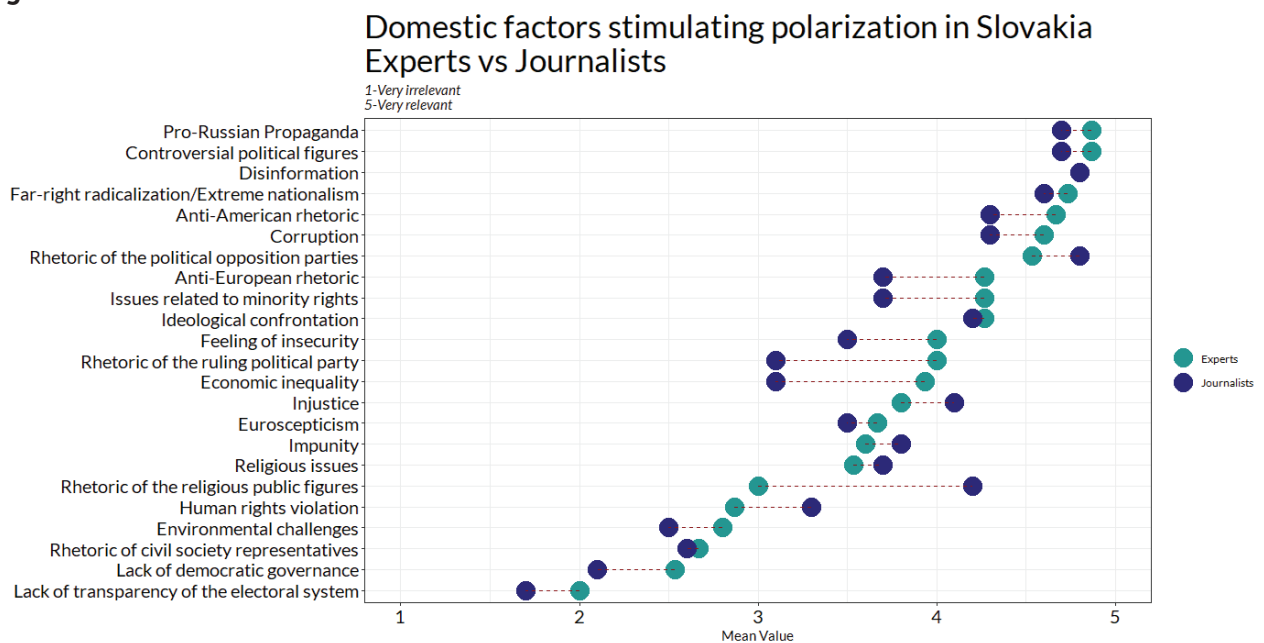


Figure 8.

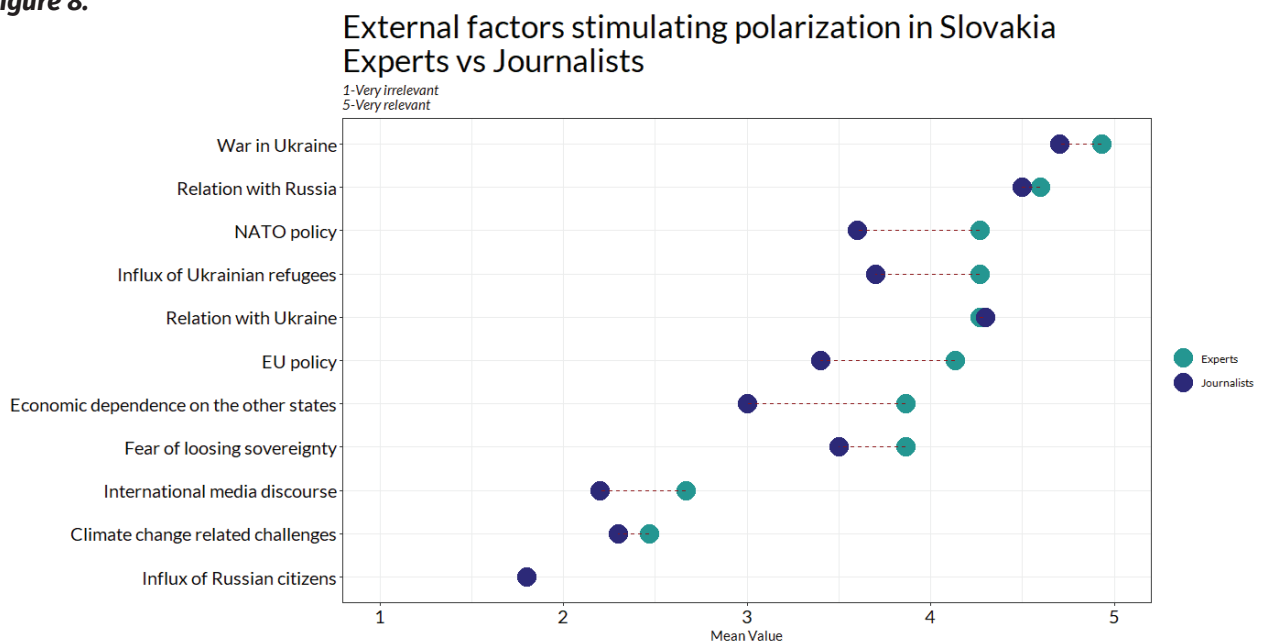
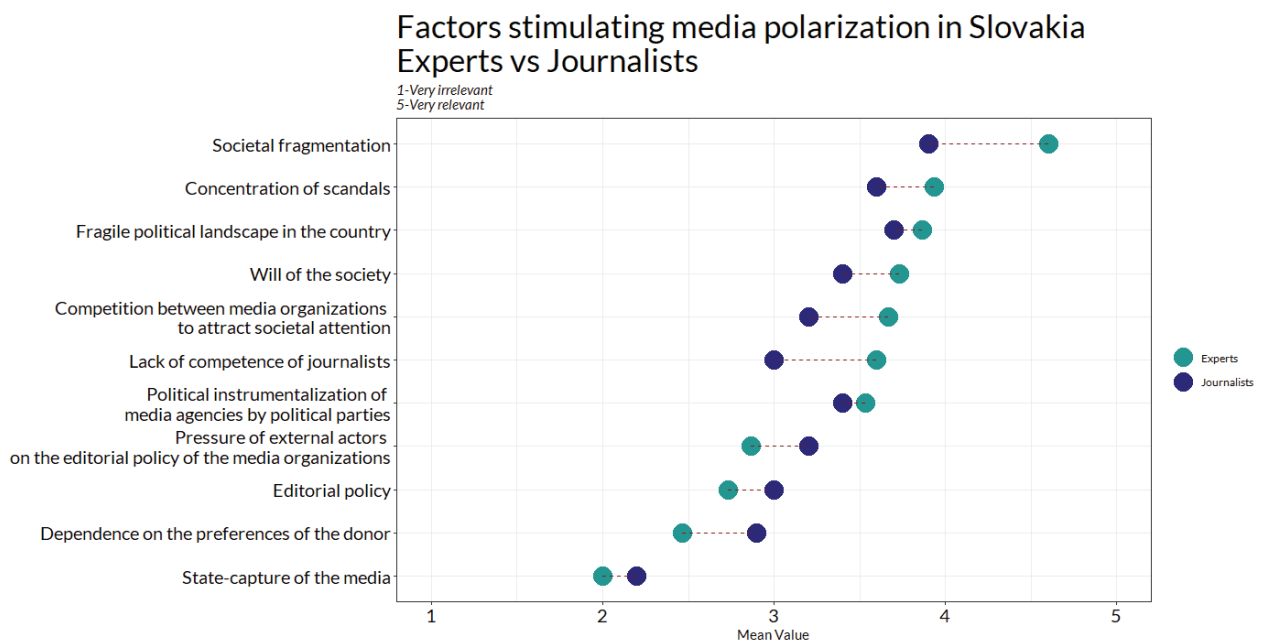


Figure 9.



Czechia

Czechia is often regarded as one of the most democratic countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Roberts 2020). There are, however, several factors contributing to democratic backsliding and polarization, including the widespread use of the internet and social media platforms. Additionally, political developments in the country have had a significant impact on societal polarization. Although the Czech Republic was once perceived as having one of the most stable party systems in the 1990s and 2000s, it is now characterized by an unstable and fragmented party system with shifting political cleavages. Comparative studies have shown that Czechia scores high on affective polarization of voters towards political parties (Orhan 2022). The nature and sources of this polarization remain unclear. Although some topics such as immigration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian war against Ukraine have the potential to polarize opinions, political attitudes cannot be clearly divided into two opposing poles. Public opinion is fragmented into smaller groups on various issues (Buchčík 2021).

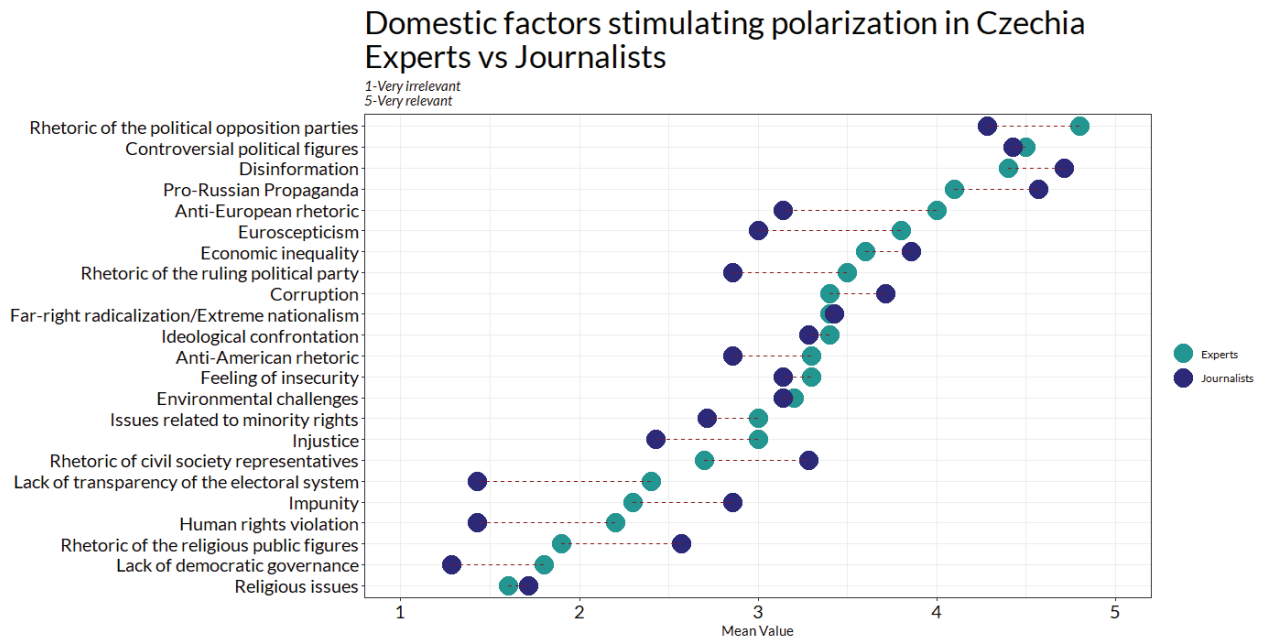
Compared to Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, the Czech Republic has free public media, which are also the most credible media outlets in the country. Moreover, public Czech TV has the biggest share in the market and the position of the public Czech Radio is strong as well. While there have been some tendencies towards political influence in these media outlets, particularly through media councils responsible for oversight of Czech TV and Czech Radio, the situation is not as tense as in neighboring countries. Most private media houses are owned by Czech oligarchs who purchased them from German owners during the 2000s and 2010s.

GLOBSEC's (2023) research suggests that Czechs are less susceptible to manipulative narratives, particularly those related to values and democracy. Among the countries observed in the Supporting Decrease of Media Polarization in Georgia and V4 States project, Czechia ranked highest in the World Press Freedom Index produced by Reporters without Borders (RSF 2024). Paradoxically, only 53% of GLOBSEC poll respondents express confidence in the mainstream media, while 72% consider their media to be rather or completely free, the highest figure among the Visegrad group countries (GLOBSEC 2023). The level of trust in the media has increased since 2020 and 2021, when only 38% and 30% respectively of the population trusted mainstream media. The peak of trust can be seen in 2022, when it rose to 58%. One possible explanation could be the disillusionment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the mainstream media's (in)ability to report on it reliably, as well as the initial moment of political unity at the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

In the Czech Republic, political issues are often transformed into culture wars between elites and ordinary people, which is a common tactic used by populists. Populist political actors tend to emphasize identities over ideological preferences which is reflected in the most salient domestic factor stimulating polarization (see Figure 10). The current political situation can be traced back to the 2013 early parliamentary elections, during which the support for established political parties, particularly the center-right wing parties, eroded. In addition to this erosion, new political actors such as the populist ANO emerged. A foreshadowing of this was seen in 2010 when the populist Public Affairs party won seats in the Chamber of Deputies, but they fell apart during their term. In contrast, ANO has become one of the main pillars of politics in the Czech Republic. Due to ANO's highly professional and efficient political marketing and communication, topics related to cultural wars and identity politics often become the focus of public discussion and media reporting, influencing people's attitudes and the mood of society. ANO is able to set the agenda not only in the political arena, but also in the media.

Political polarization may appear to be stagnant these days. On one side, there are the populist ANO and far-right populists SPD, currently in opposition in the Chamber of Deputies representing an almost anti-system opposition rather than an ideological one. On the other hand, five political parties, from centre to moderate right, currently form the government. Few voters move between these two groups. Political polarization between the government and opposition was exacerbated by the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine since February 2022. At the outset, ANO supported the government's backing of Ukraine, while the SPD did not express a position. However, opposition parties soon began using Czech support for Ukraine as means to criticize the government. This trend was particularly noticeable during the 2023 presidential election. One of the candidates, Andrej Babiš (ANO), openly deployed disinformation and adopted the rhetoric of Kremlin propaganda in his campaign. After the elections, ANO's rhetoric became more moderate. However, it still occasionally oscillates between criticizing the government and using rhetoric similar to Kremlin propaganda. For example, ANO has used the phrase 'we don't want war, we want peace' to criticize the government's defence spending at the beginning of 2024.

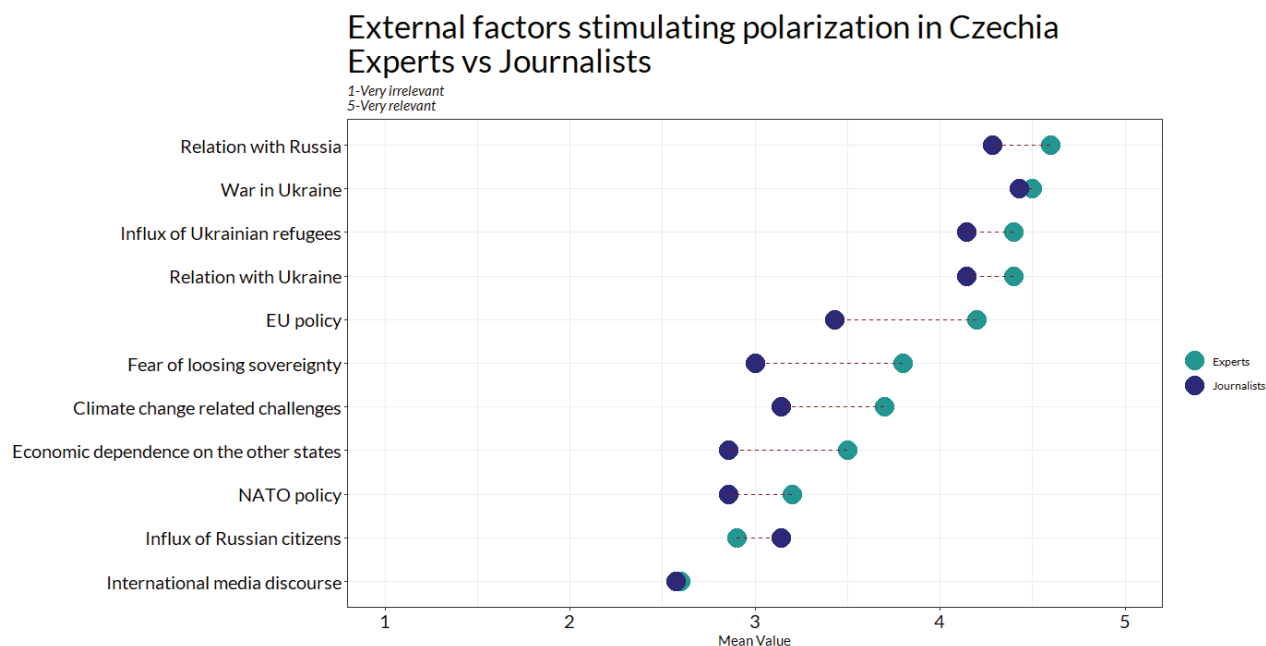
Figure 10.



The role of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns in the Czech information environment are significant (see Figure 10). In the 2000s, it influenced the debate on security policy and skewed public opinion against the placement of a US/NATO military defence radar on Czech territory. Since 2014, when Russia occupied Ukrainian Crimea and supported separatist tendencies in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, Kremlin propaganda has become more active in the Czech Republic. President Miloš Zeman was its most influential spokesperson between 2013 and 2023, seconded in parliament by the Communist Party and the SPD. President Zeman continued to promote Kremlin propaganda even after the attacks on ammunition warehouses in the Czech Republic and the revelation that Russian agents were behind them in 2021. Just a few days before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, Zeman blamed Western intelligence services for the embarrassment and claimed that Russia would never attack Ukraine. Only the events of February 2022 forced him to stop being an active supporter of the Kremlin. However, his activity and rhetoric have significantly influenced public debate and polarized opinions in society over the years. Moreover, Russian propaganda is spread not only by political actors but also through various media outlets on the internet.

There are also other influences on the Czech public sphere connected to Kremlin policies or propaganda. Most of these are associated with the Russian war against Ukraine, and are focused on subjects such as Ukrainian refugees (see Figure 11). Furthermore, Russian propaganda and some domestic political actors promote topics related to the European Union and its policies. Skepticism towards EU politics in the Czech Republic can be traced back to the era of President Václav Klaus (2003-2013), who remains the most prominent critic of the EU in the country. This historical influence is still evident today.

Figure 11.



Poland

Polish society is deeply divided, as confirmed by numerous sociological studies. The sources of this lie in complex social determinants, which are related to variations in education levels, income, and attitudes towards, on the one hand, social modernization associated with globalization and integration with Western Europe, and, on the other hand, towards the traditionalist, conservative worldview promoted by the Polish Catholic Church hierarchy. The results of successive elections clearly show a division between 'liberal' metropolises and 'conservative' small towns and rural areas. However, these conditions do not explain the current situation in Poland, often characterized by commentators as a conflict between two hostile tribes. To understand the current state of Polish politics, one must go back even further than the assumption of power by the Law and Justice party (PiS) and its coalition partners in 2015.

On 10th April 2010, near the Russian city of Smolensk, a Polish plane crashed with 88 people on board, including Lech Kaczyński – the then President of Poland and the twin brother of the leader of Law and Justice party, Jarosław Kaczyński. The plane was en route to the nearby town of Katyń, and the official Polish delegation on board aimed to pay tribute to the memory of Polish war prisoners buried there, executed on Stalin's orders in the spring of 1940. Although both the Polish official investigation and the Russian investigation concluded that the crash was caused by adverse weather conditions and pilot error, soon a conspiracy theory began to spread that the plane crash resulted from a deliberate attack on President Kaczyński, orchestrated by a conspiracy involving the then Prime Minister of Poland, Donald Tusk, and the Russian authorities. This narrative was picked up by the leaders of the Law and Justice party and turned into a political myth of Lech Kaczyński's martyrdom on one side, and Donald Tusk's treason on the other (Figure 12).

The creation of the “Smolensk myth” fostered the radicalization of the Law and Justice party and soon it was abandoned by many moderate politicians. Those who remained were those solely obedient to Jarosław Kaczyński. Since that moment, polarization in Polish politics, which was already evident earlier, rose to unprecedented levels. In the 1990s, the main political division was between post-communist parties and those stemming from the anti-communist opposition. In 2005, before the presidential and parliamentary elections, PiS mobilized its voters by promoting a division between “solidary Poland”, which PiS claimed to represent, and a supposedly unjust and cruel “liberal Poland”, which was said to be represented by Donald Tusk's party. But since Smolensk, there have been very few moments of national consensus. The only two, in 2014 and 2022, occurred when Poland faced Russian aggression against Ukraine, which all political forces perceived to be a threat to the security of Poland.

Another factor that contributed to further deepening divisions in Poland was the policy pursued by the Law and Justice party and its allies after winning the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2015, as well as the methods used to achieve this. Simply put, it was a policy aimed at transforming Poland into a de facto authoritarian state, following the model of Viktor Orban's Hungary. Moreover, the constitution was routinely violated in this process, as unlike Orban, Kaczyński never had a constitutional majority. The 'reforms' pushed by Jarosław Kaczyński's party encompassed all the most important areas of public life. The next chapter will describe the actions regarding the media, as they are crucial to understanding the current state of the Polish media.

Figure 12.

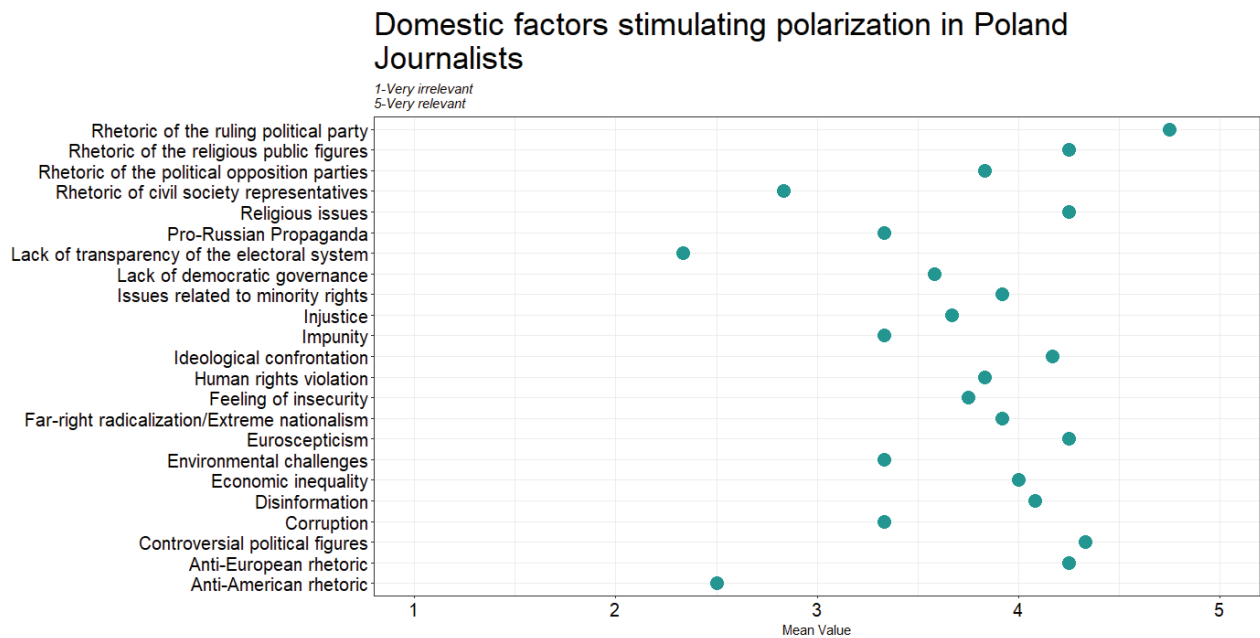
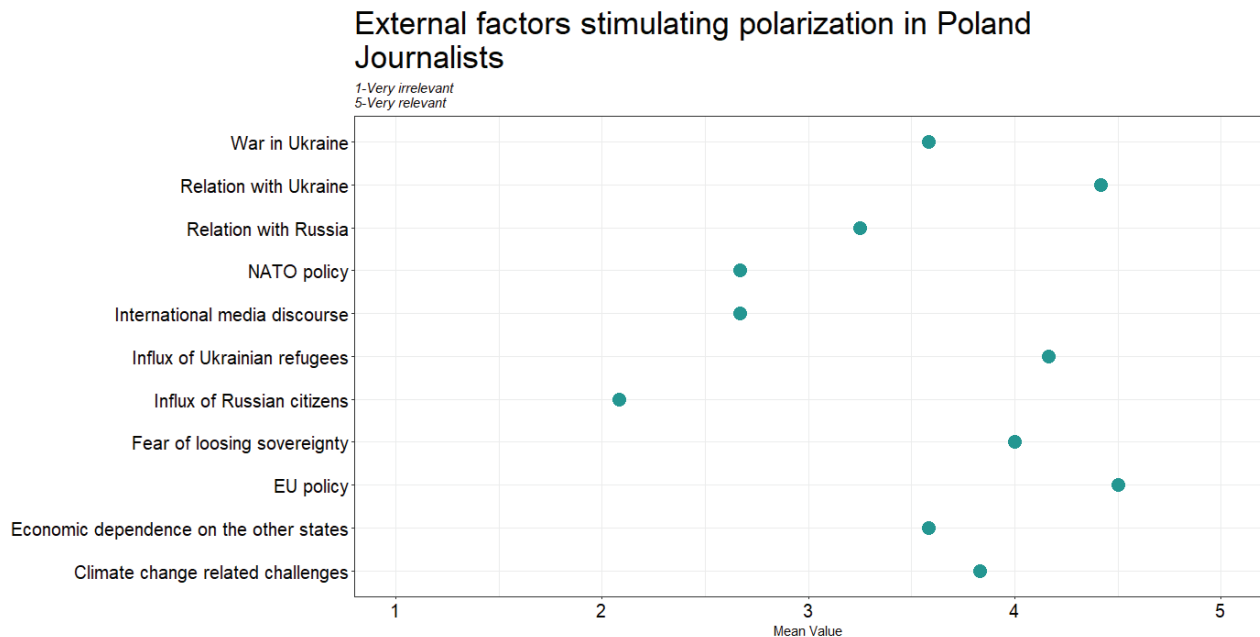


Figure 13.

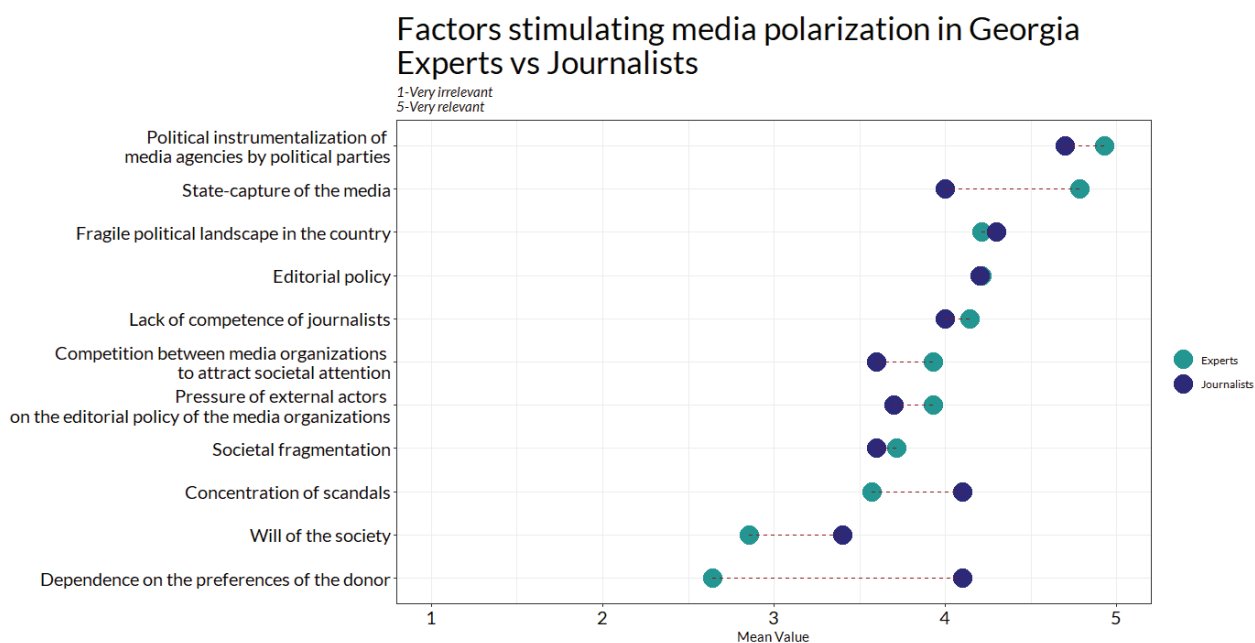


Chapter 2: Consequences of political polarization on deepening media polarization and its impact on democracy in Georgia and V4 states

Georgia

Over the past decade, the media landscape in Georgia has become very strongly polarized (Kavtaradze 2021). The majority of media outlets started mirroring the narratives of either the ruling and opposition political parties. Accordingly, the media space became occupied by two radically different discourses. Therefore, the media has become one of the main instruments of political polarization as well as the key driver of the so-called affective polarization. This is also confirmed by the responses of the surveyed experts and journalists, who name “political instrumentalization of media agencies by political parties” as the key factor. It is also noteworthy that the experts believe that polarization is less likely to be caused because of the preferences of the donors, while journalists see it as a factor in promoting polarization (Figure 14).

Figure 14.



As the ISET Index reveals, the level of polarization has increased since 2020 and is mostly connected to parliamentary elections and the boycott of the opposition parties of parliament after they refused to recognize the election results (Keshelava & Tsereteli 2023). However, the fast increase in political and media polarization levels became visible mostly in February 2022, after the start of Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine. The failure of Georgia to obtain EU membership candidate status alongside Ukraine and Moldova contributed to extreme political polarization that was directly reflected in the media environment. The European Commission granted Georgia the chance to gain candidate status but made this conditional on the fulfillment of 12 recommendations. These included a demand to “address the issue of political polarization, through ensuring cooperation across political parties in the spirit of the April 19 agreement.” The government’s commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration came under question, after controversial negotiations with the EU regarding Georgia’s candidate status, its refusal to follow recommendations by Charles Michel and the European Commission over judicial reforms, and a lack of solidarity with Ukraine in its war against Russia. However, civil society managed to save the country’s image by staging massive rallies in solidarity with Ukraine and opposing the so-called “Russian Law” that cast civil society organizations as foreign influence agents. Pro-Western media played a tremendous role in ensuring the local visibility and international media coverage of the developments in Georgia. However, pro-government and pro-Russia media outlets tried to present an alternative narrative on these processes. They presented these developments as if loud criticism of Russia, support for the government of Ukraine, and protests against the law about agents were tantamount to a call to war. The emergence of a fear of war further increased the degree of division of the population into two political camps.

Even after belatedly granting EU candidate status to Georgia in December 2023, 9 out of 12 recommendations remained unfulfilled, among which was the requirement for the reduced political polarization (European Commission 2023). However, in early April 2024, the Georgian Government reintroduced the Russian-style law on foreign agents that is perceived by many members of the European Parliament as a means to shut the doors to the country's European future (Baccini 2024). When it comes to the external factors of Russia and the EU, polarization of the media is not necessarily built around political parties' narratives. In particular, in such cases, media polarization is based on pro-European and anti-European discourses that are linked to the spread of pro-Russian messages. Since the vast majority of the Georgian population supports the European integration of Georgia, pro-opposition media outlets such as Mtavari, TV Pirveli, and Formula, report pro-European narratives because of societal support for these and are not solely mirroring the statements of opposition parties. On the other hand, the so-called pro-government media outlets such as Imedi, Pos TV, and Rustavi 2, (Keshelava & Tsereteli 2023) choose tactical reporting depending on the rhetoric and behavior of the Georgian government. ISET research has also shown that political party ratings are usually reflected in media polarization patterns but this tendency has decreased since 2022 (Keshelava & Tsereteli 2023). This might be explained by the changed political rhetoric around the Russian war in Ukraine which is also one of the key findings of this research (See Chart 2).

When it comes to polarization in social media, Freedom House reports that the country's telecommunications regulator has instructed internet service providers (ISPs) to block hundreds of websites over the past few years (Freedom House 2023). Moreover, Meta identified and reported fake accounts spreading pro-government narratives. However, the mix of partisan, mass, and affective polarization through online channels and also through different governmental and CSO platforms became most visible and obvious in April 2024, when the government started promoting online posts with profiles of government media or government officials. The main messages of the posts was that the law is not Russian and that it only serves to ensure the transparency of non-governmental organizations (Imedi TV 2024). Critical media agencies and CSOs responded by creating alternative online posts explaining why the law is Russian-inspired, why it is not about transparency, and why could it ruin Georgia's EU integration prospects (TI Georgia). It should also be mentioned that many people reported pro-government accounts and Meta has classified them as false information (Publika 2024). As a result, the Georgian Prime Minister blamed two Georgian NGOs GRASS and MDF for misleading Meta. In particular, he said: "It became clear that Facebook and social media are censored by our political opponent parties." This is a clear example of informational war and a demonstration of how political polarization is fueled in real politics and intensified in the mainstream media and internet space.

Hungary

As elaborated above, political polarization has accelerated since right after the takeover of power by Fidesz in 2010. Russian aggression against Ukraine was misused by the ruling party in 2022: its dominant media portrayed the opposition as staunch supporters of involving Hungary in a war between two foreign countries. The small group of remaining independent media outlets reported in a balanced way about the efforts made by the European Union against Russian imperialism, whilst unmasking Viktor Orbán's special relationship with Putin's authoritarian regime. The relatively weak and fragmented opposition parties have also emphasized similar arguments.

Partisan political polarization has gone hand in hand with media polarization in Hungary. As our interviewed stakeholders argue – in accordance with the conclusions of international media organization reports –, the state of media freedom and pluralism can be described as only partly free in Hungary in spite of its EU membership. State-captured media, concentration of ownership of media outlets to a small circle of pro-government figures, and government/ruling party propaganda characterize the Hungarian media. Facebook and YouTube have also become major campaign tools of the government which has put considerable financial resources into this. Media polarization is increasing and it is especially palpable in billboard campaigns and state propaganda against the European Union.

As for the link between political polarization and media polarization, in Hungary, the media has become the servant and not the supervisor of the political system. People working in the field are not journalists, but propagandists, often receiving instructions from the authorities. Unfortunately, citizens' attitudes have been also successfully influenced by smear campaigns: meaning that support for Ukraine' cause has significantly dropped. In general, although Fidesz supporters tend to deny being brain-washed, they live in their own bubble and do not know what the world looks like outside of it.

Most of the national, regional and local media are pro-government, especially in rural areas, where people are not able to access alternative sources of information. While well-educated and well-informed media consumers can find what they are really interested in, it is necessary to have a high awareness of media consumption and be able to differentiate quality content from propaganda.

Slovakia

Political polarization in Slovakia has had profound consequences on deepening media polarization and, subsequently, democracy itself. The critical role of independent media, initially underscored by the tragic murders of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018, has faced escalating challenges amidst the broader backdrop of political and social transformations.

Media polarization in Slovakia is propelled by multi-faceted factors. Social media platforms, as highlighted by the GLOBSEC Trends 2022 report, play a pivotal role in disseminating disinformation, contributing to the creation of information bubbles and reinforcing existing biases. Limited media literacy further exacerbates susceptibility to polarizing narratives, with more than half of Slovaks, according to the report, believing in conspiracy theories. (GLOBSEC 2022)

Efforts to combat disinformation in Slovakia have seen improvement, with initiatives like Konšpirátori.sk and the Center for Media Education and Monitoring (CVDM) focusing on fact-checking and media literacy programs. Collaboration between civil society organizations and the government, exemplified by the Guide for Public Administrations, reflects a concerted effort to strategically communicate and enhance media literacy.

The state of the political landscape, marked by turbulence and government mismanagement, has eroded public trust in institutions (See figure 15). Slovakia currently faces historical lows in institutional trust, as indicated by the GLOBSEC Trends 2023 report, with only 18% of respondents trusting the government. This lack of trust provides fertile ground for political polarization, with some (former) opposition parties blaming the West for the war and undermining support for Ukraine, stances that resonate with a significant portion of the population (GLOBSEC 2023).

The full-scale war in Ukraine has sparked narratives undermining public support, causing societal fragmentation (See Figure 14). Slovak political leaders, particularly from the former opposition, used disinformation to spread the narrative that the government favored Ukrainians over Slovak citizens. This narrative gained momentum in the run-up to the September 2023 parliamentary elections, when politicians competed for public support. After the elections, this opposition came to power and formed the current government coalition.

The anti-Ukrainian narratives, however, prevailed and were present also during the pre-election campaign before the presidential elections (April 2024), that were again won by a candidate that was using pro-Russian narratives. The whole campaign of the newly elected President of Slovakia was built on the fear-mongering that his opponent, the candidate of the progressive-liberal pro-Western opposition, will drag Slovakia into the war in Ukraine and Slovak soldiers will be fighting in Ukraine, despite the fact that the president in the Slovak political system does not possess the power to send troops to a warzone. Only the government and parliament acting in sync have such powers. Nonetheless, this was one of the decisive narratives that helped the candidate of the current government to win the presidential race in Slovakia.

Czechia

The year 2013 was significant not only for political changes but also for the media. Prior to the elections, Andrej Babiš, the founder, main sponsor, and leader of ANO, purchased MAFRA, the largest media house in the Czech Republic, which controls approximately one third of the print market, as well as one of the most listened-to radio station, and a music TV channel. Consequently, significant personnel changes occurred in the newspapers under MAFRA, particularly the newspaper MF Dnes. A significant number of journalists and managers declined to work for a media outlet owned and directly controlled by a Czech oligarch and politician. This was not a one-time occurrence, but rather a process that took place over several years and in several waves. As a result, a variety of new media outlets, particularly online media, were created that set themselves apart from MAFRA and its often-biased news coverage in favour of ANO or Andrej Babiš. Since February 2024, MAFRA no longer belongs to Babiš's portfolio. It has been sold to the investment group Kaprain, which is owned by another Czech billionaire, Karel Pražák. It is difficult to predict the consequences of the ownership change. However, given the weakening role of mainstream media in recent decades, it is unlikely that there will be any major changes in the conditions of the media market, the functioning of the media, or in the level of trust of citizens in the media (CZE Respondent 1, 2023).

The approach of prominent political figures towards the media has also altered the media environment. Senior political figures such as former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (ANO), President Miloš Zeman or Tomio Okamura (SPD) would make decisions to grant interviews based on which journalists and editors were seen as likely to take a non-critical approach (CZE Respondent 2, 2023). Miloš Zeman primarily spoke to media outlets that did not question his views, even if they were known to spread Kremlin propaganda.

Poland

The actions of Law and Justice (PiS) party and its allies towards the media fulfill the definition of 'media capture' identified by Marius Dragomir. He identified four major elements (Dragomir 2019): 1) capture of the media regulator; 2) control of the public service broadcaster; 3) use of state financing as a control tool; and 4) ownership control. The main steps were as follows:

In December 2015, an amendment to the Broadcasting and Cinematography Act was approved by the parliament, in the face of opposition protest. It interrupted the terms of the existing boards of directors and supervisory boards of the public television and radio. The new presidents were no longer appointed by the National Broadcasting Council consisting of 5 members appointed by the Sejm (2), the Senate (1), and the President (2), but directly by the Minister of Treasury.

In January 2016, the National Broadcasting Council was replaced by the National Media Council. It was a formally pluralistic collegial body, but subservient to the ruling party, which had a decisive majority within it. Shortly thereafter, a politician fully subservient to Jarosław Kaczyński, known as the author of brutal political campaigns targeting Donald Tusk, took over the leadership of state television. Journalists from public broadcasters began to be systematically expelled or left voluntarily. They were replaced by journalists who had previously worked in right-wing private media, favoring PiS and promoting the 'Smolensk myth.'

In 2020, the oil company PKN Orlen, of which the largest (49%) shareholder is the Polish state, took over Polska Press – the largest regional media company, which is the owner of nearly 150 local daily and weekly journals as well as many online media outlets. This not only enabled the government to take control over local private media outlets, but also gave it tools to control access to competition. Before the parliamentary elections of 2023, there was a situation in which one of the local newspapers owned by Polska Press refused to publish advertisements for one of the opposition groups, citing a misalignment of values promoted in those advertisements with the 'editorial line of the company'.

Also in 2020, PKN took over the largest press distributor, RUCH. This enabled the company to control access to the regional and local newspaper market.

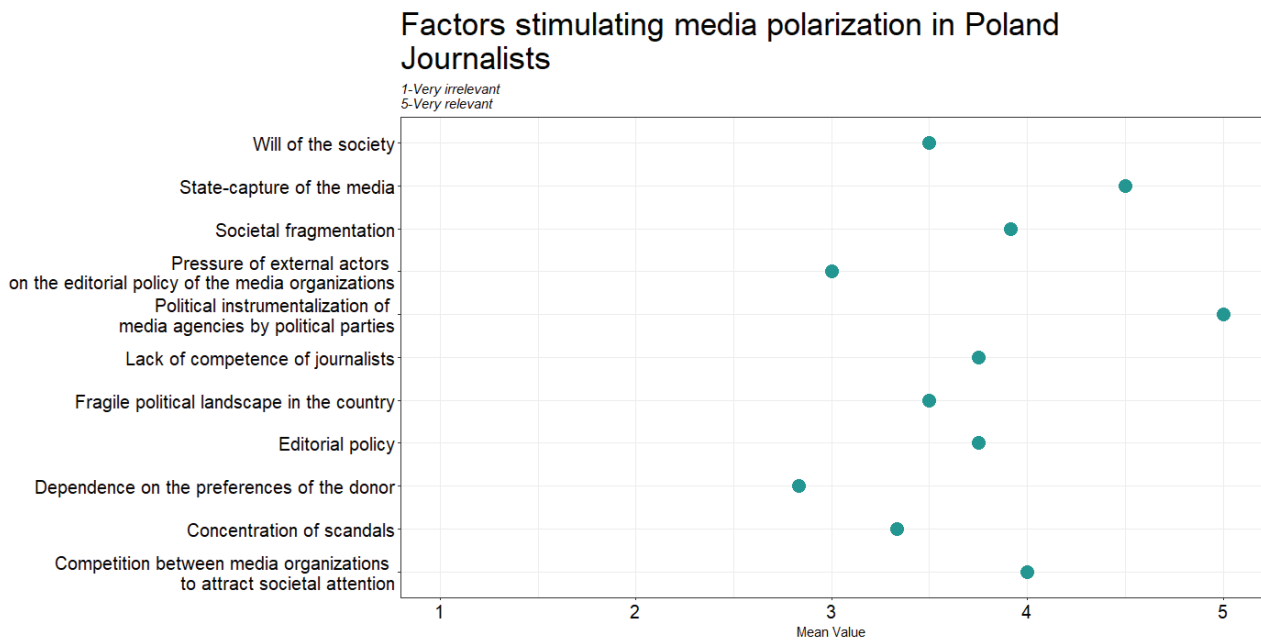
Private media critical of the government were denied access to state advertising income. And private media critical of the government were subjected to a great number of vexatious lawsuits or SLAPPS.

In 2021, an amendment to the Broadcasting and the Cinematography Act was passed, known by media term Lex TVN. Officially, the aim of this act was to remove loopholes that allowed companies from outside the European Economic Area to hold more than a 49% stake in Polish radio and television stations. The government denied that the act was aimed at any one broadcaster, saying it was meant to prevent potential media acquisitions by countries as Russia or China. However, the opposition claimed that the real aim was to revoke the license of a US-owned private broadcaster TVN, as it was the main television platform for the opposition and critics of the government in general. Ultimately, the amendment was vetoed by President Andrzej Duda, who is usually very loyal to the Law and Justice party. Justifying this decision, Duda suggested that he did so under pressure from the US authorities. The example of TVN, whose government of Law and Justice failed to acquire or destroy, shows how essential it can be for maintaining media pluralism to allow foreign companies to have shares in media companies.

In 2015, Poland was ranked 18th (out of 180 analyzed countries) in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index, but in 2016, it dropped by 29 positions. In 2020, Poland was ranked 62nd, surpassed by, among others, Armenia, and Georgia. Following the presidential elections held that year, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) stated that “the public broadcaster failed to ensure balanced and impartial coverage, and rather served as a threat to Polish values and national interests” (OSCE 2020).

After the parliamentary elections that were held on the 15th October 2023 the OSCE concluded that the elections were “competitive and voters had a wide range of political alternatives, but the ruling party gained a clear advantage by unduly influencing the use of state resources and public media”. It was also pointed out that “In a politically polarized media environment and a generally narrowing space for independent journalism, the public broadcaster openly favored the ruling party” (OSCE 2023, Figure 16).

Figure 15.



Chapter 3: Mitigation mechanisms of media polarization and its potential positive impact on voter's decision making: Perceptions of experts and journalists

Georgia

For Georgia to become a consolidated democracy and make the European integration process smooth, it is obvious that depolarization is a necessary prerequisite. This is evidenced by the recommendations of the European Union too. The global trends of depolarization show that it usually happens after systemic shocks, or after fundamental changes (Mccoy & Press 2022). Some Georgian analysts believe that lowering the election threshold from the current 5% of the vote might decrease political polarization by enabling small political parties to enter parliament (Chkhetiani 2022).

In terms of ways to decrease media polarization, the interviewed experts named ensuring greater financial independence of media outlets as a key solution. Indeed, having more media financed by Western donors was seen as preferable to funding by business representatives. Growth of the advertising market would also reduce dependence on politically motivated sources of finance in the media (GEO Respondent 1, 2023). The importance of journalist professionalism and value systems was also highlighted in the survey (GEO expert survey; GEO Respondent 2, 2023). The surveyed media representatives and experts also agreed that media literacy programs would help the public critically evaluate and discern biased or unreliable information and help reduce polarization. As one of the experts states "Educated consumers of news are less likely to be swayed by extreme narratives."(GEO Respodent 2, 2023). As one of the solutions, the interviewed expert suggested letting more members of the public take part in political talk shows so that all opinions were represented. (GEO Respondent 1, 2023).

As for the question of how decreased media polarization could contribute to more informed electoral decision-making, experts responded that in this case there will be better formed critical opinions in society. The majority of the surveyed experts believed that society does not trust the media because dishonest journalists have deceived people many times. They believe that it is necessary to separate the media from propaganda and for practitioners to remember their main function - to inform the public. According to the experts, If the public sees that the media is not engaged in propaganda activities, they will trust the information provided more and therefore will be able to make correct and informed choices based on objective information (GEO expert survey 2023). One of the interviewed respondents said that decreasing polarization would enable meaningful discussions, "compel political parties to present their views on resolving issues important to the public and empower the public to make informed decisions during elections" (GEO Respondent 3). Surveyed media representatives said that they believe that the most important thing in journalism is trust. They fully understand that society does not trust the media because of dishonest journalism. Based on the expert interviews and results of the surveyed experts and journalists, it is clear that polarization damages both the information environment and political processes. The answers of the journalists show that they are not satisfied with their current situation and would like to have more freedom to earn more trust and respect from the population.

Hungary

has intensively gained control of state/public media institutions, media regulatory bodies has used market interventions to cement its dominance of the public sphere and its growing hegemony in the fields of politics, economy, culture and education.

Indeed, polarization is the primary goal of the government. A much smaller independent media landscape has not been fully eliminated, but its reach has been seriously constrained, especially in the countryside (HUN Respondent 1, 2023). There is very little hope for change: a real break-through looks even more difficult than in Poland since illiberal laws have been approved with a two-thirds constitutional majority and the positions of Fidesz loyalists at media institutions seem safe for the foreseeable future.

As our respondent stakeholders have pointed out, independent journalists often feel threatened and excluded (HUN Respondent 2, 2023), but they can write what they want since there are no criminal proceedings against them, at least (HUN Respondent 3, 2023). Unfortunately, most citizens believe that all journalists work as puppets of political parties and this view discredits high-quality journalism (HUN Respondent 3, 2023). A further problem was indicated by one of our interviewees, if a journalist comes from a media outlet that is not particularly Fidesz-friendly, they will automatically be treated as an enemy. Independent media outlets found themselves in a peculiar situation: they do not want to argue that they are not propagandists, but if they do not say anything it also becomes a problem of credibility (HUN Respondent 2, 2023).

There is an urgent need for media education as well as a campaign against disinformation and fake news. This development, however, cannot be separated from the fundamental renewal of the party political system.

Slovakia

The perspectives of the expert community, media representatives, and politicians regarding ways to mitigate media polarization and promote informed voter decision-making revealed vital insights into navigating the complex landscape of contemporary information dissemination.

Media polarization, as highlighted by various stakeholders, plays a pivotal role in amplifying voter polarization. The demand for more radical news from the media is seen as a consequence of this amplification, creating a societal mirror that reflects and, in some cases, exacerbates existing divisions (SVK Respondent 2). The recognition that media polarization has surpassed the boundaries of healthy discourse is a shared concern. It is acknowledged that the conflict has transcended reasonable limits, venturing into the realm of disinformation. The transformation of the discourse into an emotional battle of "us versus them" does not contribute positively to societal progress (SVK Respondent 3).

Living in the information age is recognized as both significant and challenging. The inundation of information has become an integral part of daily life, but the struggle to make sense of it is acknowledged. The tendency to form information bubbles, where individuals surround themselves with like-minded opinions, is identified as a potential consequence of this information overload. Social media's influential role in shaping attitudes and behavioral norms is emphasized by respondents. While social media's impact is considered significant, it is also acknowledged that its influence can be both positive and negative (SVK Respondent 2).

Perceptions of societal polarization varied among respondents, with some recognizing it as essentially natural in a democratic setting. The digital revolution, particularly the spread of false information, was identified as a key factor contributing to negative perceptions of polarization. The proposed solution involves regulating online networks, but there is also an acknowledgement of the need to adapt and learn to coexist with these challenges (SK Respondent 3).

In examining the role of media in fostering informed decision-making, it is evident that certain approaches can contribute positively to public discourse and civic engagement. One notable strategy is the adoption of "solution journalism," a concept that goes beyond criticism by actively presenting solutions to societal challenges. In today's media landscape, where sensationalism and clickbait often prevail, solution journalism offers a refreshing alternative. By focusing not only on identifying problems but also on proposing viable remedies, media outlets can empower citizens to make more informed decisions (SVK Respondent 1).

Additionally, there is a recognition of the importance of public radio and television in shaping the information landscape. When produced with higher quality standards, public radio and television have the potential to educate voters and citizens effectively. This involves providing responsible coverage of critical issues, steering clear of sensationalism, and prioritizing content that contributes to a more nuanced understanding of complex topics. In particular, comparative analyses highlighting successful approaches from other countries can play a crucial role in reducing polarization (SVK journalist survey, 2023).

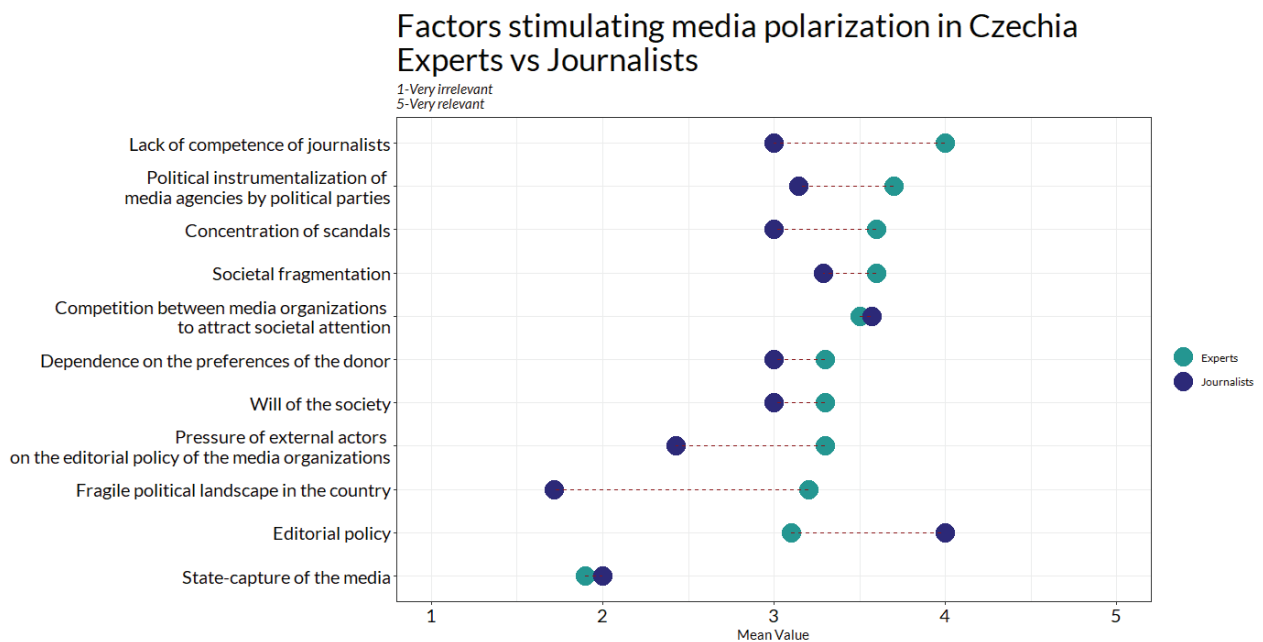
The call for a more expert-driven approach in media is resonant. Comparative analyses offer valuable insights into the workings of different systems. By showcasing potential solutions, the media can inspire hope and motivate citizens to actively participate in the democratic process. This approach encourages voters to look beyond their information bubbles, seek intersections, and engage with a more comprehensive understanding of societal issues (SVK experts survey; SVK Respondent 1).

In essence, the best cases of the media playing a positive role in support of informed decision-making involve a commitment to responsible journalism, a focus on solutions, and an emphasis on presenting a balanced and multi-faceted view of the world. Through these practices, media can foster an environment conducive to informed and thoughtful decision-making among the public (SVK journalist survey, 2023).

Czechia

When examining the factors that contribute to media polarization in the Czech Republic, there is a significant difference in perception between experts from academic and political communication backgrounds and those in the media industry. Media professionals have identified editorial policies in the Czech media as the primary weakness, which is understandable given the ownership conditions described above (see Figure 17). Experts often criticize journalists for their incompetence in reporting on certain topics or for being influenced by politicians. It is also worth noting the criticism that the media focuses too much on scandals and sensationalism (CZE Respondent 1, 2023). The biggest difference in perception between the two groups is in their views on external influences, such as Kremlin propaganda, and the fragility of the political environment in the Czech Republic. Both are perceived as more problematic by experts. As stated in the report's introduction, the Czech Republic performs well in international press freedom rankings. This is reflected in the low relevance given to state-capture of the media by both experts and journalists.

Figure 16.



Poland

Journalists and experts interviewed as part of this project unanimously assessed that the Polish media landscape is characterized by clear polarization and that main cause of this is the extreme politicization of public media. It was pointed out that these media outlets have been transformed into propaganda tools for the ruling party (POL Respodent 1,2, 2024). Consequently, the legitimacy of calling them media and their personnel journalists was questioned. Some argue that the state-controlled media and especially the public television broadcaster TVP have always been dependent on the government (POL 2,3, 2024). Under the Law and Justice party, it was just more overtly so. However, experts scientifically studying political propaganda phenomena point out that this is a mistaken perspective. Previous concepts of the relationship between power and public media did not involve the conscious use of the latter as a propaganda tool. This time, public media has been completely stripped of subjectivity.

The experts also pointed out that the public broadcaster was used in 2016-23 not only to promote the narrative of the ruling party but also to deliberately spread disinformation and smear campaigns targeting representatives of opposition parties, certain social groups (most notably migrants and LGBTQ people) and independent NGOs (POL Respodent 1, 2024). The most prominent case was that of Gdańsk Mayor Paweł Adamowicz, who was murdered during a charity event in 2018. Prior to his death, Adamowicz was repeatedly attacked by the public broadcaster in ways which could have motivated the murderer, who turned out to be mentally unstable (IPI 2019). Another smear campaign against an opposition MP also ended in tragedy. To discredit her, TVP revealed that her teenage son was a victim of sexual abuse allegedly committed by a party colleague of his mother. Unable to bear the psychological humiliation associated with this situation, he committed suicide (Politico 2023). The TVP leadership expressed no remorse in either case, further deepening resentment towards the state-controlled media among critics of the ruling camp and consequently exacerbating social polarization. After Adamowicz's murder, politicians from the main opposition party began boycotting TVP's current affairs programs, while politicians from the ruling party avoided appearances on programs of the private TVN television channel.

Furthermore, the experts emphasized that polarization is caused by internal factors, but it makes society susceptible to disinformation campaigns controlled from the outside (POL Respodent 2,3, 2024).. In this context, the focus is particularly on Russian propaganda and disinformation, whose main objectives in Poland include fueling internal conflicts, creating discord between Poland and Western allies, undermining trust in the European Union, and fostering resentment among Poles towards Ukrainians. Poland appears to be particularly vulnerable to Russian disinformation, given its proximity and being one of the main allies of Ukraine. However, experts monitoring Russian disinformation have not found much evidence of active Russian interference in Polish politics and elections so far.

Regardless of its origin and the message it promotes, disinformation is a dangerous phenomenon, and strongly polarized societies are particularly susceptible to it. The division of society into polarized groups creates a demand for disinformation within each of them. Groups expect information that aligns with their views. The more radicalized we are, the more we feel like members of one group and harbor animosity towards members of another, the easier it is for us to believe that the information appearing and aligning with our views is true.

During the most recent parliamentary election campaign in Poland, disinformation was spread widely, and not only by government-controlled media and the ruling party. Experts warn that politicians will not regulate themselves, so it is worth considering the introduction of regulations punishing spreaders of disinformation (POL Respodent 1,3, 2024). It is also necessary to promote appropriate standards in society to prevent the spread of the belief that disinformation and manipulation are acceptable tools in election campaigns and political activities in general (Mierzyńska).

Conclusion

This study has shed light on the fact that media polarization mirrors the current polarized political situations in Georgia and the Visegrad countries. In most of these countries, political parties instrumentalize media. The results of other secondary sources and this research coincide with each other in the sense that media polarization serves to divide voters into two hostile camps, which is characteristic of affective political polarization. Media polarization in particular affects prevents voters from making informed decisions. Apart from this, since 2022, after Russia invaded Ukraine, even the domestic political landscapes of these states have been overshadowed by foreign policy. Although most respondents interviewed within the framework of this study say that polarization is mainly caused by internal political factors, such as politicians' rhetoric, these domestic political narratives have been influenced by Russia's war in Ukraine.

In the case of Georgia, political polarization has had a direct impact on media polarization, and this has contributed to the polarization of voters between the ruling and main opposition parties and the weakening of other forces. The media consciously or unconsciously contributes a lot to this. This happened because Georgian media outlets do not have financial independence and therefore most of them side either with the ruling party or with the opposition. However, when it comes to the media coverage of the relationship with Russia and Georgia's EU integration path, so-called opposition media agencies tend to be more politically independent than pro-governmental media sources.

The situation in Hungary is worse in terms of freedom of media. Media polarization in Hungary is not a side-effect or collateral damage. It is the ideological objective of the current illiberal government in accordance with its strategy to further widen political polarization in order to create a stable majority in the electorate. A small segment of free and independent media maintains a traditional journalistic ethos. Nevertheless, even these face the dilemma of balancing the need to preserve their independence from opposition political parties and the need to co-operate with them as they are threatened by the government. Overall identity politics is strong while deeper social tensions remain under the surface. This is why political polarization is not connected to relevant social and political problems.

As for the Polish media landscape, it is marked by a clear polarization between news content coming from private broadcasters and that coming from the public broadcaster. The extreme politicization of public media, especially state television, from 2016-23 is not a byproduct of political conflict in Poland but a consequence of a deliberate policy by the Law and Justice party aimed at mobilizing and solidifying its electorate. The outrage over what the Law and Justice party politicians did to public media was certainly one of the factors contributing to the huge mobilization of opposition party voters in the parliamentary elections in Poland, held on October 15, 2023. This resulted in a record turnout - over 74% - and the success of three opposition parties, which, after forming a coalition, managed to establish a new government. One of the key expectations for the new government and the new parliamentary majority is the reform of public media to ensure that no political party will ever be able to repeat what PiS has done. Therefore, it is not enough to just replace the boards of companies managing public television and radio. There must also be legal guarantees of the editorial independence of these media.

Concerning the Slovak case, the complex landscape of media and democracy in Slovakia reveals a precarious balance between progress and persistent challenges. The pivotal role of independent media underscores its significance as a public watchdog and guardian of democratic values. However, the current context, marked by Russian aggression against Ukraine, political upheavals, and societal polarization, poses formidable obstacles. Polarization within Slovak society, fueled by factors such as social media platforms and limited media literacy, manifests in widespread belief in conspiracy theories and a stark distrust of standard media. Political turbulence and governance issues have contributed to historic lows in public trust in Slovak institutions, providing fertile ground for the exploitation of polarization by certain political factions. The ongoing war in Ukraine further amplifies narratives that seek to undermine public support for the country, emphasizing the need for strategic communication and media literacy.

The situation in the Czech Republic is relatively positive when compared to the other countries featured in this study. However, it is worth noting that subjective perceptions of the country's situation are worse than international comparisons suggest, particularly in terms of political and media polarization. In the past year, the government has taken legislative steps to strengthen the resilience of the councils of Czech Television and Czech Radio by changing the way their members are elected. This has made the boards more resistant to volatility and changes in political representation. However, a risk factor is the fact that the current government enjoys very low public trust, and the preferences of government parties are declining slightly but persistently, while the opposition populist movement ANO is gaining in popularity.

Overall, the increase, or decrease, of media polarization in Georgia and the V4 states highly depends on the political landscape, the outcomes of elections, funding of media agencies, on the professionalism of journalists, and editorial policy. Over the last few years, media polarization has risen due to geopolitical changes in the region and Russia's intensified hybrid war against Georgia, the V4 states and other countries. However, despite external interference, in more democratic and resilient societies like Czechia, polarization levels are lower than in fragile democracies like Hungary, Georgia, and Poland.

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Respondents' profiles

Georgia, Media expert, Personal Communication, December 23, 2023.

Georgia, Media expert, Personal Communication, January 24, 2024.

Georgia, Media editor, Personal Communication, December 6, 2024.

Hungary, Media expert, Personal Communication, November 9, 2023.

Hungary, Media expert, Personal Communication, November 2, 2023.

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Slovakia, Media expert, Personal Communication, September 7, 2023

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Czechia, Vladan Vaněk, Media expert, Personal Communication, October 13, 2023

Czechia, Michal Kormaňák, IPSOS, Personal Communication, October 17, 2023

Czechia, Ludmila Hamplová, Unit of StratCom, Office of the Government, January 3, 2024

Poland, Media expert, Personal Communication, January 5, 2024.

Poland, Media expert, Personal Communication, February 8, 2024.

Poland, Media editor, Personal Communication, February 9, 2024.

Annexes

Annex 1: Survey Questionnaire:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdjsP2e3TBIEvbLg-jwJDnGljABEtZf7k1H5FnADrtx9lV8Ow/viewform>

Annex 2: Interview questionnaire:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xG-LBf6_6OvY37trNV7ncvy108SjL78GOQ-DBh3CVF8/edit?usp=sharing

MEDIA POLARIZATION



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