Università di Genova

DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE POLITICHE E INTERNAZIONALI

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in: Security and International Relations

The Relationship between Media and Democratic Backsliding

Democratization of the Global World

Relatore

Chiar.mo Prof. Giampiero Cama

Candidato

Alessandro Torre

ANNO ACCADEMICO

2023-24

ABSTRACT

Political communication is in constant evolution. It has several tools to exploit in order to grow and spread messages: the multifaceted universe of media has always been crucial in this sense. Media, in their turn, have been the protagonists of a relentless race for development, which has been fostered and accelerated by the technological advancements that marked the last decades.

The research dealing with the relationship between politics and media is complex, multilayered and charged with subtle implications. In this interesting field of study, the particular accent of this dissertation is posed on states which are living or lived a situation of democratic backsliding. In other words, the focus is on those states which are characterised by the gradual but steady erosion of social and human rights in favour of more authoritarian positions.

The central part of the thesis deals with the ways through which autocratic regimes try to use and tailor media according to their own economic and political interests. In these countries there is a tangible deterioration in terms of freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom of press and right to access to free and independent information. This condition has been analysed from different perspectives and thanks to several parameters. In this context, a broad and exhaustive review of the approach of numerous political regimes with regard to media has been developed.

The second section took into consideration with a particular attention the topic of social media, which represented the core of the studies over the last twenty years and have been labelled several times as the "modern" version of media, replacing the previous "traditional" ones.

Social media form an integral part of the interconnected and frenetic world of today. They present diverse facets: some of them could lead to positive implications for the human beings, with an increased perception of freedom of expression and the possibility to mobilize individuals while avoiding physical consequences for city centers and its dwellers.

At the same time, social media could also be accompanied by really negative elements, harmful phenomena which take the names of disinformation, hate speech, foreign interferences and others. These are the main threats that the introduction of social media posed to democracy. An in-depth assessment of each aspect, whether positive or negative, resolutive or damaging, has been completed, also in relation to external factors such as democratic elections.

In the following chapters, in order to provide some concrete examples, it is possible to find a detailed description of the situation which is occurring in countries like Turkey, Poland and Hungary. These are distinguished by different but persistent levels of democratic backsliding, with progressive lack of protections for human rights and social measures, increasing tendency to silence and manipulate media.

The end of the thesis coincides with the opening of crucial questions related to the future management of social media. Some of the possible solutions that are described are somehow underway, others belong to a distant future, but they are all united by the adoption of strategies which constitute a mix of technology and human activities: new regulations, cooperation of social media companies, use of artificial intelligence combined with careful human oversight, devotion of much more attention to education and digital literacy. These perspectives lead to a future-oriented view but it is important to remember that these are complex themes and solutions, which will necessarily require further research and studies in the years to come.

INDEX

INTRODUCTION

THE EVOLUTION OF MEDIA

The relationship between media and politics has been investigated for over a century. It is a really relevant topic, because we all are part of a society and every society is characterised by its own political matters; media, instead, are universal, they can connect people all over the world. Or, at least, this is the ideal condition that stands behind their creation. The way through which politics are affected by and affect media and communication is an interesting research question that we have to answer in the next decades.

An important factor in order to better understand this complex relation is the everchanging nature of media. Since the first part of the nineteenth century we had some important information channels: newspapers, radio, photographs, the birth of cinema thanks to the Lumière Brothers. Then, starting in the middle of the two World Wars, we had television as the most iconic and efficient way to vehiculate news. History gave us the digital era, since the 80s: computer appeared and became more and more easy to use and affordable for everyone. Social media are the last development we had in the last thirty years in terms of speed and inclusiveness of pieces of information. Today, we are at the dawn of a new phase of history, something that could possibly be a total revolution, both in a positive and negative way.

The recent introduction of Artificial Intelligence in our lives represents a new level of development that we couldn't imagine. An unexplored world that can potentially be on the one hand of a huge help for everyone and lead to a better link between politics and information, but, on the other hand, become too dangerous because we could not be able to manage its incredibly detailed possibilities and the direct consequences.

The relationship between social media and politics has become increasingly significant in recent years, transforming the landscape of political communication and participation. The rise of digital technologies and the widespread use of social networking platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok have altered how citizens

engage with politics, how information is disseminated, and how political leaders interact with the public.

This dynamic interplay between social media and politics has brought both opportunities and challenges, reshaping the democratic process in deep ways. Social media platforms have become essential tools for political communication, allowing politicians to reach a broad audience directly, bypassing traditional media channels such as television and newspapers. This direct communication enables politicians to share their views, proposals, and initiatives with the public without the mediation or interpretation of journalists or editors. This shift has democratized political communication, giving rise to new political voices and movements that might have struggled to gain a higher level of attention through conventional media outlets.

Politicians use social media to build and maintain their public image, engage with voters, and mobilize supporters. The interactive nature of social media allows for two-way communication, where citizens can respond to political messages, ask questions, and express their opinions. This interaction fosters a sense of connection between political leaders and their constituents, helping to build loyalty and trust. Moreover, social media campaigns can be tailored to target specific demographics, allowing politicians to reach particular groups with messages that resonate with their particular concerns and interests.

The advent of social media has significantly transformed public discourse, making political discussion more accessible but also more fragmented and polarized. On one hand, social media has provided a platform for a more diverse range of voices and opinions, enabling marginalized groups to participate in political conversations and advocate for their causes. On the other hand, these platforms have also contributed to the creation of "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles," where users are predominantly exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs and viewpoints. This phenomenon can lead to greater ideological polarization, as individuals become less likely to encounter and engage with different kinds of opinion, which could be in favour of the opposing position.

The rapid and often superficial nature of communication on social media can also contribute to the spread of simplistic and emotionally charged messages that prioritize

sensationalism over substantive debate. Political discourse on these platforms is frequently dominated by soundbites, memes, and short videos that are easily shared but may not provide the depth of analysis needed for informed decision-making. As a result, social media can sometimes exacerbate misunderstandings and deepen divisions within society.

One of the most concerning aspects of the relationship between social media and politics is the proliferation of fake news and disinformation. Social media platforms have become fertile ground for the spread of false or misleading information, which can significantly influence public opinion and electoral outcomes. Fake news often spreads more rapidly on social media than factual news, driven by its ability to provoke strong and sudden emotional reactions such as, to provide an example, those related to anger or fear.

The spread of disinformation on social media can undermine the democratic process by eroding trust in institutions, distorting public perceptions of political issues, and influencing voter behavior. During election periods, for example, fake news can be used to manipulate public opinion, discredit political opponents, or create confusion among voters. The challenge of combating disinformation is compounded by the algorithms used by social media platforms, which prioritize content that generates and ensures high levels of engagement, while, at the same time, do not possess an acceptable level of accuracy.

Despite the challenges associated with social media, these platforms have also played a crucial role in political mobilization, particularly among younger and more digitally savvy populations. Social media has been instrumental in organizing protests, advocacy campaigns, and grassroots movements, enabling activists to coordinate actions, share information, and build networks of support. Movements such as the Arab Spring, #BlackLivesMatter, and #MeToo have demonstrated the power of social media to galvanize public opinion and to bring about social and political changes.

Social media allows for the rapid dissemination of information, making it easier to organize large-scale protests and events. Hashtags and viral campaigns can quickly raise awareness about specific issues, helping to rally support and pressure political leaders to

respond. Additionally, social media provides a platform for citizen journalism, where individuals can share real-time updates and document events as they unfold, often while they bypass traditional media gatekeepers withoutn any type of constraint.

Elections have become a key battleground for the influence of social media. Political campaigns now heavily rely on social media for outreach, fundraising, and voter engagement. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter offer sophisticated tools for microtargeting, allowing campaigns to tailor messages to specific voter segments based on their interests, demographics, and online behavior. This targeted approach can be highly effective in persuading undecided voters and mobilizing supporters.

However, the use of social media in elections also raises ethical and regulatory concerns. Issues such as data privacy, the transparency of political advertising, and the potential for foreign interference have become major topics of debate. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, for example, highlighted how personal data harvested from social media could be used to influence voter behavior on a large scale. This has led to calls for greater oversight and regulation of social media platforms to ensure fair and transparent electoral processes.

As social media continues to evolve, its impact on politics is likely to grow even more significant. The integration of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and deepfake videos could further complicate the relationship between social media and politics, making it harder to discern truth from falsehood and increasing the future potential scope in order to undertake a deep and really harmful activity of manipulation.

At the same time, there is growing awareness of the need to address the challenges posed by social media in the political sphere. Governments, civil society organizations, and technology companies are increasingly focused on finding solutions to issues such as disinformation, online harassment, and the erosion of democratic norms. This includes efforts to improve digital literacy, enhance the transparency of social media algorithms, and develop more robust systems for monitoring and combating fake news.

Nowadays, we can notice that there is an increasing attention for the contextualization of journalistic practice in situations of democratic erosion and rising authoritarianism (Schimpfossl and Yablokov, 2019; Sukosd, 2018).

In conclusion, the relationship between social media and politics is multifaceted and dynamic, offering both opportunities and challenges for democratic societies. While social media has democratized access to political communication and empowered new voices, it has also contributed to the fragmentation of public discourse and the spread of disinformation. As this relationship continues to evolve, it will be crucial to strike a balance between harnessing the positive potential of social media and mitigating its negative impacts on democracy. The future of political communication will depend on our ability to navigate these complexities and ensure that social media serves as a force for informed and inclusive political participation.

THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The evolution of media and political communication has undergone significant changes over the centuries, deeply influencing how political messages are crafted, delivered, and received by the public. This transformation is closely tied to technological advancements and shifting public expectations, as well as broader social, cultural, and economic changes. From the early days of oral communication in ancient democracies to the rise of social media in the 21st century, media has continually reshaped political discourse.

In ancient civilizations like Greece and Rome, political communication primarily took place through public speeches and debates in forums. Leaders such as Cicero and Pericles mastered the art of oratory, recognizing that persuasive speech could sway public opinion. These societies were built around face-to-face communication, where the delivery of the message was as important as its content. This method of political communication was limited to small, local audiences and relied heavily on the personal charisma of leaders.

The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century revolutionized political communication. It made the mass production of written materials possible, allowing political ideas and information to spread much faster and farther than ever before. Pamphlets, books, and newspapers became powerful tools for political expression. Martin Luther's 95 Theses, distributed across Europe through print, sparked the Protestant Reformation and showed how mass communication could lead to significant political and social upheaval.

During the Enlightenment, print media allowed the dissemination of political philosophy and revolutionary ideas, helping to fuel movements like the American and French revolutions. In both cases, pamphlets, newspapers, and other print materials spread revolutionary ideals to a broad audience, creating a more informed and politically active public. The use of print media during this period established the precedent for political propaganda and the mobilization of public opinion.

The next major shift in political communication came with the advent of broadcast media in the 20th century. Radio, in particular, became a crucial tool for politicians, allowing them to communicate directly with large audiences in real-time. In the 1930s and 1940s, leaders like Franklin D. Roosevelt used radio to speak to millions of Americans through his "Fireside Chats," effectively bypassing the traditional media gatekeepers and establishing a personal connection with the public. These radio broadcasts allowed political figures to project authority, compassion, and leadership directly into people's homes.

Television further enhanced the reach and emotional impact of political communication. The first televised presidential debate in the U.S., between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960, marked a turning point. Viewers who watched the debate on television largely believed Kennedy had won due to his confident and charismatic appearance, while those who listened on the radio thought Nixon was more persuasive. This event highlighted the growing importance of image and style in politics, as television brought a visual component that shaped public perceptions in ways that radio could not.

Television also allowed for the growth of political advertising. Candidates began producing highly stylized and persuasive campaign ads, using both visuals and sound to influence voters. The medium became a platform for crafting messages that could

emotionally resonate with viewers, often simplifying complex issues into easily digestible formats. By the late 20th century, television had become the dominant medium for political communication, with political campaigns relying heavily on televised debates, interviews, and advertisements.

The emergence of the internet in the 1990s brought about another major transformation in political communication. The internet created new opportunities for both politicians and voters, democratizing access to information and lowering the barriers to entry for political participation. Websites became important tools for campaigns, offering platforms to share detailed policy proposals, gather donations, and organize volunteers.

However, it was the rise of social media in the 2000s that truly revolutionized political communication. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube allowed politicians to bypass traditional media outlets and communicate directly with voters. This direct communication meant that politicians could craft their own messages and distribute them to large audiences without the need for journalistic intermediaries, who might otherwise filter or challenge their claims.

Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign is widely regarded as a turning point in the use of social media for political communication. His campaign effectively harnessed social media to engage younger voters, mobilize grassroots support, and raise unprecedented amounts of money through small donations. The Obama campaign demonstrated how digital platforms could be used not just for broadcasting political messages but for building interactive, two-way communication between candidates and voters.

Social media has also dramatically altered the speed and nature of political news. With platforms like Twitter, news and political statements can be shared instantaneously, allowing for real-time political communication. This has led to the rise of what some scholars call the "permanent campaign," where politicians are constantly communicating with the public, not just during election cycles but throughout their terms in office.

However, the rise of social media has also brought challenges. The rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation has become a significant problem, as platforms often lack the editorial oversight of traditional media. Politicians can use social media to spread

false or misleading information to their supporters, while foreign actors can engage in disinformation campaigns to influence political outcomes. The echo chamber effect of social media—where users are exposed primarily to views that align with their own—has also contributed to increasing political polarization.

In the digital age, the use of big data and algorithms has further transformed political communication. Political campaigns now have access to vast amounts of data about voters, including their browsing habits, social media activity, and even consumer preferences. This data is used to micro-target voters with highly personalized political messages. Political parties and campaigns can tailor their ads to specific demographics, making communication more efficient and effective.

The use of algorithms by social media platforms also plays a critical role in determining which political content users see. These algorithms are designed to maximize engagement, often by promoting content that provokes strong emotional reactions. As a result, sensationalist or polarizing political content tends to be amplified, which can distort public perceptions of political events and issues.

The evolution of media has fundamentally reshaped political communication, from the early days of oral debate to the digital age of social media and big data. Each new medium—whether it be print, radio, television, or the internet—has brought both opportunities and challenges for political leaders, voters, and democratic institutions. While technological advances have democratized access to political information and made it easier for politicians to engage directly with the public, they have also created new challenges related to misinformation, polarization, and the manipulation of public opinion.

In the future, as media continues to evolve, political communication will likely become even more fragmented and personalized. Politicians will need to navigate an increasingly complex media landscape, where the line between fact and opinion is blurred, and where the speed of communication often outpaces the ability of traditional democratic institutions to respond effectively. Nevertheless, the fundamental principles of political communication—persuasion, engagement, and the shaping of public opinion—will remain at the core of democratic societies.

WHAT IS DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING?

Democratic backsliding is a complex phenomenon that could end in different ways but usually start with the same initial phases. In fact, according to Alizada and other authors, they have "similar patterns across different geographical contexts"[1]. Media attacks are the typical act through which democratic backsliding is organized. The goal is to create total polarization within civil society: the spread of misleading information is directed to the opponent parties with the attempt to harm them.

Nancy Bermeo defined democratic backsliding as "the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy"[2]. She also has attached to his analysis another level of specificity by enumerating six existing types of democratic backsliding. Namely, they are open-ended coups d'état, promissory and executive coups, election-day vote fraud, executive aggrandisement and strategic manipulation or harassment. In particular, Bermeo observed the fact that in recent times promissory coups, executive aggrandisement and strategic harassment are the most common examples of backsliding, while open-ended coups d'état, executive coups and election-day vote fraud typically belong to the past.

The potential development that could help the success of the attack is a particular hesitation of media outlets. When a firm is victim of a digital attack, it can consider the possibility to wait to inform and give an alert signal to its users. The logic is to avoid to be misunderstood by the citizens. It has been revealed the fact that in correspondence of less reliable information devoted to the citizens there is a higher level of attempts of democratic backsliding. That is the reason why several processes of autocratization start with this type of attack: to put media under silence can be considered as the first ideal step that fosters the following ones[3].

---

[1] Alizada, Nazifa, Rowan Cole, Lisa Gastaldi, Sandra Grahn, Sebastian Hellmeier, Palina Kolvani, Jean Lachapelle, Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Shreeya Pillai, and Staffan I. Lindberg (2021) Autocratization Turns Viral: University of Gothenburg: VDem Institute

[2] Bermeo, Nancy (2016) "On democratic backsliding," Journal of Democracy, 27(1), 5–19

[3] Morris, Stephen (2001) "Political Correctness," Journal of Political Economy, 109(2), 231–65.

When warnings launched by outlets are delayed and postponed by hesitation, citizens rationally start questioning about the work and values of media firms. The direct consequence is a problem of trust that leads to complete media dysfunction. Because of this, the fundamental role of watchdog and democratic gatekeeper played by media entities is lost.

Here is the reason behind some repeated attacks thrown by undemocratic leaders from all over the world. If they have a solid portion of followers that strongly believe their words, they willingly try to undermind the stability and the credibility of press agencies by labelling their articles and statements as "fake news". A strong increase in terms of mistrust for media outlets causes a higher difficulty for these ones to report events in a correct and thruthful way, does not matter if they maintain the intention to tell only the truth or not.

The hesitation of media structures is important also relatively to the future intentions of an incumbent government. The product of this practice paves the way for the introduction of new media policy by the ruling party, both in a violent or non-violent form.

The "official" governmental justification given in public speeches and press conferences is that media are not impartial and this intervention is necessary to "save" the nation and correct the unbalanced situation. Citizens are not aware of the real nature of media outlets and, at the same time, cannot now exactly which are the ideas of the official government related to the future possibility of an authoritarian shift.

This is the motivation thanks to which people can also start thinking to a remote chance that the party really looks after them and wants to correct the setting of media in their country. But there are other complex psychological aspects that can influence the inability of citizens and media when they face an incumbent digital attack.

The first possibility, that we already mentioned in part before, is the possibility that media firms, even if they acknowledge signals that introduce the eventuality of a media attack, fail to compose efficient messages for the population in order to discourage the authoritarian plans of the government through a coral action.

The second scenario sees a situation in which ruling parties are so powerful and assertive that citizens are unarmed and cannot even start a reaction. The third case entails a sort of

popular condescension for incumbent governments, that pave the way for the citizens to deliberately neglect the attack.

Backsliding are more frequent and easily completed after the restriction of press freedom. The governmental control of media allows the regime to focus then on electoral and judicial systems, other important bulwarks of democracy. If the party has media freedom in its hands, it will have open space for the limitation of democratic quality. In fact, the first step is the absence of information for the citizens about the backsliding under construction.

Moreover, the impossibility for the people to detect and decypher backsliding, make it more likely to happen. In this general context, it has to be introduced the problem of spread mistrust for media firms and the hesitation of media outlets to launch strong warnings while the government's intention, even though largely unclear at an early stage, shift progressively through the establishment of a democratic backsliding. This process starts for those who have the power with media control and then embraces several other democratic institutions that are significantly undermined.

More specifically, several studies have revealed that policy outcome has strong links with the intrinsic features of the process of backsliding. If the results of policy outcome are bad, incumbent government will have a higher percentage of benefits. At the same time, on the other hand, citizens could be victims of a more harmful scenario.

The explication of this logic is that, as a natural consequence after deeply negative performances by the government, the chief will be more and more pressured by the constant push of the citizens to force him to resign. In such a situation, having the uncontested control of the media apparatus can give the largest benefits to the leader. The next political choices of the central government will be directed to a strong reduction of judicial independence, a "mediatic bombing" for his opposing enemies and, maybe, a radical change in the rules that discipline the electoral machine. All these actions, taken together, could then give to the leader the possibility to steadily remain in power without any kind of external justification.

Democratic backsliding is a particular phenomenon which involves a high level of complexity and consequences. Its specific features have been well described by David

Waldner and Ellen Lust. They affirmed that democratic backsliding can verify in several political regime types, with a general situation of deterioraton and loss of qualities which are usually associated with democracy. In particular, they added that in democratic regimes, backsliding entails "a decline in the quality of democracy"[4], while in autocracies it coincides with "a decline in democratic qualities of governance"[5].

---

[4] Waldner, D., & Lust, E. (2018). Unwelcome change: Coming to terms with democratic backsliding.
Annual Review of Political Science, 21(1), 93–113. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628
[5] Ibid 4

MEDIA FREEDOM AND FREEDOM OF PRESS

Freedom of press and of media is considered one of the crucial elements for the existence of a healthy democracy. The absence of adequate protection for the press makes it unable to monitor the government and the institutions and to properly inform the citizens. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued by the United Nations defines press freedom as a "universal right"[6], the aim of which is the diffusion of "information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".

In order to investigate and try to picture an international average level, the use of Freedom House is really resolutive. Freedom House is a self-described independent watchdog organization that monitors impediments of a legal, political and financial nature to press freedom world-wide and rates countries annually on a 100-point composite Press Freedom Index (PFI). By doing this, it is possible to create a general ranking of all nations, classified under the point of view of the freedom of their media sector.

Generally speaking, average media freedom has decreased from its peaking levels in the majority of presidential and semi-presidential democracies. This tendence has found evidence in several zones of Eastern Europe, Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

This is a really relevant measurement because it allows scholars to draw significant conclusions. A higher degree of freedom of press is often linked to a more qualitative governance and better conditions with less corruption[7], with a few rare exceptions. In contrast, the absence of freedom for the media corresponds to the absence of contestation and protests: the evident result is a consequent absence of democracy.

On this topic, several scholars spent time debating. Some consider freedom of media as a fundamental condition for democracy[8]; others consider other factors like political and

---

[6] Democracy, autocracy and the news: the impact of regime type on media freedom, Sebastian Stier, Democratization 22(7), 2015: 1273-1295.

[7] Camaj, L. (2013). The media's role in fighting corruption: Media effects on governmental accountability. The International Journal of Press/Politics, 18, 21-42; Stein, E. A., & Kellam, M. (2014). Programming presidential agendas: Partisan and media environments that lead presidents to fight crime and corruption. Political Communication, 31, 25-52.

[8] Norris, P. (2000). A virtuous circle? Political communications in post-industrial

social culture and the institutional framework as more important[9]. What has been largely demonstrated is the fact that, on the contrary, democracy cannot be identified as the only valid condition to establish and give constant support for completely free media.

Some specialised studies strictly related to transitional democracies suggest the presence of possible impediments of different and complex types to the liberalization of media. For example, it can happen that the main obstacle is a constrained ideological plurality and diversity, or maybe a lack of professionalization or a loss of independence, or a serious repression waged by the central government[10]. In general, the oppression of media and journalists are partially episodic.

According to VonDoepp and Young, leaders have the preference to control the media apparatus in periods of particular crisis and insecurity, caused by political or economic turmoils[11]. In fact, in moments of domestic crises leaders can be targeted as the most vulnerable politician, because it is the most visible and can be easily attacked. When they feel the government they guide as instable, they have an increased push to keep the information system under their hands. In such a way, all the possible voices of dissent that could undermine their authority and the support they receive are silenced.

There is also a strategic consideration related to leaders' attacks on media outlets: in particular cases in which the press' common ideology collides with the one of the leaders and there are not viable electoral opponents, presidents target free media as "direct political opponent"[12] in order to mobilize its constituency, polarize the debate and attract sustain.

---

democracies. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press; Dahl, R. A. (1998). On democracy. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

[9] Graber, D. (2003). The media and democracy: Beyond myths and stereotypes. Annual Review of Political Science, 6, 139-160; Gunther, R., & Mughan, A. (2000). The media in democratic and nondemo-cratic regimes: A mutlilevel perspective. In R. Gunther & A. Mughan (Eds.),
Democracy and the media: A comparative perspective (pp. 1-27). New York,
NY: Cambridge University Press.

[10] Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (Eds.). (2012). Comparing media systems beyond the western world. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press; Voltmer, K. (2013). The media in transitional democracies. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

[11] VonDoepp, P., & Young, D. J. (2013). Assaults on the fourth estate: Explaining media harassment in Africa. Journal of Politics, 75, 36-51.

[12] Silencing critics: Why and how presidents restrict media freedom in democracies, Marisa Kellam, Elizabeth A Stein, Comparative Political Studies 49 (1), 36-77, 2016

Leaders that have an open opposition by media outlets is much more motivated to limit freedom of media than those who are clearly supported and ensorsed by them. When the leader's ideological position and the dominant media establishment's one are in collision, the perfect scenario for a likely decline of the freedom of press is created. This division and the absence of an organized opposition are typical elements of the periods after elections with landslide victories.

In this framework, there is a tangible higher disposition to oppose the press, because of the contemporary absence of a political counterpart. Looking at the other side, media firms deliberately accept the opposition of the leaders, because they have to sell as much as they can and these types of controversial news and stories arouse great interest and curiosity by the citizens[13]. Moreover, it is possible that the media establishment sincerely oppose the government. When presidents acquire awareness of this mediatic confrontation, they usually transform their rhetorical statements in concrete actions that constrain the working conditions of the press.

An important concept that has to be analysed in this context is about the "democratization of the media"[14]. Under this definition we keep together the political process of democratic transition with a higher level of pluralism in media and, broadly speaking, a better citizens' access to information. The widespread idea sees media as important entities in order to sustain and maintain a democratic system, but not democratic organs themselves; in fact, journalists and media owners are not directly elected by people like politicians.

There are open debates and different positions related to the conception of media. The biggest distinction is to be found between a "liberal" or a "radical" perspective[15]. On the one hand, some scholars who are in favour of the liberal view promote the creation of a "marketplace of ideas" through and increased level of pluralism in the field of media providers. In this group can be counted the American Founding Fathers and John Stuart Mill, for example. In their opinion, the basic objective of the "marketplace of ideas" is to satisfy both horizontal and vertical function in a determined political framework.

---

[13] Baum, M. A., & Groeling, T. (2009). War stories: The causes and consequences of public views of war. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
[14] Voltmer, K. (2013). The media in transitional democracies. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
[15] Becker, L. B., Vlad, T., & Nusser, N. (2007). An evaluation of press freedom indicators. International Communication Gazette, 69, 5-28.

But on the other hand, those who have a critical stance think that the liberal idea would lead to an unavoidable failure. According to them, media commercialization is a too big obstacle for the proliferation of a pluralism of views and opinions in most countries, with the consequence of a strong concentration of ownership.

Media concentration hampers the development of a democratization of media[16]. The reason is that there are particular electoral advantages for the few people that have power of media in their hands and the governmental policies encounter constrained interpretations. As a further demonstration, several studies showed that broadcasting run by the state is "specialised" in the production of news that are clearly biased in favour of the ruling party or the incumbent leader[17].

In particular, in the described scenario of high concentration of media ownership, it can be supposed that leftist presidents could find a superior motivation in limiting press freedom than leaders that have a different position along the political ideological spectrum. In fact, leftist leaders usually invoke a greater degree of equality and political participation and are against hierarchies of power and private ownership[18].

In the perspective of the critics of the liberal conception of media, an example of journalism with a civic matrix could represent the right solution. It is necessary an active role by the state in order to fight for a reduction in citizens' access to free media and, at the same time, an increase in terms of plurality of information sources and ideas.

The world of media often sees interferences by presidents or regimes in order to influence the direction of news and stories according to its preferred position. Through the intervention of their communication chiefs or functionary loyal to them, leaders can actively reward a sort of positive coverage or, on the contrary, punish and adopt sanctions

---

[16] Hallin, D. C., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2002). Political clientelism and the media: Southern Europe and Latin America in comparative perspective. Media, Culture & Society, 24, 175-195; Hughes, S., & Lawson, C. (2005). The barriers to media opening in Latin America. Political Communication, 22, 9-25; Boas, T. C. (2012). Mass media and politics in Latin America. In J. I. Dominguez & M. Shifter (Eds.), Constructing democratic governance in Latin America (4th ed.). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved from http:// people.bu.edu/tboas/media_LA.pdf
[17] Hughes, S., & Lawson, C. (2004). Propaganda and crony capitalism: Partisan bias in Mexican television news. Latin American Research Review, 39, 81-105.
[18] Levitsky, S., & Roberts, K. M. (Eds.). (2011). The resurgence of the Latin American left. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

against negative coverage. These sanctions belong to different legal, economic and political instruments they possess.

As a practical example of this system of rewards and penalizations, government can decide to use advertising, tax credits or bank loans in order to incentivize positive coverage. Other tools, such as the confiscation of unfavourable publications, raids of media offices, cancellation of benefits and "soft censorship" measures are usually employed for a strong control and repression of negative coverage.

In order to silence opposing parties, critics and sources of dissent, powerful presidents can use a range of different tactics and strategies of intimidation. These are entirely directed against the press, while civil society as a result becomes more and more ignorant. This vacuum of information reflects a poorly or not informed citizenry, and democracy is not able to resist for a long time.

The use of intimidation methods, such as political pressures, legal or economic sanctions, push media firms not to investigate or organize journalistic inquiries on the central government.

Broadly speaking, leaders are constantly worried about the public support of their contituency, but not only. They also have to keep the sustain of their inner circle of loyal appointees in their hands. This is the reason why all presidents try to control the media, with different degrees and tools. For example, they can cast official press conferences in which friendly journalists that avoid risky questions are welcomed. Their aim is to manage in some ways the flow of information and news, to avoid an erosion of support and to reaffirm their authority, especially in context of crisis.

It is important to underline a thin variation in leaders' practice, related to the possible anticipation of the crisis or not. When presidents have time to detect the arrival of a period of crisis and, as a consequence, have time to redirect coverage, the expected action is a clear suppression of the reporting of the crisis, as it never happened. This preemptive approach is substituted by a punitive one in the second case. When leaders are surprised by an unexpected crisis, they decide to adopt harsh punishments for media outlets in order to avoid an exaggerated exposure that could increase their vulnerability, already exacerbated by the difficult moment.

It is possible to conclude that media freedom is more likely to fall when contentious events happen against a leader, with the specific case of economic crises that could lead to other limitations to the conditions in which media firms can operate.

Another aspect to consider is the possibility for the leaders to have strong decree powers or not. If presidents are not constrained in their actions by external legislations or norms, it is more likely that they will persecute the press and control news coverage. Conversely, when presidents do not have decree or agenda-setting powers and possess a limited veto power, they only have the possibility to limit press freedom through a negotiation or a legislative cooperation with other forces[19]. Because of this, another potential factor that could foster the decline of media freedom is the high number of seats in Parliament hold by the presidential party.

In addition, there is also a matter of democratic accountability for the leaders. The more they can be considered responsible through a strong scheme of institutional rules, laws and legislative impositions, the more they will find limits in the application of restrictive actions against freedom of press[20].

The judiciary power could be considered as a veto player. If judges are independent and autonomous they are not obliged to keep a subordinate position towards leaders and they can intervene in order to correct and monitor decisions by both the executive and legislative powers. When they acquire this power, there is higher probability of a judicial protection of media outlets against limitation on their freedom adopted by the presidents[21].

The further incentive to the defense of free media by judges can be found in the possibility to maintain unaltered the status quo and the balance of powers through flows of

---

[19] Alemán, E., & Tsebelis, G. (2005). The origins of presidential agenda-setting power in Latin America. Latin American Research Review, 40, 3-26; Negretto, G. L. (2006). Minority presidents and democratic performance in Latin America. Latin American Politics and Society, 48, 63-92.
[20] Morgenstern, S., Pérez-Liñán, A., & Negri, J. J. (2008). Parliamentary opposition in non-parliamentary regimes: Latin America. Journal of Legislative Studies, 14, 160-189.
[21] Pérez-Liñán, A., & Castagnola, A. (2009). Presidential control of high courts in Latin America: A long-term view (1904-2006). Journal of Politics in Latin America, 1, 87-114.

information and revelations about inter-branch relations. So the more independent are the judges, the higher will be the capacity of defense of a correct degree of freedom of media.

The disposal of natural rescources is another relevant element to take into consideration. Several studies witnessed the fact that in the presence of a state which has a relevant rate of resource wealth, media freedom is more likely to decrease. One possible explication of this correlation could be that, as Sonin, Guriev and Egorov explained, presidents that can count on a huge amount of natural resources are not very worried about their bureaucratic performance. Consequently, they do not perceive the pressure of monitoring the news and the information that are published by free media outlets[22].

As it has been already underlined, leaders' motivation cannot be considered as the only sufficient element to predict a certain decline in the level of media freedom. Several other factor play a key role in this context and can foster or hamper presidential will. For example, institutional constraints (legislations or opposing parties) and an independent judicial power can help maintaining free media; a strong legislative majority of the party of the leader, the possession of decree powers and the abundance of natural resources are elements that facilitate the interference of presidents in the media sector in order to limit freedom of press.

Simeon Djankov et al. (2003) developed a very interesting analysis of the relationship between state ownership of media outlets and its general outcome and implications. In particular, the main result of the study tells that with a greater rate of state-run media, with a special accent on the press sector, there is a correspondence of worse outcomes in several fields. For example, the government has less efficacy, there are increased levels of corruption and citizens' rights are restricted. There is another aspect which is negatively influenced by a domination of state-owned press: datas show worse results referred to health and educational well-being compared to those registered in states with the majority of media owned by private entrepreneurs[23].

---

[22] Egorov, G., Guriev, S., & Sonin, K. (2009). Why resource-poor dictators allow freer media: A theory and evidence from panel data. American Political Science Review, 103, 645-668.

[23] Djankov, S., McLiesh, C., Nenova, T., & Shleifer, A. (2003). Who owns the media? The Journal of Law and Economics, 46, 341-380.

Media have the possibility to become the "fourth estate", apart from the concrete capacity to satisfy those functions or not, but there is a fundamental condition that has to be respected: they have to safeguard their independence and freedom of expression. Being the "fourth estate" entails the responsibility to monitor other institutional bodies through an accurate system of checks and balances, in a general process that can increase democratic accountability.

The key concept in this context is the term "independence". In order to accomplish the mission of oversight of the democratic structure, also the judiciary needs to be free and independent. Moreover, a subjugated judiciary causes a complete loss of media's influence[24].

In conclusion, the presence of a concrete and meaningful political-institutional opposition is crucial to guarantee a balanced political competition. As already extensively demonstrated, a situation in which presidents have big power and parties are weak screeches with a high level of freedom of media. In this context, media are depowered and, without proper political adversaries, remain the last opposition standing.

---

[24] McMillan, J., & Zoido, P. (2004). How to subvert democracy: Montesinos in Peru. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 18, 69-92.

MEDIA FREEDOM AND REGIME TYPES

As Gehlbach and Sonin found out in their analysis, when central governments have the need to mobilize their constituency in favour of laws which are against the most common popular interests there is an increased evidence of frequent state intromissions in the media system and a greater degree of media bias in autocracies[25].

By contrast, the interferences of the state in democracy are significantly lower, because governments find institutional and constitutional obstacles such as the rule of law principle and competition among political parties.

Political systems do exercise a relevant influence on the media establishment; some of the most important basic principles of press freedom are often crushed by political powers that have to modify the underpinning structure and procedures of media by decreeing binding rules and decisions.

Steffen Kailitz wrote a general data set that classifies several political regimes. He defined political regimes as "set of rules that identify who has access to power, who is allowed to select the government and under what conditions and limitations authority is exercised"[26]. In his personal analysis, political regimes are distinguished on the basis of different strategies of legitimation[27].

Media are seen in different ways whether politicians or citizens have to use them. For example, politicians exploit media as distributors of surveys and predictions about public preferences, in order to adjust their choices towards the most appreciated position and obtain political gains. Voting people can also be deeply persuaded and convinced through a brilliant use of media as communication channels. In this context, the engagement of voters and the management of public relations become two salient aspects of the use of media done by political exponents. Citizens are simply bound to media for the role they

---

[25] Scott Gehlbach, and Konstantin Sonin. "Government Control of the Media." 2012. http://ssrn.com/sol3/abstract=1315882

[26] Kailitz, Steffen. "Classifying Political Regimes Revisited: Legitimation and Durability." Democratization 20, no. 1 (2013): 39–60.

[27] Kailitz, Steffen. "Political Regimes Code Book. Version 1.2." Unpublished manuscript.

play as information providers, political and diplomatic watchdogs and public agenda-setter.

The political realm intervenes in media-related matters because it has to pursue its specific economic interests. It is not surprisingly frequent to see media realities directly censored by governments or news distorted owing to the personal convenience of leaders and ruling parties. Editorial policies are usually influenced and folded under the chase of an economic profit by media owners. The news market is strongly influenced by entrepreneurial dynamics, with the evident consequence that media are not free to publish contents and news stories without a correlated financial consideration of pros and cons, personal favours and advantages of various kinds.

This actual framework is the product of a "manufactured consensus"[28] between the most important figures of the political and the economic sectors, which clearly possess the means to modify and rebuild news coverage in the version they like the most.

In general, the boundaries in which journalists are able to operate are established by political, economic and legal factors that surround the regime. Commercial logics put further pressure on journalists, that have to fulfil the indications of media owners and see their agenda-setting power diminished. The context of hectic competition in media market introduces new limitations in the field of news production, which are already worsened in quantitative and qualitative terms by the periodic reduction of staff and human resources in newsrooms[29].

Politics have a sort of supremacy on media outlets and use them for several reasons: they can hamper the flow of dangerous news and information, control practical content production and spread their propaganda messages through different means of communication. Political persuasion is the reason of the governmental use of media, and this happens both in autocratic and democratic systems. The particular features of every

[28] Herman and Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent. For an overview of the Marxist literature, see McQuail, Mass Communication Theory, 95–6
[29] Lichtenberg, Judith. "Foundations and Limits of Freedom of the Press." In Democracy and
the Mass Media: A Collection of Essays, edited by Judith Lichtenberg, 102 –135.
Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

political regime can have repercussions on the analysis of costs and benefits that each government periodically makes relatively to media policies.

News production is a complex and delicate sector that, as we already underlined, could be undermined by different and multifaceted factors. Its logic does not present the same features for every political regime: there is a sharp distinction between production of news and stories in democracies and autocracies.

Autocratic regimes are closed systems, without any possibility for external interventions or constraints imposed by institutions. In this framework, the capacity to repress, both in a violent way or not, is extremely heightened. Coercive manners and do-it-yourself regulations are only two examples of probable actions that an autocratic leader would undertake in order to protect its legitimacy at power.

Media serve the autocratic system by fulfilling two fundamental goals for the survival and the safeguard of the regime. First of all, the undisputed primacy of the preservation of order and the defense of legitimacy impose a tight control on mass communication. In such a way, the possibility for civil groups and organizations to set up protests and to steadily play their "opposition role" is seriously compromised.

The second important point is the total avoidance of public discourses and debates about the central power, in order to securely hold the legitimacy of the regime, also from a mediatic perspective. The opportunity to restrict and modify news coverage is the reason why autocratic regimes often have the possession of media outlets or delegate them to loyal figures[30]. These authoritarian governments use the journalistic practice of framing: current political events are willingly presented in the light of the regime's goals.

According to Sebastian Stier, there are two main elements that can explain the different directions undertaken by press policies: regime legitimation and governance[31]. For autocratic rulers, public support is the driving force behind the building of a legitimation strategy that could be durably stable and credible. This popular push gives a substantial

[30] Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce, and George Downs. "Development and Democracy." Foreign Affairs 85, no. 5 (2005): 77–86.
[31] Democracy, autocracy and the news: the impact of regime type on media freedom, Sebastian Stier, Democratization 22(7), 2015: 1273-1295.

incentive to the creation of processes of self-reinforcement[32], that are usually exploited by the autocrat in order to preserve its powerful position.

Along with public support, leaders also need press' support. When presidents perceive the confident backing of press entities, they enter in a psychological process thanks to which they can deliberately decide not to employ political, economic, material and strategic resources aimed at the establishment of a broad media censorship.

Legitimation patterns also demonstrate that pro-regime news coverage could be not necessarily established through force by the government. Among several possibilities, the idea that independent journalists could firmly agree with the polities and the positions of the autocratic government has to be taken into consideration.

With regard to political governance, Francis Fukuyama described it in an article as "a government's ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services, regardless of whether that government is democratic or not"[33]. Governance is linked to this analysis in a really relevant and interesting way, because an increasing number of scholars and political scientists recently underlined the persistence of a positive relationship between freedom of media and quality of governance[34]. In particular, the presence of an autonomous press, which is able to produce contents in an independent way, creates the conditions for an increased transparency and accountability of the bureaucratic apparatus.

Democracies have demonstrated to associate themselves with significantly higher degrees of media freedom compared to autocratic regimes. In all autocratic sub-types of regimes,

---

[32] Gerschewski, Johannes. "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-
optation in Autocratic Regimes." Democratization 20, no. 1 (2013): 13 –38.
[33] Fukuyama, Francis. "What Is Governance?" Governance 26, no. 3 (2013): 347 –368.
[34] Adsera, Alı´cia, Carles Boix, and Mark Payne. "Are You Being Served? Political Accountability and Quality of Government." Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization 19, no. 2 (2003): 445 –490; Egorov, Georgy, Sergei Guriev, and Konstantin Sonin. "Why Resource-Poor Dictators Allow Freer Media: A Theory and Evidence from Panel Data." American Political Science Review 103, no. 4 (2009): 645 –668; Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina, "Controlling Corruption Through Collective Action." Journal of Democracy 24, no. 1 (2013): 101– 115; Themudo, Nuno S. "Reassessing the Impact of Civil Society: Nonprofit Sector, Press Freedom, and Corruption." Governance 26, no. 1 (2013): 63 –89; Treisman, Daniel, "What Have We Learned About the Causes of Corruption from Ten Years of Cross-National Empirical Research?" Annual Review of Political Science 10, no. 1 (2007): 211– 244.

media freedom can be found more or less on a similar level, even if there are notable variations. However, among autocracies, it is important to design another sub-differentiation.

Monarchies, military regimes and electoral autocracies have proved to possess higher levels of freedom of media compared to other regime types. In particular, electoral autocracies registered the best results in this field.

Communist ideocratic regimes, by contrast, are those with the lowest rate of free media along the autocratic spectrum. These kinds of regime possess a "utopian and totalitarian ideology[35]" (Stier), which constitutes the point of greatest interest for both rulers and citizens. The bad results in media freedom are due to a sort of communication monopoly which serves to spread communist ideological doctrines and future goals[36].

Of course, the owner of this monopoly corresponds to the central party. Through this gradual process of centralization of media and state ownership of influent media firms, the party achieves the outcome of the complete deletion of free market competition[37].

In the middle of these two opposite groups, it is possible to note that personalist regimes and non-ideological governments guided by one party register an average low level of freedom of media, even if they do not find association with any the excesses of the represented scenario. The specific aim for these regimes is to demobilize citizens.

In particular, personalist regimes basically strive for economic and material enrichment[38]. The consequence is a low rate of political legitimation, with leaders that are usually confined at receiving popular support by using their leadership abilities and their charism.

---

[35] Kailitz, Steffen. "Classifying Political Regimes Revisited: Legitimation and Durability." Democratization 20, no. 1 (2013): 39–60.

[36] Friedrich, Carl J., and Zbigniew Brzezinski. Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965.

[37] Geddes, Barbara, and John Zaller. "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes."
American Journal of Political Science 33, no. 2 (1989): 319 –347; Gehlbach, Scott, and Konstantin Sonin. "Government Control of the Media." 2012, http://ssrn.com/sol3/abstract=1315882; Siebert, Fred S., Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm. Four Theories of the Press: The
Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet Communist Concepts of what the Press Should Be and Do. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963.

[38] Soest, Christian von. "Persistent Systemic Corruption: Why Democratisation and Economic

Other typical characteristics of personal regimes are the creation of a widespread system of political clientelism and the total dependence of media outlets on governmental or private resources, due to the extremely weak economic conditions. As a consequence, media are largely owned by oligarchs, whose interests are often blurred with the dictator's ones[39]. After communist regimes, personalist autocracies give the worst performances in terms of media freedom.

Regimes characterised by the presence of one central party generally have higher levels of freedom of media than communist governments, but do not achieve the same level of electoral autocracies. One-party regimes have a monist concept of rule[40], this factor clashes with other considerations essentially based on governmental performances.

Governance theories related to media freedom in electoral autocracies have proved to be quite ambiguous. The presence of political elections is not always the synonymous of a positive model of good governance.

On the one hand, more economically prosperous regimes will probably have a higher degree of legitimacy and, as a consequence, will be less likely to get overthrown by popular protests and uprisings. So the regime will be free to start a process of liberalization of press coverage and news production, and will exploit the intrinsic advantages of a free and liberalized press.

On the other hand, regimes with a widely good financial situation could get involved in other kinds of social and mediatic problems. For example, a significant degree of economic development could introduce an increased level of inequality and more democratic demands. That's why developing autocracies are forced to "run for cover" and start a repressive work of media censorship. In this context, public censorship becomes more sophisticated and effectively sensitive. Governments, thanks to state capacity and heightened tax revenues, possess the economic means to put in place new-

---

Liberalisation Have Failed to Undo an Old Evil." Zeitschrift fu¨r Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft 7, no. S1 (2013): 57–87.

[39] Voltmer, Katrin. "Comparing Media Systems in New Democracies: East Meets South Meets
West." Central European Journal of Communication 1, no. 1 (2008): 23 –40.
[40] Voltmer, Katrin. "Comparing Media Systems in New Democracies: East Meets South Meets
West." Central European Journal of Communication 1, no. 1 (2008): 23 –40.

generation programmes which make possible modern, constantly watchful, widespread censorship.

A sort of probable compensation scheme sees the central government in the act of donating really generous rents for citizens in order to fade the popular perception of censorship[41]. Resource-rich states have lower levels of media freedom because they are characterised by a lowered dependence on their own bureaucratic performance[42]. Citizens libing in this type of regimes are paid-off and obliged to forcibly accept a real reduction of their civil and social rights.

There are political and economic motivations behind the negative correlation between freedom of media and size of population. Bigger media markets are attracted from the perspective to nationalize media firms and rake incomes from advertisements. They try to convince national governments with important economic incentives. On the other side, there is the factual risk for the large population of the country to see a valuable political opposition disappear.

In fact, mass communication in highly populated nations is the designed tool in order to create an organized counterpart to autocratic regimes. With external market controlling media outlets, this scenario is doomed to wane. Here is the natural cause of lower levels of freedom of media in countries with autocratic regimes and a large population.

Other studies revealed that the disposal of alternative sources of information is correlated with freedom of media with an inverse tendency. These secondary channels of news are more difficult to manage for the government, with a consequential decrease in the rates of control. The immediate reaction of the regime to the diffusion of alternative sources of news is the tightening of monitoring and oversight of those "classic" media channels that are already present in the media landscape[43].

---

[41] Schmidt, Manfred G. "Legitimation durch Performanz? Zur Output-Legitimita¨t in Autokratien." Totalitarismus und Demokratie 9, no. 1 (2012): 83– 100.
[42] Egorov, G., Guriev, S., & Sonin, K. (2009). Why resource-poor dictators allow freer media: A theory and evidence from panel data. American Political Science Review, 103, 645-668.
[43] Freedom House. "Freedom of the Press." http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-press

Civil wars and conflicts play a relevant role in the framework of constant control and possession of media that has been portrayed. Autocratic regimes perceive a serious threat to their legitimacy when they have to deal with internal conflicts and violent confrontations. The most common solution they put in place is a combination of harsh repression and an increased level of interferences in the press system.

To conclude, it is important to underline and take into consideration the fact that not all the regimes having authoritarian features or tendencies undertake the same measures. The way in which the different regimes react to external threats are not at all equal. As a consequence, the solutions that every autocratic regime decides to adopt and implement differ from case to case.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICS: POSITIVE ASPECTS

The use of social media related to political discussions has been investigated in several aspects. One of the most relevant results is the fact that the existence of a virtual arena in which it is possible to freely express its thoughts is considered a sort of "safe place" for the majority of users. Political issues usually are really delicate topics: a lot of people affirmed that would not treat these arguments in the same way in a real, face-to-face conversation. This is due to a general fear of being judged and, maybe, harshly critized. The possibility to lose some friends for having different views is the principal cause behind this fear. It has been found that discussions and chat in social media entail a higher level of honesty. Every person feels more confortable in expressing its personal opinions because they perceive less barriers. These barriers are often present and difficult to overcome in real life. On a social media, there is the possibility to avoid a direct confrontation and also the possible consequences have a smaller echo.

In fact, users search like-minded people in different parts of the globe and start the hardest confrontations with them. This is difficult in real life, because the higher risk is to ruin the interpersonal relations with its immediate circle of close persons. The possibility to keep our social relations harmonious and avoid conflicts, quarrels and face-to-face threats.

In general, the term "social media" appeared for the first time in 2004: in particular, it was the first usage of the exact definition with the meaning we adopt today. The Merriam-Webster dictionary described social media as "forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other contents"[44]. Among the models of "electronic communication", it is possible to stress the existence of several websites aimed at microblogging and creating new social networks.

There are two sides of a medal that we should take into consideration when we talk about social medias and democracy. On the one hand, we can find a huge obstacle that hampers the rise of social media as a democratic forum: false infornation. But on the other hand

---

[44] <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social+media>

people perceive they possess freedom of expression, which is one of the key features of democracy; moreover, interactions with users from all over the world allow them to find other people interested in the same topics and political matters. This basic principle of exposition of ideas and emotions can also transform itself into an undefined sort of protest about something they don't agree with. The only way to think clearly is to find an outlet: this is here represented by social media.

The direct consequence is that in this way it is possible to substitute vandalism and violent demonstrations across cities with a pacific, non-physical unrest. This process entails the combination between the accomplishment of the protests and the avoidance of public transport deviations, strikes and traffic blocks, that have catastrophic consequences for those who work in that specific sector.

Not only: it is really important to put attention on the fact that social conventions and rules are circumvented, with an increasing feeling of honesty that permeates the online environment. All those rules that are inspired by politeness and social acceptance can be disregarded in this new field of discussion, because personal beliefs and values cannot be entailed without a proper face-to-face communication. Another degree of honesty allowed in chats and forums is introduced by the possibility of disguise its real identity behind anonimity or fancy nicknames[45].

By using social media, the needs of socialization are often satisfied and one possible individual development could be a higher participation in the political life of a community. This psycological acquirement is due to the possibility for people to perceive themselves as an active part of the system, not only a passive figure receiving orders established by others. The biggest change is the progressive transformation of the audience "from informartion consumers into information". Users are able to create pieces of information, while until the birth of the digital era the only option for them was to read them. Another relevant aspect is the creation of the concept of "awareness" in chats and forums: people feel they are increasing the awareness about political matters they are keen on by reacting against fake news. This attempt could be directed to like-minded individuals but also to people with a different way of thinking. In this second case the

objective is to warn about wrong news and ideas and guide them through good news and others they should ignore, with the aim of transmitting a change favourable to the topics they perceive as of the utmost importance.

It is important, anyway, to pay attention to some dangerous aspects fo this digital environment. Social media have revealed to have positive aspects related to political engagement and participation but not so much on political knowledge. As a matter of fact, online groups usually start and spread discussions characterised by a low level of quality and fact-checking. Everybody has its own conception of the term "awareness" and of what it is in virtual forums. The results usually are the creation of more chaos and the leakage of attractive (but false) information.

Throughout the recent history, the use of social media platforms has been fundamental in some cases. We can consider for example the role played by Facebook and Twitter in tightening the ties between digital technology and politics with respect to environmental matters. Between 2009 and 2011, the period of the explosion of these social networks, a lot of unrests related to climate change broke out. We saw significant examples in Chile, Turkey with the Gezi protests, the two Twitter Revolutions: in all these social movements, social media served as a tool to engage people to join, coordinate the structure and the procedures of the demonstration and have a concrete influence on a higher level, the political one.

But we can also consider other examples of positive effect of social platforms for the organization of protests and the fulfilment of general aims. The student protest in Austria started in 2009 and made a large use of social media to be developed in an efficient way. Two years later, a series of protests started in several North African and Middle Eastern countries to overthrow some authoritarian regimes that had been transforming the government into a personalistic dictatorship. This broad framework then took the label of "Arab Spring": in some cases, such as in Egypt, technology has been used to inform and mobilize groups and the goal of ending the autocracy of Hosni Mubarak was achieved.

It is important to take into account also the other side of the complex relationship between politics and social media's users. Also politicians use social platforms in order to improve their public image, foster the spreading of their main ideas and give a boost to the electoral campaigns. Here we have the opposite part of the spectrum, the possibility for presidents,

ministers and official to build a positive character in social arenas. In this context, social media are used by politicians as a way to maintain the status quo unaltered and preserve mainstream norms by pushing people to conform to them. The fundamental key is the popular perception of having the right to speak freely and express its political opinions. This is a different view of a strategic use of social platforms: not only in order to organize uprisings and protests, but also to keep governing without making any substantial change. If users think they are free to confess their ideas and political worries, it is more likely that they will accept the rules and the system of which they are part.

Social media could be considered as prominent actors in terms of self-expression and access to information with a particular interest in the period of political elections. This gives the fundamental result of more educated electors, which could have a bigger number of options that they could decide to choose. The possible increase in the level of engagement of citizens reflects itself in a higher degree of participation and attendance, when referring to the elections period.

Minorities have the opportunity to make their voices heard and to mobilize themselves in order to start acquiring a specific weight in the political scene; their presence and the bunch of activities they develop in the online environment has the main consequence of allowing them to enter in the public dialogue as new relevant figures.

Another important aspect that arises in favour of the positive implications of social media is the fact that, as several scholars demonstrated in the past, they give the possibility for "outsiders" or other candidates to participate in the elections and run for office even without a concrete financial assistance. As said for social minorities, the same concept could be applied for weaker political parties. Among these, it is possible to include parties which are not completely established, have a non-defined structure or live a sort of phenomenon of "underrepresentation": thanks to social media, they start making their entrance in the political environment[46].

From a theoretical point of view, democracy is nourished by an enlarged pluralism, an equal level of freedom of speech and of expression for every citizen and an adequate

---

[46] Maria Petrova, Ananya Sen and Pinar Yildirim, 'Social Media and Political Contributions: The Impact of New
Technology on Political Competition' (2021) 67 Management Science 2997.

standard in terms of quality and operativity of institutions. Social media had the pivotal merit to introduce an open space for discussions, a forum where users can spread their views and opinions. This explains why Holly Ann Garnett and Toby James described the Internet as a system that can lead to what they call "deliberative opportunities"[47].

In its initial phase, social media had the main goal of ensuring the connection for the citizens with their own relatives and close friends. The absolute novelty was represented by the possibility to keep distance relationships alive; the evolution of the global world led to the current data of more than 58% of the entire population of the planet which could be labelled as "active social media users"[48].

According to several scholars and researchers, without certain flaws which characterise them, social media remain the source which ensures the highest level of differentiated voices and points of view, compared to other media[49].

---

[47] Holly Ann Garnett and Toby S James, 'Cyber Elections in the Digital Age: Threats and Opportunities of Technology
for Electoral Integrity' (2020) 19 Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy 111.
[48] Mason Walker and Katerina Eva Matsa, 'News Consumption Across Social Media in 2021' [2021] Pew Research
Center's Journalism Project <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/09/20/news-consumption-across-social-
media-in-2021/>
[49] Adam Piore, 'No, Big Tech Didn't Make Us Polarized (but It Sure Helps): Social-Media Bubbles Tell Only Part of the Story of Why We're so Divided. The Rest Is in Our Heads.' [2018] MIT Technology
Review<https://www.thefreelibrary.com/No%2C+big+tech+didn%27t+make+us+polarized+(but+it+sure+helps)%3A...-a0554051593>

DO SOCIAL MEDIA LEAD TO DEMOCRATIZATION OR NOT?

The relationship between social media and politics and their eventual blending are at the centre of a widespread debate. Some scholars underline the fact that social media can become a useful instrument available to citizens in order to foster democratization. In addition, they are deemed as a fantastic parameter of the general interests, needs and tastes according to the public opinion. Others consider social media, on the contrary, as a tool employed for a harsh mass repression[50].

Several followers of the first standpoint highlighted that one of the most illuminating ideas of democracy is the proliferation and diffusion of opposing perspectives and opinions. According to them, social media not only consent this, but also facilitate it through a global participation of users, that are considered as equal members of the same platform. The main aim, which is manifestly displayed, is the achievement of a "rationally motivated consensus"[51]. However, there are still strong doubts about the commonality between the ideological will and what social media really are, in their actual form.

These doubts are fed by fake news, an enormous problem that will be addressed later, and homophily. It is the tendency to engage in interactions with like-minded people and it constitutes a powerful force in social networks. Political discussions in the online context cannot be defined properly as "democratic deliberations" because they present several flaws that undermine their rationality and reliability.

Some tangible examples are the lack of coherency and an adequate work of factchecking related to political information in social media, the partial absence of strong and clear

[50] E. Morozov, The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom, PublicAffairs, 2012.
[51] P. Dahlgren, "The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation," Political Comm., vol. 22, no. 2, 2005, pp.147–162

arguments[52] and the recurrence of humorous and witty online conversations which shift the centrality of the debate towards zingers and irony[53].

The bad side of the equal participation to social networks can be identified in the popular perception of every social message as equally valid. Further investigations about the real content or the provenance of the message are delayed or totally cancelled. For example, users often do not question whether the submitter is a robot, a spammer, an élite or a "common" user or other possibilities; similarly, considerations about probable phenomena such as astroturfing, smearing posts or fake news charged with manipulative and false information are considerably scarce.

There is also a psychological aspect to take into consideration in the debates about social media. The users that live in this virtual ecosystem have different personalities, tastes, demands and emotions. They are not all the same. That is why different groups, which could also share similar ideological approaches, have multifaceted reactions to different topics or questions. The type of public opinion which can be revealed in social media networks is not completely (or not always) the same public opinion that can be detected in real life, among the streets or in the houses.

Social media are characterised by nonrandomness: the sample of population which is taken into account is not uniform and homogeneous. In fact, the percentage of representation of young male people living in a urban context is always higher with respect to other categories[54]. There is a clear phenomenon of overrepresentation that is underway. This becomes a really relevant question in the moment of the introduction of the debate about political choices.

An interesting consideration about the term "deliberation" has been developed by Daniel Gayo-Avello. He made a captivating play on words in order to refer to the common habit

---

[52] M. Conroy, T.J. Feezell, and M. Guerrero, "Facebook and Political Engagement: A Study of
Online Political Group Membership and Offline Political Engagement" Computers in
Human Behaviour, vol. 28, no. 5, 2012, pp. 1535–1546.
[53] A. Hess, "Resistance Up in Smoke: Analyzing the Limitations of Deliberation on
YouTube," Critical Studies in Media Communication, vol. 26, no. 5, 2009, pp. 411–434.
[54] D. Gayo-Avello, "Don't Turn Social Media into Another 'Literary Digest' Poll," Comm.
ACM, vol.54, no. 10, 2011, pp. 121–128.

of posting opinions and messages in the online environment with the exclusive aim of being read from other users, not to talk with them. According to him, due to this tendency the definition "public deliberation" has been replaced by "deliberation in public". Another appropriate formulation could be "blinkered deliberation"[55], that emphasizes the popular will to expose its opinions without interactions with others.

Social media is considered by many as the product of "communicative capitalism"[56]: what really matters is the exploitation of individual communication under the form of an active monetization and commoditization. The push for political initiative, in this context, passes into the background and loses its core value. The respect for the instances of the users is nevertheless present and the observance of their right to free speech is safeguarded, but these protections are carried out in the perspective of non-interference with the interests of the principal investors and the regulatory body of laws they act within.

There are several approaches that could be developed in order to analyse the relationship between social media and democratization. The first one is based on the "voice of the people", which creates the definition "vox pop approach". It tries to bring to light some particular opinions and positions about certain topics by showing particular series of tweets related to the issue. This is a borderline practice which cannot be properly defined as veritable "public opinion", but constitutes an important tool really common in journalism aimed at sustaining an argument.

The second approach is mainly referred to a quantitative analysis. The operation foresees an aggregation of social media metrics for a given issue. These metrics are gathered on the basis of a careful scrutiny of users' profiles, hashtags, keywords. Two ways of exploiting this approach have been developed.

On the one hand, researchers use data produced by social media to build a time series which could represent the mood of the general public. For example, the possibility to detect a peak in the mood which is not expected entails the correspondent possibility to find keywords related to it and this process is reversible and interchangeable.

---

55 R.E. Goodin, "Democratic Deliberation Within," Philosophy & Public Affairs, vol. 29, no. 1, 2000, pp. 81–109.
56 J. Dean, "Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive," Polity, 2010.

On the other hand, there is a tangible risk related to this approach: inconsistency. In fact, the main feature of this approach is the entire retrieval of data is based on social media. These virtual platforms are typically prone to some sort of "mood swings". The atmosphere can change with some overreactions or underreactions that do not represent the real public reaction, which usually stands in a median line. So here the problem is that the highest peaks do not always represent the general mood and reactions in a correct way.

There is also a second way thanks to which it is possible to employ this approach focused on aggregated metrics. It consists in the creation of a "correlated scheme" obtained by crossing the time series from social media data with the one traced by traditional polls related to public opinion.

The third approach is called "semantic polling". It is characterised by a careful and thorough scrutiny of data of a textual type in order to make valid assumptions about public opinion. Textual data comprehend contents such as Tweets, posts, articles and so on. These are mined and studied to reach specific conclusions and statements on particular topics[57].

A possible obstacle to the production of correct, trustworthy conclusions is strictly related to the collection of valid opinions and ideas. Topics that have a fast-pace circulation and that are linked to technology encounter several biases in social networks[58]: the direct risk is to "fall into the trap" of making public opinion and trending contents the same thing, which is absolutely misleading in the majority of the cases.

In general, social media introduced the possibility to encompass in its structure different forms of participation and political actions. These could be divided between conventional and unconventional ones, and both have been frequently detected in the world of social media platforms.

---

[57] N. Anstead and B. O'Loughlin, Semantic Polling: The Ethics of Online Public Opinion, 2012; www.lse.ac.uk/ media@lse/documents/MPP/Policy-Brief-5-Semantic-Polling The-Ethics-of-Online-Public-Opinion.pdf.
[58] J. Ausserhofer and A. Maireder, "National Politics on Twitter: Structures and Topics of a Networked Public Sphere," Information, Communication & Society, vol. 16, no. 3, 2013, pp. 291–314.

Conventional forms of political action entail an active possibility of discussion, vehiculation of ideas and self-expression. For example, people that undertake conventional actions could vote, run for office, mobilize and spur the constituency, be volunteer in electoral campaigns, create direct and tight links with functionaries that have been elected and so on. On the contrary, unconventional or contentious forms of political action consider the organization of uprisings, popular demonstrations, mass strikes, riots, revolutions and all entail the rejection of unjust norms.

The short circuit among the ideal framework and reality started spreading with the appearance of new platforms and online websites. The general conviction, that sometimes was more of a hope, was that the connection between social media and conventional participation could lead to an increase in terms of political engagement and mobilization, with a particular accent for the youth and less involved groups.

Reality instead highlights the fact that there is not any type of distinction in the level of engagement between social networks users or non-users. In addition, it is relevant to take into consideration the fact that people that could be defined as "politically active" does not receive a higher degree of information and awareness from the attendance of such platforms, while, on the other hand, it is possible to affirm the opposite thing, due to the capacity of social media to spread misleading concepts[59].

It is possible to talk about a missed achievement of the objectives of a heightened level of democracy and political engagement of the citizens. This awareness pushed some scholars to interrogate about the real, intrinsic function of social media. They are a product tailored for mass consumption and owned by privates. The main aim of social media is the entertainment of the population, also due to the way of functioning of these platforms which give a "prize" to those websites or pages which attract users for a longer time.

The process of increasing engagement of people in political actions, both in conventional or unconventional forms, is shifted to a secondary matter. The result of these analysis is

[59] M. Conroy, T.J. Feezell, and M. Guerrero, "Facebook and Political Engagement: A Study of Online Political Group Membership and Offline Political Engagement" Computers in Human Behaviour, vol. 28, no. 5, 2012, pp. 1535–1546

that it is true that social media could foster popular participation in political actions of a contentious, unconventional nature; the creation of complete, exhaustive, practical political ideas and programmes is something which, on the other hand, cannot be facilitated by the use of virtual media.

In order to create a higher degree of civic and popular engagement in political topics, there is the absolute need of a change in the internal nature of social media. They are too much impregnated with economic and financial interests and calculations of convenience. The main theme is the process of monetization of communication.

People that want to engage and connect to politics, especially if they live under regimes of an authoritarian type, requires some fundamental conditions to spread their ideas and start having a clout in the political scenario. Among these conditions, the existence of meaningful and open deliberations, the right of freedom of speech and expression, the free availability and accessibility of credible pieces of information.

In addition, it is important to delete some underway activities of manipulation, monitoring, commoditization, monetization when citizens link themselves to some organizations or groups. People cannot feel unsafe or vulnerable to the harassment and persecution by police officials or authorities. So the creation and development of new technologies which could favour more transparent and permissive spheres of action is the necessary choice which has to be adopted in the following years.

Today, social media represent a profitable opportunity for politicians, officials and members of delegations. Political campaigns, for example, are currently characterised by a massive use of online means of communication, in order to spread information and attract votes by illustrating the main candidate and its ideas in a modern, compelling way.

The interconnected world of social media requires a constant presence of the political protagonists, and timely moves not only in face-to-face confrontations, but also in the virtual environment. In this context, the role of campaign managers becomes fundamental. They have to take care of the image of their candidate in several platforms at the same time, in order to push him higher in public opinion polls and surveys.

Among the basic activities they bring about, they have to announce the will of their candidate to run for the elections, organize the practical matters related to the campaign such as the creation of the bureaucratic staff, the achievement of financial funds, the scouting and recruitment of volunteers. Moreover, they have to refine the relationship between their candidate and the public: the general image of the politicians should be as authentic, available and inclusive as possible. In this way, it is easier for campaign managers to intercept the agreement of larger parts of the constituency, find new supporters and mobilize people towards the candidate they are backing, through an accurate diffusion of his main political slogans, opinions and programs.

This is the general use of social media made by people and workers close to the politicians; the way through which they are used is substantially different when the politicians themselves undertake the use of these platforms in an active, purposeful way.

It has been observed several times that, in this context, social media are seen as "one-way communication tools[60]"; political figures do not opt for an open deliberation with citizens, but they prefer an unconstrained exposition of their own programmes and opinions. The possibility of a constant and interconnected discussion with users is usually discarded.

This tendency is duplicated also in the period immediately after political elections. Media platforms are a useful instrument for politicians to provide timely information about what they are working on or what they are planning to do in the future. The negative side of this conception of social media is the scarce engagement established with citizens. Governmental policies and decisions are never discussed with voters: the consequence is a progressive estrangement and disalignment of electors.

An interesting consideration about the relationship between organizations and the use of social media could be developed. The advent of Internet and the digital era gradually decreased the perceived need of engagement in collective political action for several formal organizations and groups. This evidence provoked the widespread conviction that the social movements of the actual political landscape are essentially flat, without a clear

---

[60] D.G. Lilleker and N.A. Jackson, "Towards a More Participatory Style of Election Campaigning: The
Impact of Web 2.0 on the UK 2010 General Election," Policy & Internet, vol. 2, no. 3, 2010, pp. 69–98.

leader who could provide a stable guidance to the other members. Some organizations have been described as having an horizontal structure. By contrast, this general opinion cannot be properly sustained for every action which is undertaken and developed thanks to digital or social networks. This idea does not apply for every type of collective action.

It has to be introduced an important distinction in the bigger field of "collective actions", which entails not only the sphere of definitions, but also the concrete plan. In fact, some social movements could be described as "collective actions using social media" and others as "connective actions"[61]

The main difference foresees the creation of a collective identity, which is typical of the first type of movement but is not a compulsory phenomenon in connective actions. In this second case, it is probable that the feeling of group identity would be something not strictly required. As a consequence, here it is more accurate to speak about "networked individualism"[62]. In this framework, all the members of a social movement or of an organization share the personal perception of being individuals which are linked, clustered and coalesced by the chase of a unique goal, but they remain individuals, not a group.

This particular feature of connective actions makes them unproductive and inefficient, because of the confusion which is generated. That is why several scholars consider social media as a threat for social movements and organizations: they foster this kind of participation which is mainly based on individualistic criteria, so they become a big obstacle to the achievement of the aims of these movements more than profitable opportunities.

There is a sharp division among scholars which possess an optimistic view about social media and democratization and those that have a negative, pessimistic perspective. The

---

[61] W.L. Bennett and A. Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics," Information, Communication & Society, vol. 15, no. 5,
2012, pp. 739–768.
[62] H. Rainie and B. Wellman, Networked: The New Social Operating System, MIT Press, 2012, p. 358.

first group sees them a facilitating factor for social revolutions and uprisings[63], a role which for some scholars is more strictly related to other types of media like televisions and radio. Anyway, the "optimist party" argues that the activists that take part in social movements find their legitimation through the usage of social media[64].

The second group, by contrast, characterises their main points by affirming that social media simply are elements that constitute a strategic tool with positive effects for a broader and deeper coordination.

Central governments are free to opt for harsh repressive measures with regard to social media, but they could also decide to take advantage from the perceived freedom of expression they induce in favour of the citizens, in order to protect their own position and power. For example, China represents a perfect subject because it has what several political scientists defined a "networked authoritarianism"[65]. The country has its own main social media platforms which are substantially different from those installed in other parts of the world. The regime allows a relatively free usage of social media and also lets some critical opinions about the State or its policies pass. The only condition that enhances the probability of a lightning-fast and resolute work of censorship is whether these instances of dissent try to introduce an active call for participation in collective actions, does not matter if the intimate nature of the message is not negative.

In sum, it is possible to exclude the assumption according to which social media are absolute catalyzers of democratization and political engagement. Considered the fact that every possible popular demonstration or mass uprising could end in various ways, social media could be considered however as a really relevant instrument, but the addiction of other strategic methods and means is necessary, to put it mildly.

Social media alone are not able to represent the only way through which engagement and democratization are ensured, and they do not ensure the complete freedom for the citizens.

---

[63] P.N. Howard et al., Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?, PITPI, 2011.

[64] J.B. Alterman, "The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," The Washington Quarterly, vol. 34, no. 4, 2011, pp. 103–116.

[65] G. King, J. Pan, and M.E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," American Political Science Rev., vol. 107, no. 2, 2013, pp. 326–343.

The supplementary point to develop is the popular capacity to organize in groups and take risks of different nature. In this context, the future development of new accurate technologies could be of vital importance to reach a higher level of freedom, at all levels.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

The complex set of relations that intertwines democratic elections and social media is an interesting part of the broader analysis that is being carried out. As underlined above, online media are able to create a deepened engagement in the political discourse of a large portion of the constituency, but, in order to do this, they need the intervention of other relevant factors. A higher level of popular engagement means in a wider turnout in the elections, one of the basic principles for a stable democracy.

On the contrary, social media could also become a significant tool to fulfil negative actions and discriminatory behaviours. For example, they could be employed to spread messages of hate and contempt, to build some blatant cases of violation of human rights, to interfere with an undue influence on electoral processes and to monitor human rights defenders. They have also been largely used by extremist figures of the political scene, to become their principal escape valve throughout their electoral campaigns.

So it is crucial to maintain a clearly equilibrated position when the usage of social networks in the elections' period is envolved, without exaggerations in both senses. The first point which is impossible to hide is the total presence of online media in several fundamental steps of the process which accompanies the vote. The initial phase of acquisition of information, the central part with the presentation of the main candidates and their concrete programmes, the development and diffusion of public discourse are examples of segments of the broader framework of political elections which entail a massive employment of social media.

In the broader context of the evolutionary process of social media, one crucial element is represented by the introduction of algorithms and artificial intelligence. The volume of interactions among users and participants is the key aspect that has to be closely followed in order to satisfy the profit agenda. Here the opportunity for the personalization of feeds with advertised, commoditized and sponsorised posts appears. This produces as a result the loss of "common features" among individuals and the increased difference between the singular home feed of every user, with the contemporary impossibility to control each other and have access to someone else's feed.

The actual scenario entails a continuous and fruitful exchange in people's mind between the perception of the external world and the reflection of the online environment. When there is a discrepancy between the two dimensions, also the personal concepts of what is "right" or "wrong" could change.

Still, some doubts remain about the tightness to democratic canons of the rights ensured by social media[66], such as, for example, freedom of self-expression, privacy or availability of free flow of information. These media have a pervasive approach in people's lives, even if for certain aspects individuals are still learning new concepts about them and these represent an absolute novelty to several societies[67].

For example, some concrete threats in terms of conformity to democracy could proceed from widespread platforms like X or Facebook: institutions could be hampered and the creation of an independent political will discouraged. This is due to the inner functioning of these social media, which use algorithms that "observe" and register all the users' actions: likes, dislikes, interactions with others, posts or articles where they spent the majority of their time on. This sort of "espionage" has two main consequences. The first is the malleable adaptation of someone's feed to the contents he likes the most[68]; this work of tailoring of home feeds in its turn creates a personalization of the intake of news of every user, with other specific virtual phenomena such as filter bubble, framing and echo chambers that proceed hand in hand.

Another relevant aspect of social media is strongly related to the their audience. The average public which live on social media platforms has been defined by Philip Michael Napoli as "the most comprehensively measurable audiences in the history of media"[69]. The particular case of the Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2018 blew this awareness into the public and drew attention to this aspect. The result that several scholars found out

---

[66] Thomas Wischmeyer, 'Making Social Media an Instrument of Democracy' (2019) 25 European Law Journal 169.

[67] Luciano Floridi (ed), The Onlife Manifesto (Springer International Publishing 2015) <http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-319-04093-6>

[68] Helen Margetts, 'Rethinking Democracy with Social Media' (2019) 90 The Political Quarterly 107.

[69] Philip M Napoli, Social Media and the Public Interest: Media Regulation in the Disinformation Age (Columbia University Press 2019).

were that glaring episodes of undue influence had occurred, and that these needed a superior level of regulations in order to discipline them.

Social media usually come with some specific negative phenomena. The first which has to be analysed presents a subtle but crucial distinction between two definitions: misinformation and disinformation. They are frequently both presented under the not correct name of "fake news".

The distinction is not always so evident, because this discrepancy depends on the inner intention of the author, but it is possible to understand it by analysing the given definition of the two phenomena: disinformation has been several times described as "false or misleading information that is shared in an attempt to hurt or profit from others"[70], while about misinformation has been said that it is "inaccurate information that is disseminated with no malicious intent"[71].

The general and resolutive definition is "verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public" and has been given by the Code of Practice on Disinformation by the European Commission, which also affirmed that they "may have far-reaching consequences, cause public harm, be a threat to democratic political and policy-making processes, and may even put the protection of EU citizens' health, security and their environment at risk"[72].

Democratic governance could be significantly affected by the widespread distribution of misleading information, because one of its main characteristics is the assurance that all the citizens could find accessible high-quality information, in order to develop and foster independent political thoughts and the process of decision-making.

---

[70] Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, 'Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making' (Council of Europe 2017) <https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html>
[71] Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, 'Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making' (Council of Europe 2017) <https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html>
[72] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation

As a consequence, people who encounter misinformation or disinformation start to doubt about the reliability of the government and the veracity and accuracy of what it proclaims or undertakes. This loss of faith and confidence in governments and the relative institutions is a complete failure for democratic systems[73] and, at the same time, a great political opportunity which authoritarian regimes have to take advantage of[74].

When disinformation creeps into the world of elections and political communication, the result is that the public arena becomes invariably and irreparably fragmented. Every political discussion is marked by a general feeling of distrust and suspicious thoughts appear in public discourses. In this context, social media had the controversial role of "acceleration factor" for the diffusion of disinformation. One interesting and, for certain aspects, alarming aspect which accompanies disinformation and misinformation is their capacity to link to all the other negative aspects which could influence political elections.

In fact, the majority of wrong news find one of their favourite channels of diffusion in echo-chambers, which in turn foster and increase polarization; they gain effectiveness when establish a combination with micro-targeting actions and represent the instrument through which the achievement of the goals at the basis of foreign interventions are reached; furthermore, some extreme forms of these news could be labelled with the definition of "hate speech"[75].

Even in the broad group of false information, there are some relevant differences. The most evident examples of misleading news do not represent the major threat for the electoral cycle. The worst concern is here constituted by those subtle false contents, which do not express their untrustworthiness in a really clear way, and which are very difficult to track, assess and disprove.

---

[73] Zack Beauchamp, 'Social Media Is Rotting Democracy from Within' [2019] Vox <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/1/22/18177076/social-media-facebook-far-right-authoritarian-populism>
[74] Ronald J Deibert, 'The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths About Social Media' (2019) 30 Journal affectiveof Democracy 25.
[75] Tim Culpan, 'TikTok Is the New Front in Election Misinformation' Washington Post (29 June 2022) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/tiktok-is-thenew-front-in-election misinformation/2022/06/28/0aedd53e-f73b-11ec-81db-ac07a394a86b_story.html>; Alistair Coleman, 'French Election: Misinformation Targets Candidates and Voting System' BBC News (22 April 2022) <https://www.bbc.com/news/61179620>.

In general, the fact that the exposition to sources of misinformation or disinformation makes it more difficult to face the direct consequences is a proved conclusion. This is verified by the so called "backfire effect", which is presented here as a heavy obstacle for the organization of an effective reaction. This is why several scholars underlined the importance of finding a solution at the earlier stages of the process, with the necessity to contrast the problema t its source.

The second phenomenon to be outlined is hate speech. It has been described by Anna Bisoffi as "expressions of incitement to hate and/or discriminate, directed towards certain people due to characteristics, real or perceived, connected to their identity, for instance, their nationality or their sexual orientation"[76]. The deep political distinction between parties highlighted the fact that several members and above all the politicians themselves have strongly exploited the resource of hate speech. In this way, divisions and opinions have been exacerbated, the free discussion and expression of idea manipulated and the respective opposition parties strongly attacked through words of hatred and contempt.

The objective of hate speech could be double-sided:to some extent, it has to instil fear and produce an action of intimidation directed to the targeted political opponents, but, from other points of view, it wants to conquer the sustain of thousands of sympathizers[77].

UNESCO commissioned and financed an in-depth study related to the topic of hate speech in social nertworks. The results it gave do witness that numerous psychological implications intervene and exercise their weights in some cases.

To present some examples, people feel a sort of "protection" ensured by the "shield of anonimity" they encounter, regardless of whether it is real or imaginary. They also perceive a kind of immunity which makes them feel "untouchable", because of the typical cross judicial and cross national nature that characterises the Internet.

Users who want to spread hate comments know that they will not receive any type of concrete sanction and they will not be considered as totally or partially accountable for

---

[76] https://repository.gchumanrights.org/items/634e0ea6-4e95-4062-abf7-db48df185c4a

[77] Irene Spigno, Discorsi d'odio. Modelli Costituzionali a Confronto (Giuffrè 2018) 17 <http://www.libreriadelgiurista.it/libri/9788814228322/discorsi-dodio-modelli-costituzionali-a-confronto.html>

what they wrote. The consequent aspect is a further harm and a deterioration of the conditions of the direct victims, which do not possess any weapon in order not only to avoid the situation, but also to react or counteract to it[78].

Hate speech gives rise to violent and raw episodes which represent the "arch enemy" of safe and effective democratic elections. In fact, societies characterised by pluralism and tolerance are clearly threatened by messages containing anti-democratic propaganda, especially if the authors do not have the risk of being accused or punished for what they did.

The electoral cycle is composed by different delicate steps which require an absolutely immutable system of mutual security. The possibility to put in place peaceful demonstrations is part of this scheme based on security and safety of the citizens. With the widespread interference of hate speech, this system is near to its collapse, because without security the eventuality of violent episodes in elections increases and also the electoral integrity is put under scrutiny[79].

Social media are the protagonists of a curious paradox: they equally allow the promotion and diffusion of pro-democratic and anti-democratic messages in democratic societies[80], with the consequence that it is really relevant the approach through which these platforms are used. In this scheme, there are particular conditions that facilitate the reproduction of anti-democratic claims and attitudes which are exclusively present on social media, while others are not totally limited to it.

On the one hand, some features of social media established positive implications for grassroots movements and organisations from below. Their affordability, low cost methods of use and wide accessibility represent fundamental points in favour of these

---

[78] Iginio Gagliardone and others, Countering Online Hate Speech (UNESCO 2015) 13.

[79] 'Safeguarding the Legitimacy of Elections: The Kofi Annan Commission Launches Final Report' (Kofi Annan Foundation, 23 January 2020) <https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/supporting-democracy-and-elections-with-integrity/safeguarding-the-legitimacy-of-elections-the-kofi-annan-commission-launches-final-report/>

[80] Charles Koch Foundation, Interview with Joshua Tucker, 'How Does Social Media Impact Democracy?' (3 March 2021) <https://charleskochfoundation.org/stories/how-does-social-media-impact-democracy/>

democratic instances. Through an increased opportunity of collaboration and communication, social media could constitute good examples of bastions of democracy.

On the other hand, they enable every user to produce and spread messages which are against the pivotal principles of democracy and tolerance and which are mainly based on the will to harass and prosecute the direct "political enemies". Social media have been caught several times as the stage for human rights violations and authoritarian actions.

In addition, their frenetic interactivity and propensity to reach millions of users in a few seconds adds an additional load of seriousness to the specific situation. There is the constant eventuality of the circulation of wrong or negative messages which could be vehiculated to an infinite amount of users with absolute immediacy.

A deep analysis is required with regard to the crisis in the news media which has been crafted by the introduction of social media. The possibility to express opinions, ideas and messages without paying high costs multiplied the will to "find a place" in the virtual environment, but there is a peculiarity. Social media do not present any kind of barriers or gatekeeping figures in order to check and assess what is being exposed inside their platforms.

In the past, this delicate role was played by alternative figures such as, for example, publishers, journalists, academies, editors and others[81]. They have been bypassed by the birth of modern social media, with a tangible and worrying collapse in terms of quality of messages and absence of control. By following this loss of checking capabilities, somehow has been "encouraged" the diffusion of anti-democratic opinions which were explicitly banned before.

In this framework, there is the heavy interference of the business logic which stands at the basis of every media platform: the key element in order to gain more and more revenues is how much time do people spend on pages and websites. So the more attractive is the content, the more profitable would be the situation for the owners and developers

---

[81] Andra Brichacek, 'Six Ways the Media Influence Elections' School of Journalism and Communications-University of Oregon (2016) <https://journalism.uoregon.edu/news/six-ways-media-influences-elections>

of the platforms. They try to facilitate this business logic by giving different incentives for attention-grabbing contents.

All the previous considerations find practical application at the moment of political public discourse and democratic elections. Social media are more likely to spread false information that to avoid and delete them, and, at the same time, social divisions are even worse with the interference of online websites. As it has been stressed above, authoritarian presidents and candidates can find big advantages from the total flow of information which is vehiculated by virtual media. This introduces a growing dissent and distrust in the way of working of democratic institutions and, above all, opens the door for anti-democratic positions which could represent a solution to the perceived political stagnation and apathy.

The fundamental condition in order to see the materialization of this scenario is the existence of a society which is already pervaded by a sense of progressive distrust, dismay and disapproval towards democratic leaders and institutions, usually seen as "weak". The sharp distinction among the élites and the considerable middle class represents another social factor which makes the eventuality to see democracy at risk in that determined country more likely.

In this already negative atmosphere, social media could become the element which gives the needed vent to the discouraged society, with the results of being a huge obstacle for free democratic elections and, at one time, the speaker of the collapse of trust in democratic values. It is necessary to underline the simultaneous presence of social media as a tool in a broader context of underway crisis.

Democratic elections could be strongly influenced by some "digital side-effects", which are micro-targeting and disinformation. The right to create an autonomous political opinion is hampered by attempts of exercise of undue influence of different forms.

This point represents the biggest difference between new social media and traditional ones, such as radio and television. Both in private and public sector, several regulations and norms appeared in relation to some crucial aspects. states tried to intervene in order to affirm their needs and requests, like equal exposition and representation among several

political parties, with a common, stable parameter of space and time for each one. Another element was the introduction of a sort of "cooling-off period" which was planned to anticipate the day of the elections.

In general, the eventual intromission of the state in these kinds of traditional media proceeds from the typical logic of "spectrum scarcity". According to this idea, the state is enabled to "make its voice heard" on such matters and directly distribute licenses broadcasters, because only few transmissions and programmes could be processed by the bandwidth.

The big distinction between old and new media entails the presence of a tight regulatory scheme with severe norms and rules. Traditional media have a relevant body of laws aimed at the establishment of debates and confrontations which follow a fixed pattern. The need to find a correct balance, especially in very delicate arguments like elections and political discourse, is something which modern social media are completely lacking.

Several national courts made an attempt of transfer of some crucial principles and rules to online platforms. The results demonstrated the impossibility to extend laws which were born to fulfil goals in a completely different context to a new one. In particular, social media have typical peculiarities that have been analysed above, so this process of veritable exportation of norms is even more so difficult and far-fetched.

Social media remain with a considerable vacuum of normative production. They are seen and work as a channel which helps to express and relocate messages in the virtual environment: they do not have at their disposal any method of supervision on the contents they publish. Moreover, the problem is translated to third parties, which do not have appropriate means to hold social media accountable for the messages they spread.

In the world of political elections, social media have been a novelty that created disarray and confusion in a multilevel conception. The recent developments saw numerous democratic governments that adopted regulations and norms in order to avoid undue influence and contectually ensure transparency and honesty in this field. This is the first change they tried to bring about to establish a discipline in the relationship between democratic procedures and the media sector. The second choice referred to the assurance

of a fair and well-balanced participation for every political figure to the run for office, with the same level of opportunities and instruments for every candidate.

The problem which those governments are struggling to eradicate is the element of undue influence by external actors. It must not be put in place, because, among the possible scenarios that could occur, there is the alarming danger of a degeneration of influences. They could lead to a terrible situation in which the formation of a free and unconstrained public opinion would be significantly hampered and jeopardized.

Over the past few years, scholars and researchers discovered with clear evidence that social media exercise a negative impact on the possibility for the citizens to bring to completion political choices on a basis of complete awareness of information, because these last are often not independent and reliable.

Intromissions in electoral matters is a consolidated phenomenon which characterised several – even famous - cases of the past. There are different types of meddling which could arise and with different timing and recipients. For example, they could have implications on the general voting process, voters' turnout or political preferences. Obviously, it has been widely observed that the more these interferences happen near the veritable voting day, the higher will be the total amount of harm they provoke.

The creation of filter bubbles and biased news contents seems unavoidable, because of the nature and some systemic features of media platforms. Algorithms in some ways promote and stoke the feelings of polarization and radicalisation among groups. Users are being bombarded by microtargeted messages which are based on their previous preferences and which have the aim to keep them on the page as long as possible. The predominance of contents which are mainly shared by individuals and like-minded people build a "bubble" in which opposite points of view or opinions are rejected. At the end of the process, political divisions are heightened and exaggerated and really relevant news become slowly blurred behind others.

Political speech and social cohesion are two crucial aspects which make up the electoral cycle and, more broadly speaking, a genuine democracy. These two main elements could suffer the intervention of external phenomena, such as polarization. This last has a

particular power to be harmful in those societies which already present some signals of hassle and distrust.

There is a specific type of polarization that is deemed to be even more detrimental and damaging: affective polarization. It is underpinned by the tendency of the partisans of a political group or ideological trend to consider in a negative perspective the political opponents[82]. The consequent formation of political biases against the members of the opposite political parties could lead to open hostility[83] and unleash the use of violence in the following steps. In this context, the intervention of social media in such a dispute is a possible element that could destabilize the situation[84]. In fact, they are often used as a tool with the exact aim of exacerbating the ongoing conflicts.

Political advertising is another factor that could potentially represent a problem for the correct exercise of democratic elections. First and foremost, it is really important to find a clear definition of this practice. An additional consideration has to be made about the real intentions of the work of advertising. Several developments and analysis must be implemented, because along the electoral cycle the detailed distinction between legal political contents and and illegal or secret propaganda, spread through opaque means such as dark advertisements, is often not outlined in an visible way.

Undue influence in electoral topics is self-evident when political advertisements start taking center stage. This happens through a complex and multilayered process which is aimed at the formation of a behavioural and psychographic profile on social networks. Micro-targeted contents, political ads, filter bubbles obtained by the observation of what people loves, explores or communicates are the perfect mix which leads to a negative, alienating influence on citizens.

---

[82] Ally Daskalopoulos and others, 'Thinking Outside the Bubble: Addressing Polarization and Disinformation on Social Media' Center for Strategic and International Studies Journalism Bootcamp (28 October 2021) <https://journalism.csis.org/thinking-outside-the-bubble-addressing-polarization-and-disinformation-on-social-media/>

[83] James N Druckman and others, 'Affective Polarization, Local Contexts and Public Opinion in America' (2021) 5 Nature Human Behaviour 28.

[84] Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy, 'Déjà vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century' (2018) 62 American Behavioral Scientist 3.

The same elements constitute the ideal background for the application of foreign intromissions in elections. They are not something new at all, but a consolidated tendency which follows every period of electoral race. Foreign interferences could be managed by both state or non-state actors, and their main goals range from a scope to another: military, political, social or economic ones.

Foreign meddling acquires an elevated degree of dangerousness and non-traceability when undertakes a constant usage of social media. All the tools above mentioned constitute a big threat to political elections, but there is the additional concern and discomfort coming from the use of bots with unforeseeable final intentions. With regard to this problem, it has been said that "by exploiting the open, anonymous and borderless nature of digital technologies, social media have provided novel opportunities for bad actors to meddle transnationally"[85].

Today, the manipulation of elections and of politics has arrived to such a high level that the envolved actors have become veritable professionals. The direct implication goes to the distinction between legitimate campaign activities and actions of foreign intromissions, which appear blurred in the majority of the cases.

The question is compounded by the difficulty to detect the existent relationships and kinship among the countless members of interest groups and other branches. Also the effective number of actors which take part into these interferences is not well-known. In general, there are cumbersome attempts to fix a comprehensive regulation on the links between national groups, governments from abroad, political consultants, communication firms and commercial entities.

In conclusion, there are challenges to democracy that have been exacerbated and enlarged by the appearance of social media. Some specific cases such as hate speech, disinformation, foreign meddling and polarization were already present in the past, but their actual version is far more threatening for the democratic processes and public discourse, due to the quick and dangerous evolution they had thanks to technology.

---

[85] 'Safeguarding the Legitimacy of Elections: The Kofi Annan Commission Launches Final Report' (n 118).

Political elections could suffer from the intervention and proliferation of several elements which could appear. They have different forms and scopes of action: the common denominator which makes them seem really similar is their capacity, willingly perpetrated by the authors or unintended, to inflict harm and damages to the correct democratic electoral process, with all the implications that are, as a result, undermined and made ineffective.

FIRST CASE STUDY: THE TURKISH CASE

In this chapter we will start an in-depth study about concrete examples of States that are living a democratic backsliding. The second level of our analysis will try to reveal the multilayered possibilities through which social media served as a tool for the gradual process of erosion of democracy.

The first focus is dedicated to Turkey. This country experienced a turn towards authoritarianism that encompasses a period of more than twenty years. In 2002 the AKP party, Turkish translation of Justice and Development Party, won the elections with 34% of the votes. The first important point to analyse is the party's strong sympathy for Islamism and for center-right political instances. Also religious-conservatives were seen in a good manner: they have been defined several times as the "center of the nation"[86]. In their first public discourses, they defined themselves as a "conservative-democrat party". Since the very beginning, they started a system of rewards for its supporters (resources, money and a relevant role in business and in the bureaucratic apparats) and punishments for the opponents. Among these, we can find secularists, leftists, Kurdish.

As a natural consequence, all the institutions that lived in that political environment changed progressively their intrinsic democratic features and also modified their functions.

In this context, media represented one of the main sectors in which the new regime tried to impress a change. Media plurality declined relentlessly. Since the early 2000s, the instrument that has been used in order to inquire about a country's degree of freedom of press is the World Press Freedom Index. This reflected as a mirror the evolution of the situation of the Turkish nation: in 2002, Turkey was in a median position (99th) among more or less 180 countries[87]; after sixteen years, in 2018, the ranking step occupied by the country is the 157th[88].

---

[86] Buğra A and Savaşkan O (2014) New Capitalism in Turkey. Turkey: Edward Elgar Publishing.

[87] RSF (2002) Reporters without borders publishes the first worldwide press freedom index.

[88] RSF (2018) 2018 world press freedom index.

What happens today is a general action of AKP government to misalign the different power hierarchies that make up the identity of political groups. Scandals based on corruption cases that directly or indirectly touched members of AKP are usually muted on radio programs and newspapers; party opponents are depicted as "enemies of the nation"[89] or "dangers for democracy"; every week several fake news that seek to undermine the contrasting parties' development appear and spread all over the country.

These are really common phenomena in the Turkish current mediatic landscape, but not only. It is really common to see unfair political trials and confiscations of land properties waged by the AKP government. These actions are part of a larger project of harsh punishments for the "enemies" of the regime. The principal aim is to hamper the proliferation of critical assumptions against AKP. In fact, the government labelled everything as a "democratic" way to smash the oppression and corruption that characterises the Turkish political world[90].

Journalists in Turkey have to face lots of pressures and threats; they are accustomed to work in a context that could be labelled as "tutelary democracy"[91]. They are forced to embrace the government's position through manyfold ways, more or less violent. When the regime perceive the presence of incoming publications about communism and politicised Islam, considered as a powerful engine that can create and strengthen ethnic identity, it intervenes and tries to hamper the prosecution of the working process. Radicalising and fostering the birth of new ethnic identities among different groups is something really dangerous for the government: this is the reason why it decides to curb in a resolute way.

The direct consequence of the destabilization of power hierarchies is the creation of a scheme of instability[92] in which actors acquire or lose power and see their social relations

---

[89] Democratic backsliding and the media: The convergence of news narratives in Turkey, Defne Över, Media, Culture & Society 43 (2), 343-358, 2021
[90] T24 (2014) Erdoğan 2009'da Zekeriya Öz'ü Böyle Savunmuştu: Operasyonu yapanlara saygı
duysunlar. December 30.
[91] Esen B and Gümüşçü Ş (2016) Rising competitive authoritarianism in Turkey. Third World
Quarterly 37(9): 1581–1606.
[92] Wacquant L (2008) Ordering Insecurity Social Polarization and the Punitive Upsurge Radical
Philosophy Review 11(1): 1–19.

transform. As Kemper says, in these situations it is possible that personal expectations are not satisfied: this causes the sudden emergence of the emotional field[93]. Insecurity and fear are only the most tangible products of a reduction of influence. The emotional change of actors leads then to a shift in professional practice, in this case of news-making practice. Dafne Over tries to explain through this process the gradual loss of democracy in the media in Turkey.

In general, when violent confrontations between the government and other groups appear, to narrate the story from a point of view which doesn't match the one of the regime is highly dangerous and could lead to controversies. The Turkish history in the 1990s taught this: in the context of the harsh armed conflict between the national government and the PKK (an organization of paramilitaries based in the region of Kurdistan), the media sector was picked on with journalists censored, sent to prison or murdered in order to acquire the presentation of facts which was "right" in the governmental perspective.

The regime soon started accusing hundreds of journalists of an alleged proximity with their "historical enemies". Usually, the assumptions talk about a possible membership or affiliation to terrorist organizations or an active participation in the propaganda machine of illegal armed groups. Then, these accuses are used by the Courts in a process of political instrumentalization that end with a change in the distribution of power in the media sector. This unbalanced situation is also caused by the fact that journalists are persecuted and put in jail. By following this system, Turkey reached the unenviable record of "country with the highest number of jailed journalists" in 2012 and 2013 and between 2016 and 2018.

There is another big instrument used by the government in order to modify the media system according to their preferences: property transfers. In fact, high tax fines and property seizures are usually moved by the AKP to the owners of opponent media outlets, that in the majority of the cases are obliged to sell them. In order to conclude this substitution at power, the biggest banks of the nation give easy credit and facilitations to businessmen and entrepreneurs aligned with the ideas of the government, that can buy

---

[93] Kemper TD (1978) A Social Interactional Theory of Emotions. John Wiley & Sons.
Kemper TD (1990) Research Agendas in the Sociology of Emotions. State
University NY Press.

those sold outlets. The result is their change into pro-AKP outlets that propose contents largely shared and accepted by the regime.

News organizations sometimes receive phone calls in which they are forced to appoint their journalists and communicate them their dismissals. In the most frequent scenario, this happens without any type of explanation offered to workers. Another deeply negative data about Turkey has been given by Agbaba et al. in 2014: from 2002, year of the rise to power of AKP, since then more than 1860 journalists has been forced to resign or dismissed due to political reasons[94].

Also those journalists who manage not to lose their workplace are victim of visible different treatment. It has been called by lots of them a sort of "mobbing effect": they continue doing their normal activities with the bitter consciousness that they will not be included in the newspaper. People that seek protection and sympathy from the regime avoid secularist and leftist journalists "as if they have the plague"[95].

The redistribution of relevant positions within news organizations is another aspect on which journalists want to pose the accent. Having a strong friendship with members of AKP or markers of religiosity has become an important source of finding a place, in a context of decreasing meritocracy in the world of media. In fact, as we already underlined, the current structure of organizations entails several dismissals on the basis of the religious and political identity of workers and promotions on the basis of personal relationships with politicians and party members. As a consequence, we have a system in which low-skilled workers or without experience have the possibility to obtain high-ranking seats and become managers of other much more appropriate candidats.

If we shift our analysis to a more personal and confidential level, the typical feeling of a journalist in Turkey is of absolute fear, anxiety, insecurity. The eventual causes are multiple and belong to different degrees of severity. The first point is the spread feeling of exclusion. Decisions from above are waged through a calculation that includes identity

---

[94] Ağbaba V, Özel Ö, Demir N, et al. (2014) Kalemi Kırılan Gazeteciler. Ankara: Cumhuriyet Kitapları.
[95] Democratic backsliding and the media: The convergence of news narratives in Turkey, Defne Över, Media, Culture & Society 43 (2), 343-358, 2021

matters as of primary relevance, merit and professionalism are completely negligible. This makes journalists feel that their work, at the end of the day, is totally unuseful.

The second problem is the fear of being unemployed because of the stories and the news that the journalist decides to report in his newspaper. The truthfulness of the witness here passes into the background. If a story goes against the positions of the party, it also goes against the interests of the owner of the outlet. The risk of being dismissed increases more and more. Moreover, journalists that do not respect the official ideas of the regime can face the possibility of a face-to-face confrontation with party officials, something that makes them feel again and again insecure.

There is another source of anxiety and frustration that entangle reporters, in particular secularist ones, is the fear of being imprisoned. The government has the possibility to wiretap journalists' phone calls and sneak in their houses with wires and hidden microphones. Every word people say could be considered as a possible proof in favour of their alleged position of criminality; every expression could be transformed and instrumentalised through a fine work of framing. Government is able to achieve what it wants to demonstrate in several manners, legal or illegal. This consciousness raises the perceived feeling of insecurity of journalists, that fear to be labelled as "traitors of the country"[96] and picked on.

One of the most important principles of media is the freedom of expression of those who work there. In the framework of an enlarged "fight for democracy" that is being witnessing in Turkey, what is happening is not only censorship imposed from above, but also self-censorship. When journlists start feeling threatened, the natural consequence is a strong boost in the self-restraint of its communicative possibilities.

This is clearly explained by those journalists who spent decades in newsrooms and now operate in an editorial reality that changed direction towards the government's ideas. The emargination proceeding from a journalists' identities marks the evident impossibility to their job. They say that journalism requires as a primary condition the constant discussion

---

[96] Democratic backsliding and the media: The convergence of news narratives in Turkey, Defne Över, Media, Culture & Society 43 (2), 343-358, 2021

and exchange of opinions through words: the creation of this atmosphere of isolation hampers the development of a proper journalistic conduct.

Over the years, self-censorship acquired the contours of a really relevant element in mainstream media system[97]. To demonstrate this, journalists also found a single definition for this type of activity, which is "Mr. Erdogan would be angry journalism". By taking into consideration the whole Turkish media sector, it is possible to affirm that this journalistic sway is now the dominant one above all the others.

The first abundantly clear example of "Mr. Erdogan would be angry" practice happened in 2011, when the frontier between Turkey and Iraq had been doused with bombs by the Turkish government against Iraqis civilian smugglers. At a later moment, the AKP made an official declaration that tailored the situation by defining bombings as an "accident", while affirming that smugglers had been mistaken for militants of the Kurdish opponent party, PKK[98]. Another case of obvious self-censorship appeared in the aftermath of the Gezi protests between 2012 and 2013.

Since that same year, an inquietant fact gave people the awareness of the complete flattening in the production of political journalistic contents: several newspapers started appearing with the exact same frontlines, usually accurately reporting the same words pronounced by President Erdogan in his official speeches. The plurality of opinions is in constant decline in Turkey. All the different voices and points of view that should characterise a genuine news production sector are becoming a convergent voice that incorporates everything else and makes mainstream sources of information a mere copy of others. This univocality has caused a real retrogression in political news-content production. This process has been contrasted by journalists belonging to independent media outlets, but the system that had been built is much more powerful and threatening.

---

[97] Dağıstanlı M (2014) 5 Ne 1Kim: Medyanın Mutfağından Sansür Oto-Sansür Hikayeleri. Istanbul: Postacı Yayınevi.
[98] Eralp DU (2015) The role of US drones in the Roboski Massacre. Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice 27(4): 448–455.

INTRODUCTION TO THE POLISH AND HUNGARIAN CASES

In the context of a broad analysis related to the relationship between media and democratic backsliding, an important focus should be devoted to two countries that today have particular stances and features in the international framework: Poland and Hungary.

These two nation have several similarities and share some aspects of a common historical past. After the collapse of the Soviet Union both had strong developments in the direction of a democratic and liberal system with free market and fair political elections. In the following years, however, several scholars failed to acknowledge them as two "consolidated democracies", and the question is still open.

Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz in their seminal book "Towards Consolidated Democracies" defined an approach in which the consolidation of a democracy can be traced from a behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional point of view[99].

Behaviourally, they consider a regime as democratically consolidated when there is the complete absence of actors belonging to different spheres (institutional, social, economic, political) that spend money to carry out the secession from the national state or the establishment of an undemocratic regime.

Attitudinally, what makes a democracy consolidated is the broadly shared opinion that the best suited way to face political unhappiness and economic turmoil and to guide the collectivity is the democratic apparatus of institutions, procedures and mechanisms. In this context, another relevant condition is that pro-democracy stances are bigger and more influent in civil society that those prompting a political change.

Constitutionally, the basis for an achieved democratic consolidation is the acceptance by both forces belonging or not to the government of a system of laws, norms, institutions and procedures in order to solve conflicts and tensions.

---

[99] Linz, J.J., & Stepan, A.C. (1996). Toward consolidated democracies. Journal of Democracy, 7(2), 14–33.

According to some specialised observers, in the late 90s the two countries were on their way towards a strong consolidated democracy, having already "passed the point of no return"[100] in this process. This is to say that a shift to autocracy was considered really unlikely to happen and unexpected at time.

The scenario has changed progressively over the years for the two Eastern European countries. Today, their policies, in the eyes of the international arena, are dramatically eroding liberal democratic rights and domestic factors have had a tangible impact in the establishment of such a political strategy.

The turning point for Hungary has been the rise to power of the political party Fidesz in 2010, while for Poland has been decisive the election of PiS, the Law and Justice party, in 2015. Both the two nations in the recent past have registered "levels of democratic backsliding that are considered intolerable by the EU"[101].

In particular, Hungary has been defined "an authoritarian regime" and Freedom House, an important reality in the constant monitoration of the levels of democracy and freedom all over the world, labelled it as "partly free". Since the very beginning of its experience at power, Fidesz started to deliberately control several public and private sectors and institutions[102]. As a consequence, the media, NGOs, courts and religious groups are only some of the interests of the government, which imposes frequent and tight restrictions without any kind of opposition.

Two important distinctions allow the introduction of a separated analysis between the countries, which are not totally in the same situation. In fact, it is important to understand that the specific methods and techniques used in order to erode rights were not equal; another complex reflection entails the direction taken by each democratic backsliding and their final destination.

---

[100] Ekiert, G., & Kubik, J. (1998). Contentious Politics in New Democracies: East Germany, Hungary,
Poland, and Slovakia, 1989–93. World Politics, 50(4), 547–581. JSTOR.
[101] Holesch, A., & Kyriazi, A. (2020). Democratic backsliding in the European Union: The role of the
Hungarian-Polish coalition. East European Politics, 1–20.
[102] Bakke, E., & Sitter, N. (2020). The EU's enfants terribles: Democratic backsliding in
Central Europe since 2010. Perspectives on Politics, 1–16.

This different perspective entails two different definitions for Poland and Hungary: the first one has been considered by scholars as a "conservative autocracy", while for the second has been preferred the term "patronal autocracy" or "Mafia state". Poland is a country which has a resolute view (and of consequence serious social problems) about civil matters such as religion, sexual identity and orientation, gender equality.

PiS and Fidesz not only share the situation of general violent repression and suppression of democratic rights they created in their countries, but they also have several other common points. For example, they soon began the establishment of their "propaganda machine"[103] by putting in place a process of substitution of the existing editorial boards and oversight organs. The objective of the substitution is to promote friends and other people loyal to the party at the highest parts of media outlets, in order to control freedom of press and to be sure that scandals and leaks of dangerous information will not occur.

The oppression of freedom of press has been central in the political strategies of both Polish and Hungarian government. In Poland, Kaczynski's government has passed laws that overcame a constitutional institution like the National Broadcasting Council, which role was to ensure the total independence of information coming from state-run media firms. On the contrary, chiefs and directors of radio and television channels were directly appointed by the Minister of Treasury. These kinds of operations gradually shifted the mediatic power in the hands of the regime. In Hungary the exactly same thing happened: new legislation suddenly gave the control of media entities to the central government, which was in such a way justified to circumvent the constitutionally designed body, namely the Media Council, and put into function its particular system of dismissals and appointments. Fidesz partisans arrived to the highest ranks of media firms and the new system (without Media Council) acquired the power to impose heavy fines for coverage that it considers offensive to public moral or human dignity or not balanced.

Another bastion of democracy that has been trampled is the principle of rule of law. Relevant changes occurred in the last decade in the two countries. They decided to use repeatedly the terms "constitutional identity" and "constitutional pluralism". More specifically, the tangible governmental interventions were referred to different, pivotal

---

[103] Bakke, E., & Sitter, N. (2020). The EU's enfants terribles: Democratic backsliding in Central Europe since 2010. Perspectives on Politics, 1–16.

sectors. Public administration became partially or totally controlled by the regimes, the judiciary system lost independence and autonomy, the accurate mechanism of checks and balances that usually works as "the watchdog of freedom and democracy" was deleted.

Hungary was particularly cited when a violent clash with the EU concerning the asylum acquis broke out. Its violations became more and more considered in the international framework. The Hungarian and European stances seemed and seem irreconcilable, because Orban's party refuses to acknowledge the absolute primacy of the EU legislation in this field, while it should be able to have the total supremacy for its larger applicability.

The biggest cause behind this mismatch is to be found in the radical ethnopopulist matrix of the country, which characterises also the Polish predominant cultural level. This sway is in evident contrast with the incresing multicultural and pluralist approach of the European Union. In accordance with this substantial division, both PiS and Fidesz spread their rhetoric messages by naming themselves the "pure people", that is to say Hungarian and Polish citizens, in open opposition with the "corrupt élite", the EU.

In this context, one of the actions of primary importance for the national governments is the framing of information according to their will and their interests. The crisis of migration offered PiS and Fidesz the opportunity to address the problem as more appropriate to their own specific advantages. Kaczynski talked about an alleged "external oppression" by the EU and about a loss of "sovereignty of the people"[104] in order to introduce a broad obstaculation of a future mandatory relocation of migrants. Viktor Orban tried to touch the same topics in his official speeches, blaming the political and economic leaders that, according to his words, had the intention to build a new Europe "against the will of the people of Europe"[105] and without any attention to the values of the "common European homeland"[106].

---

[104] Csehi, R., & Zgut, E. (2021). 'We won't let Brussels dictate us': Eurosceptic populism in Hungary
and Poland. European Politics and Society, 22(1), 53–68.
[105] Ibid 102.
[106] Ibid 103.

In this way, the two leaders demonstrated an evident tendence to imagine themselves as active players able to reject European punishments and to create a new European political group from the inside with autonomous ideas.

The erosion of democratic points of reference was picked on since its very initial moment: the development of free and fair elections. Several agencies denounced multiple times the uncorrectness of the political elections held in Hungary in the last decade. In particular, the 2014 and 2018 elections have been defined by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe as "free but not fair"[107], and it is easy to imagine why. The basic action undertaken by Orban's party consists in the manipulation and tampering of electoral mechanisms, achieved through the creation of fake parties that could divide the total number of anti-Fidesz votes and the emission of new rules and norms related to advertisements in order to foster the widespread presence of Fidesz.

Poland and Hungary managed to establish a sort of collaboration involving different fields, due to their common positions. Some scholars, such as Kyriazi and Holesch, used the literal definition of "Polish-Hungarian coalition"[108], while others preferred "the illiberal bloc"[109]. The main aim of the coalition is to provide mutual sustain and protection in front of the sanctions and the restrictive limitations launched by the European Commission. The result is a sort of mutual agreement that tries to repel the European punishments and that currently has an influential impact in the European Union through several political behaviours. The EU's sanctioning capacities have been successfully constrained in some cases.

One is the transfer of backsliding practices and procedures, which requires as an underpinning condition the mutual backing facing the international scene. The awareness of the solid backing of an international important ally permits the two governments to render official their domestic legitimation and pass as a normal political action laws that are externally harshly contested. This diplomatic endorsement is an effective public

[107] Bakke, E., & Sitter, N. (2020). The EU's enfants terribles: Democratic backsliding in Central Europe since 2010. Perspectives on Politics, 1–16.
[108] Holesch, A., & Kyriazi, A. (2020). Democratic backsliding in the European Union: The role of the
Hungarian-Polish coalition. East European Politics, 1–20.
[109] Nyyssönen, H. (2018). The East is different, isn't it?–Poland and Hungary in search of prestige.
Journal of Contemporary European Studies, 26(3), 258–269.

strategy; it sounds like a justification for new legislative changes attempted periodically by the two nations.

AN IN-DEPTH FOCUS: POLAND

In Poland, the local and national press gains advantages from announcements and public advertisement. These phenomena are politicised at a maximum level, and this is a typical feature of these kinds of regimes. Everytime the government changes, it is expected a sudden shift in advertising, with the aim of the creation of benefits for the respective media sources and channels[110].

Governments at a local level are legally empowered to emit and publish free-of-charge bulletins; in other words, they have the legal right to issue regular press titles or, something even more important, sell advertisement that have commercial implications. The publication of free-of-charge bulletins by local governments is allowed by the "Ustawa o gospodarce komunalnej", the law on communal economy[111].

The production of advertisement can be started both in a public or private form, with State institutions, local governments and regional entrepreneurs that spread their work by exploiting media outlets loyal to the central government, or directly owned by it. In this context, there is the total inability to track any possible direct link with politicians or functionaries which have the power. But the combination is obvious: it is regular to see that the publisher and editor-in-chief of a news organization is an employee of the local governor's office.

The action of advertisement sales by government-friendly media firms is clearly tangible in a local dimension. Public announcements are specifically showed in media that are managed by local governments, but not only. Private advertisements are published in an equal measure by the same media. The series of activities implemented by local leaders are promoted and exalted through the widespread advertiting campaigns. Direct attacks at the independent press are another frequent tendency.

The practice of public and private advertising has been judged as "illegal" by the Regional Audit Office (Regionalna Izba Obrachunkowa): according to the sentence, the press run

---

[110] http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/opinie7.nsf/nazwa/146_20131204/$file/146_20131204.pdf
[111] Dominika Bychawska-Siniarska, Director of the Observatory of Media Freedom in Poland of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights; Prof. Ireneusz C. Kamiński, Jagielonian University, Polish Academy of Science, an expert at the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.

by local governments is not allowed to enjoy the benefits of private advertisement published and spread by using public money[112]. Despite this legal observation, this is a developed habit in the country and it is still in place without any modification occurred in the past years.

Ministries' websites or the Bulletin of Public Information are the only official sources of datas about advertisements. The citizens cannot acceed to accounts and they are totally unaware of the general situation, since nobody is legally forced to demonstrate to the public the number of public and private advertisement[113]. The result is a heightened difficulty for the people to access to information related to this topic.

If the attention is shifted to the local dimension, it is possible to make more negative consideration about this disinformation problem. Titles issued by media outlets that are in the hands of local governments are essentially transformed into instruments for political propaganda. The focus is often posed on the government's work, which is described in an enthousiastic way. Their targeted public is not so easy to define, because there is the total absence of reports or datas about the number of titles published by the governments or how much of the money obtained from advertisements is official.

Commercial advertisements have relevant consequences and implications under an economic and financial point of view. In particular, the deprivation of announcements can induce financial problems that cannot be neglected. This is especially true for those companies which are not sustained or directly managed by foreign investors. At a national level, firms that are backed by foreign interventions can usually have access and exploit different channels of financements. Both big or small reception levels do benefit from advertisements, which give terrifyingly high revenues and profits for broadcasters. In fact, a study revealed that in 2011 the 55% of the entire budget of Polish public television came from advertisements[114].

In such a situation, the press loses its main democratic function, to be a a political watchdog. This undermined situation is intertwined with economic personal interests of

---

[112] http://samorzad.pap.pl/depesze/rio/133104/Bez-reklamy--W-gminnej-prasie-nie-moga-ukazywac-sie-platne-ogloszenia-
[113] https://www.bip.krakow.pl/?dok_id=69623
[114] http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/polskie-media-publiczne-jako-jedyne-w-europie-utrzymuja-sie-glownie-z-reklam/x2vx0

media masters, which possess other activities such as, for example, car rental, investment funds, travel agencies, security associations, real estate companies and others.

The prospect of a gradual loss of supervision about media is largely known by political exponents, that are far from proposing a law in order to contrast this situation. A practical example has been the creation of the Law on Public Broadcasting by the Polish parliament in December 2015. According to the plan of the new amendment, the Minister of State Treasury is able to nominate and decide upon the members of Management and Supervisory Board. But the most visible consequence, by contrast, has been a mass dismissal from media outlets of more than one hundred journalists. Others were displaced from public media sector to secondary editorial groups where the access to the public was forbidden.

The same law established the exact competences and functions of the National Broadcasting Council, the only constitutional organ that in the current scenario could carry out the role of public broadcaster. It is broadly financed thanks to the commercial advertising affairs and the gathering of licence fees. There is a relevant problem: the fee is not paid by several viewers, this causes a flaw in the collection system.

It completely lacks the public and cultural consciousness of how important paying the licence fee is. Even if media have embarked on some public campaigns aimed at demanding to the audience to pay the licence fee, the situation did not see any substantial change. In addition, it is to be put into consideration the bad functioning of the monitoring activity, which is not brought forward in a proper manner

An important point that must be understood and analysed is the discrepancy between the appearance and the substantial reality related to the concept of journalistic protection in Poland. Generally speaking, the legal structure of laws is totally in line with the directives and the objectives established by the EU; the problem is the evident distinction with what really happens in the country.

The regulatory scheme in force regarding journalistic safeguard and protection seem very robust and solid in Polish law. The Polish Constitution stipulates the freedom of expression, the right to informational autonomy, secrecy of communication and privacy to journalists. Behind this law system which appears satisfactory and aligned to international standards in the field, there are non-negligible problems that have to be taken into consideration.

Journalists lack a real, concrete protection towards intelligence agencies which strictly control mass communication. Their legal competences are in this context definitely exceeded and the consequence is that their work of surveillance gradually becomes a sort of persecution for independent journalists. These lasts are usually convicted of criminal or civil defamation charge. Public administration bodies or individual employees or politicians are the subjects who launch these proceedings in most cases. The sentence they have to address could lead them, in the worst of the hypotheses, to more than one year of emprisonment.

Several journalists are under civil law contracts or self-employed and do not benefit from the complete pack of guarantees typical of labour law contracts. For example, they have to finance their own social security payments, even though they however have medical insurance. Many of them are forced to work in public offices or in public relations because of the lack of journalistic independence. In fact, their contracts could be stopped and terminated in every moment, something that adds further instability and absence of autonomy in their working system.

The topic of media ownership is addressed in a really cloudy and ambiguous way. There is not a regulatory obligation that forces to publich periodical reports related to this matters. In fact, the last report issued by the Polish Chamber of Press Publishers (Izba Wydawcòw Prasy), an institutional body which represented the custom in this field, dates back to 2012[115]. Even in those rare cases of updated reports about media ownership, it is to be noted that several mistakes and inaccuracies frequently occur, and this does not play in favour of clarity and transparency in this field. The absence of transparency in turn facilitates the constant process of politicisation of the debates referred to the media.

Ownership ratios are documented in an occasional, sporadic way. Also the audience ratio of different media sources, which encompass radio, televisions, the Internet and the press, is not part of a uniform document[116]. A proper official database related to these topics and available to the citizens never existed. Today, the ownership of the media is becoming a relevant factor in the larger political struggle and conflict that are in place. Another

---

[115] http://www.iwp.pl/rynek_prasy.php
[116] http://www.money.pl/gospodarka/wiadomosci/artykul/media-w-polsce-do-kogo-nalezy-prasa-,138,0,1988746.html

frequent tendency is cross-ownership[117]. The financial implications of media market are not reported, so that people is completely unable to acquire information that could be reliable and trustworthy from a journalistic point of view.

Media firms have clear political prefences and interests. This is abundantly showed by the study of media contents, which are mainly based on the political scenario and reflect the strong division in the political spectrum between liberal media and conservative ones. The complete and deep awareness of what is happening in the relationship that links media and political regimes belongs exclusively to people that have a higher degree of information.

In the framework of the common politicisation of public media debates, journalists can decide to willingly expose their political ideas and positions or not. Those who reveal their political affiliation have several ways in order to express it. They can choose to participation in anti-government protests or pro-government demonstrations. However, no reactions are provoked: the reason is the ceased activity of the old National Ethical Council (Rada Etyki Mediòw) which introduced a vacuum of oversight by ethical bodies in the country.

Political opinions have strong influence in the approach through which the news are reported in public media. It is not unusual the decision to order a report analysing the news content of public and private media by the Public Broadcasting Council[118]. Media concentration is a factor of extreme importance in Poland. The relevance of this phenomenon is well explained by the data according to which seven big media owners have in their hands the majority of radio, televisions, press outlets available in the Polish mediatic and editorial landscape. In any case, in the current situation no defined rules on content regulations do exist.

The only possibility of removal of a controversial content could be waged by the national courts. They can order it through the tool of court proceedings, when they judge this legal measure commensurate and fair, in relation to the troublesome contents.

---

[117] http://monitor.cmpf.eui.eu/mpm2015/results/poland
[118] http://towarzystwodziennikarskie.org/?s=start;TDX

The new anti-terror law introduced an absolute novelty, which is the capacity for the Head of the Security Agency to lock down pages that in some way "incite terrorism" (Kaminski) or spread terrorist contents. The initial point for the Head of the Security Agency is the assent of the General Prosecutor; no judicial intervention by the courts is foreseen in the blocking procedure of terrorist topics.

Some scholars focused their works on the fact that the Polish system does not provide for any type of special rules for the press or programmes of subsidies aimed at fostering and monitoring its widespread distribution. Legislation avoids to make the work of the press easier, simply because a legislative scheme related to media and press regulation does not exist in the current situation.

For this purpose, a group of NGOs which is called "Pact For Culture" (Pakt Na Rzecz Kultury) proposed the establishment of a public fund exclusively directed and distributed among broadcasters, in order to properly fulfil what they defined "a public mission"[119]. These NGOs have interests in the field of culture and education and were born with the fundamental function of being a "public watchdog" for democracy and media freedom. Their proposal never found a legislative or governmental following action and remained an ideal perspective for the future.

Several NGOs frequently present soft law rules in the context of debates on draft laws on public media. Even though soft law does not have a strong influence or authority, it is regularly referenced and quoted in public speeches and in the legislative process. The presentation of soft law norms by these non-governmental organisations is not followed by modifications of a legislative nature.

The European Court of Human Rights made 36 judgments against Poland referring particularly on Article 10 of the Constitution, namely freedom of expression. In 25 cases Poland has been found guilty of violations of the European Convention on Human Rights. The core of the violations regarded the Polish government's carelenessness about some troubled matters. Among these, the public watchdog role played by media, the chilling effect of economic and penal sanctions, the primary importance of political speech or

---

[119] http://www.mediapubliczne.org.pl/

discussion in debates devoted to public interest topics, the discrepancy between factual allegations and value statements. The Court's judgments often required a change in the application of the norms by national courts or amendments to national legislation. Concrete examples of amended decisions were the cancellation of some laws or the deletion of sanctions of a penal type.

There is the possibility for the Polish parliament to assess the conformity of its draft laws with the EU law through the activity of a specific constitutional body. The same possibility disappears when the checks on conformity are shifted to other international organisations or the Council of Europe, because the system lacks such organs that could perform this delicate function.

At present, it is important to note that, after the political shift undertaken by the country, the Polish courts are more and more aware and flexible as compared to the Convention standards established by Strasbourg case law. Some of the problems analysed above have been taken up by the courts and the legal barriers decreed by the European legislation have been progressively adjusted into legal practice.

For example, in November 2022 the Digital Services Act went into effect. Its implementation requires European Union countries to enact legislation that defines the competencies of bodies that act as Digital Services Coordinators, responsible for overseeing the enforcement of the Digital Services Act (Article 49) (https://www.traple.pl/en/digital-services-act-the-legal-status-of-implementation-in-poland/).

This Act substitutes the Law on Provision of Electronic Services (Ustawa o swiadczeniu uslug droga elektroniczna), which already obliged all providers of online services to make certain information in a transparent, not ambiguous and directly accessible way for all the users of the electronic system. The point that distinguished Poland from other European countries was the absence in applicable law of a regulator responsible for overseeing compliance with the Law on Provision of Electronic Services: the introduction of the Digital Services Act changed this negative situation. (https://www.traple.pl/en/digital-services-act-the-legal-status-of-implementation-in-poland/).

Another new body has been created in the last years in Poland: the National Media Council. The idea was to regulate all public media thanks to the work of this constitutional organ. In reality, there is not a minimum level of guarantees that could ensure that this Council would remain totally independent and autonomous from political parties. Still, there is the risk of seeing this body swallowed up in the political struggle among different forces. One additional problem refers to the rules that discipline the election of the Chairman and members: they are directly elected by political organs, a practice which is in contrast with the international principle that oversight bodies in public media should be made up of members reflecting pluralistic views and distinguished political positions.

The space for an intervention of the Public Broadcasting Council becomes larger in this context. Every public broadcaster should write and publish annual reports about its programs, plans, financial conditions to the Public Broadcasting Council. The President of the Council is also enabled to impose fines on those media which transmit programs openly against Christian values, minors' welfare, social and moral values.

In reality, the imposition of economic fines is really rare and circumscribed. From an economic aspect, public broadcasters have the tendency to avoid price undercutting with regard to direct competitors. They have to respect basic market principles and relegate the phenomenon of price undercutting exclusively to big commercial companies, especially in radio. This narrowness is due to the intrinsic features of the Public Broadcasting Council: it is a politicized body and its interventions towards public broadcasters are strongly influenced by the political orientation of the Council at the moment. In general, the activity of monitoring reimains quite ambiguous and not effective.

The same thing should be said for the Inspectorate of Public Spending (Najwyzsza Izba Kontroli, or NIK), which has to monitor national televisions and radio from a financial point of view, related both to general or particular spending. The way through which it plays its role is the conduction of audits. The monitoring should be on an annual basis, but the reality is far from this initial plan. In fact it is estimated that the last audit on the financial perspectives of national televisions has been run more than ten years ago, in 2012.

The new draft law that regulates national media has created a Fund for National Media which is fuelled by different types of incomes. Among these, there are commercial advertising, payments of license fee and additional state-aid. No testing procedures to identify the socially useful services are provided by the law, while the EU Commission explicitly required them[120]. This is an important point of friction between Poland and the EU, due to the possible developments of this national law: the Polish Press Agency (Polska Agencja Prasowa, PAP) could become part of public media and start receiving benefits from state aid, since the channels that have the must-carry status are not clearly specified.

---

[120] http://www.krrit.gov.pl/Data/Files/_public/Portals/0/komunikaty/wysluchanie/odp--sejm-uwagi-krrit---ustawy.pdf

ANOTHER IN-DEPTH FOCUS: HUNGARY

Since 1990, Hungarian media have been characterised by a continuous political struggle with the aim of "conquering" the public service media. After the collapse of Soviet Union and the consequent political changes, the world of journalism was invaded by left-wing political stances and opinions, which lived sometimes in cases of over-representation. Suffice it to say that an important part of quotes in Népszabadsàg, namely the principal Hundarian daily newspaper which substituted the Communist Party's journal, has been detained by the foundation of the Hungarian Socialist Party until recent years. In the 1990s, journalists mainly belonged first and foremost to the group of liberal intellectuals and ownership influence was really limited.

Viktor Orban, actual Prime Minister of Hungary since 2010, is a really important figure in this strive for mediatic power. He started a series of attempts of interferences in the media market since 1998, constantly in search for an equilibrium a balance in media. The creation of a more favourable media system has always been the milestone of the political programmes of Fidesz, in order to maintain power as long as possible. In fact, Fidesz started to shape the system since its first governing period, in 2008, towards a right-wing "media empire". Orban fundamentally based his political strategy on the creation of media firms with some valuable allies placed at the peaking seats or within the organizational staff. Some recent studies highlighted the current presence of eight Hungarian oligarchs in the Fidesz business networks.

The most developed pattern sees national oligarchs having in their hands the majority of big media firms. These figures are characterised by friendly or informal relationships with exponents of the political and financial sectors, with whom they share high amouts of interests in different fields. The government continues to use its power through the absolute control of media (especially the press) in order to satisfy the needs of clients and friends in business. Moreover, it keeps in its hands the work of manipulation of public procurement. According to a Freedom House report published in 2015, "the principal

source of corruption is constituted by the intertwined relationship between economic élites and political exponents"[121].

The easiest explanation of this process is that the central government found much more easy and successful the chase for the total control of media sector by employing different economic ways and harsh business pressures. On the other hand, Hungarian oligarchs loyal to Orban's government are not attracted by economic advantages but by the power of communication; by ruling relevant media outlets, they are allowed to gradually influence and shape public opinion towards their interests.

The only exception in Hungary is represented by external, international companies that own media outlets. For example, it is possible to cite in this group Bertelsmann, RTL and Ringier. They were significantly dominant in the mediatic scenario in the 1990s. Since the first years of the new millennium, their percentage has been gradually decreasing, and they are more and more moving out from the country and the relative market. Hungarian ownership is stronger in the current scene.

From a theoretical and legal point of view, Hungarian laws forbid an ownership of an indirect or second-level type. The factor that allows owners to circumvent the rules is the informal nature of their links with politicians and influent characters. The only well-known element is the origin of the ties between new media owners and politicians. They usually are relatives, friends, neighbours, roommates at the university, and so on. As a consequence, the law cannot tear down these kinds of relationships and the practice remains really common in the market.

Corruption as part of public procurements is something that could potentially be prosecuted by the law. Soon, Fidesz established new norms and rules aimed at the distruction of every probable indictment and the contemporary protection from every type of illegal charge.

The same thing happens with regard to political scandals and disreputable acts. Criminal proceedings against the exponents committing these acts are usually suspended, even though in many cases they are not even taken into consideration and initiated. A clear

---

[121] https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2015/hungary

example of the sway adopted by the system can be found in the fact that under every Orban's government the Public Prosecutor was Peter Polt. He was a member of Orban's party, Fidesz, and even a candidate in the political elections of 1994; the party backed him in the moment of his former nomination as Deputy Ombudsman. Consequently, the obvious result has been the absence of the slightest nuisance or concern for Viktor Orban and his government from a judicial point of view.

In the actual framework, ownership ratios and correlated levels of analysis are not accessible for the citizens, even though the exact names of the biggest owners are published and available in the Media Authority online website[122]. More specifically, the only accessible datas are organized into PDF files which are divided according to several categories. Each category contains the domicile and the name of the service provider, but also the denomination and website of the media service.

Official channels do not give precise information about those who gain advantages from owners or stand behind them, so the whole system is accompanied by a general level on unawareness. Even in the cases where people can have easy access to data, the level of information provided by reports and sites is not enough. In the online database of the Company Register the only available data refer to domicile, taxation number and company register number.

The same pattern is applied to the system of ISPs. Ownership concentration is not regulated or constrained by legal means. The overall register of owners of ISPs is exclusively kept and published by the Media and Telecommunications Authority; as said above, also in this field the only available information regards the direct owners and their respective service areas. Other pieces of information are not accessible for other sections of population. The absence of filtering and selection entails the elevation of difficulty of all the necessary stages to achieve a complete list of service providers.

In general, information concerning state advertisement are not easily accessible for the citizens. Only commercial information aggregators, such as KantarMedia, could develop this activity and spread news like the total amount of funding or advertisements coming

---

[122] http://mediatanacs.hu/tart/index/1569/Linearis_audiovizualis_ _mediaszolgaltatasok

from the state, the media target and the placement of ads. KantarMedia, for example, freely gives information to journalists, but in every different situation they commerce them as their product[123].

Media outlets, in addition, do not publish reports about the public money they receive. All state media possess a certain degree of political bias, but some thematic weekly journals, like those addressed to children, consitute an exception in this case.

Mainstream media are, for the 50% of their total number, politically biased. The only substantial distinction can be traced on the basis of the nature of the medium, which entails different levels of political bias. Several studies demonstrated that an effective link between political bias, non-transparent ownership and political affiliation does exist. This negative connection is particularly alarming for media in a local dimension: they lack independence and autonomy because they are almost entirely financed by local governments.

Some media companies, such as HirTV, Heti Valasz and Magyar Nemzet among others, often try to maintain a public facade of objectivity and impartiality. The problem is their vehiculation of news reports, which is completely approached from the point of view of the political and economic interests they have to safeguard.

One additional aspect of these media outlets' activities is the fact that the main unpleasant and unconvenient news are deleted, omitted or partially reported. There is a limit that it is necessary to underline: only media companies which possess the lowest degree of quality of work and, at the same time, the highest degree of extremism have to resort to a total falsification of news. Some examples of media within this group are Lanchid Radio and Echo Tv.

Hungarian media share some specific features that become equally present and give birth to phenomena that now are considered as "normal" in the national scenario. Cross-ownership has gradually become a spread tendential aspect. Cross-ownership between press product owners and service providers is something which remains not disciplined by neither the Media Council nor the Act on Mass Communication and Media Services

---

[123] http://www.kantarmedia.com/hu

(the Hungarian "MTTV"). The Act has been introduced in 2010 and has the objective to permit ownership concentration in media outlets in a more liberal approach.

Political parallelism, for example, is another common and traditional element which could be found across all media. In other words, in the past twenty years advertisements were distributed among different media outlets in an equal way. Since 2010, "parallelism" disappeared in favour of a shift towards right-wing media outlets: the leftist media outlets did not receive any advertisement because of their political position.

The relationships between Viktor Orban and Lajos Simicska have marked the ownership affairs in a significant way in the two past decades. Lajos Simicska is the foremost national oligarch, which had a in enormous media empire, which consisted in two important newspapers and radio channels, one television channel with several others television program production companies and firms operating in other business sectors, namely contruction industry and so on. He was also one of the main financial supporters of Orban. It is clear to all the absolute relevance of a solid friendship for each other. Orban could develop its interests in a multifaceted direction of business, while Simicska could gain political advantages and privileges from the favour of the Prime Minister. In fact, in an initial phase of their relationships, they were great allies in politics and business.

But then their alliance saw some complications and they suddenly became enemies fighting for the supremacy in the media sector. The end of their privileged relationships curiously encountered an unexpected mediatic coverage: the day of the split soon took the definition of "G-Day", with the letter G coming from a coloured nickname Simicska employed to refer to his former friend Orban[124]. Their controversial separation was something minuciously planned by the Prime Minister, who could initiate its building of a completely new media empire, with the introduction of new (even more) loyal players in the scene.Shortly thereafter, Viktor Orban tried to attract some senior managers and other apical figures of Simicska's media firms. Other companies detained by the businessman, such as those with business in constructions, were banned from public procurements for more than three years, as a penance.

---

[124] http://mertek.hvg.hu/2016/01/05/a-g-nap-es-a-nagy-partraszallas

The reaction of Lajos Simicska was laid down thanks to the influence of his media outlets, like for example Hìrtv and Magyar Nemzet, which have been completely shifted against the Prime Minister and his functionaries. Orban answered by buying channel TV2 and by transforming it in a thematic news channel in the framework of public service media.

The media market is subjected to the influential effect of a well-known phenomenon: advertisement proceeding from the state or from state-run firms, which guarantees an important backing to several media outlets. Commercial advertisement is used by Orban and its government as a strategic tool aimed at the distortion of the media market. A clear demonstration of this process is the creation of a new body, the National Communication Authority (NKH), finished in October 2015[125].

When the discussion is about media market, it is important to consider that it is a space that, due to its specific traits, is subject to the influential formative effect of state advertisements. The first aspect to consider is the relevance of advertising campaigns for the printed press, which is the category of media most exposed and which gains the majority of its revenues from them. In Hungary, advertisement spending has been steadily decreasing, with a particular acceleration in this sense after 2008[126].

The second important element is the influence of state advertisements on private advertising. Every private firm usually can acquire vital information about where to display their advertisements on the basis of the spatial disposition of state advertisements. This indirect message sent by the state through the placement of its ads represents an indication for private advertising companies: if they want to become "friends", they have to target some loyal media outlets which have proximity with the government in order to spread their advertisements.

State advertisements exploit some big groups in order to find a bigger diffusion. These companies generally find no competition in the national market. They have a sort of monopoly, because the services they supply and deliver are not substitutable. They even do not need any business ratio hidden behind their choices, they are the only actors in the

---

[125] http://nkoh.kormany.hu;
http://hvg.hu/itthon/20151028_Volt_MTVs_musorvezeto_oszthatja_az_allam
[126] http://mertek.hvg.hu/2013/04/17/egyre-kisebb-a-torta/

scene. Some examples are the Budapest Transport Company, the Electricity Company and the National Lottery. The Budapest Transport Company has a strong connection with daily newspapers loyal to the central government, to which it gives generous subsidies and funds. The National Lottery directs its funding to the world of television programme production, which is generally characterised by the ownership of offshore companies and former owned by Lajos Simicska.

The already exposed troubled disruption of the relationship between Orban and Simicska had impactful implications also in the field of advertisements. There has been a substantial change of direction and recipients of the generous revenues from state advertisements: Simicska's television companies and newspapers quickly lost their economic advantages. An evident example is Magyar Nemzet, which is a top-level daily newspaper directly owned by the businessman: before the end of his relationship with Orban, it received more than one third of its main revenues (more or less, the 46% of those coming from ads) from state advertisements. After, the new favourite daily newspaper of the Prime Minister, Magyar Idok, receives the 80% of its advertisement revenues directly from the government.

In Hungary, several journalistic associations do exist. They are formed by following political or religious criteria. They are veritable civil associations, since they do not possess the rights of a chamber of trade union, and their main goal is to represent the material interests of journalists. They have a moderate, limited power. The biggest association is the Hungarian Journalists' Association (Magyar Ujsagirok Orszagos Szovetsege, or MUOSZ).

Journalistic associations and groups provide, among their fundamental features, membership on a voluntary basis. Ethical procedures' effect is chilled by the fact that the different associations have a competitive rather than cooperative approach towards the others. The limited effect of ethical procedures introduce the dangerous aspect according to which secret surveillance becomes the preferred instrument to indimidate independent journalists[127]. They are constantly kept under observation and could be intimidated for their professional activities.

---

[127] https://muosz.hu/archive/cikk.php?page=mozaik&id=5648&fo=2&iid=0

There are cases in which journalists seem satisfied and happy to work for the political party they sustain and to serve its interests. For this reason, a high number of journalists willingly decide to work in media that have guidelines and a direction with which they are in agreement and that they respect. If journalists are victims of pressures by the owners or the possibility of an acquisition of the media outlet by direct political adversaries materialises, they can choose to leave the company in a choral action. This happened, for example, in the television channel HirTV and in two online journals, namely Origo and Index.

Journalists are in the majority of the cases hired with a short-term employment contract. They are not protected by any labour law and positive transformation in this sense are not on the horizon: the last media reform dates back to 2010, when more than one thousand of journalists has been fired from public service television.

The right to protection for journalists against pressures provided by sponsors, advertisers or media owners is enshrined in Article 7 of Smtv. In reality, the failure to comply with this rule is not sanctioned or monitored as should be. Not surprisingly, several attempts to exert pressures occurred, but they have been noticed and disclosed only in really rare cases.

It is interesting to note the increasing popularity and democratic relevance of online social media for younger generations. Datas prove the occurred shift towards the online media: in 2015, the total amount of expenditure in advertisements on the Internet was higher than that devoted to national televisions[128]. They are becoming today sort of "island of freedom and democracy" and free space for the development and the proliferation of investigative journalism. This process is originated by the contemporary mediatic scenario: politicians put increasing pressure on members of editorial rooms in both printed press and television broadcasting, the market specifically referred to daily newspapers is suffering from low levels of circulation of its products.

From a legal point of view, the Media Council is enabled to ban or block audiovisual contents convicted as "illegal" published by newspapers, radio and ISPs[129], even whether

---

[128] http://mrsz.hu/kutatas/reklamkoltes/reklamkoltes-2015
[129] Article 189 (3) bf) Mttv. Article 188 (2), Article 189 (3)-(7) Mttv.

it is an online or on-demand press product. When these media are caught in violations of certain types, they could also be forced to pay fines established by the Media Council. It plays the role of a superior, expert body with regard to several questions about media owners and providers.

For example, the Media Council can make intromissions in typical processes of the market such as acquisitions and mergers, also among service providers and press product owners. The Axel Springer-Ringier case, happened in 2011, could constitute a perfect example of this established practice by the Council. It is also enabled to appeal to the Competition Authority if one of the merging parties has editorial liability and if their goal is to use a press product or a telecommunication network for the vehiculation of media contents.

The MTVA, namely the Mediaszolgaltatas-tamogato-és Vagyonkezelo Alap, is a coordinating group of four Hungarian public media: the two television channels Duna Televiziò and Magyar Televiziò, the radio channel Magyar Radiò and the press agency Magyar Tavirati Iroda. The structure of MTVA is to be found in the system of elections and appointments of its members. The main chief is appointed by the President of Media Council, who is appointed in turn by the Prime Minister. This framework makes impossible to define the MTVA as independent from political influence. MTVA is not responsible for anyone, because the general mechanism of oversight strictly controls the "shell companies" of the public service broadcasting.

The management of MTVA does not encounter any external supervision. The Media Council is impossibilitated to do such activity. The same thing could be said for financial aspects regarding the MTVA. Some reports online are openly available and consultable, but they do not supply enough details: budgetary questions related to the MTVA and other "shell companies" remain a cloudy and not transparent topic for external individuals, like the eventual success or failure of their operations.

Moreover, there has been in recent years a structural change, according to which the national news agency, Magyar Tavirati Iroda, has been incorporated under the bigger MTVA, which aggregates within its body several public media. This embedding

happened in 2010 and has been confirmed and corroborated thanks to the constituational amendment adopted in 2015.

MTI undertakes actions which are labelled as "public service activity". The distribution of its news is executed for free through online networks. Public service media have only one possibility: buy news exclusively from MTI. This framework causes several negative consequences: the news market suffers from a sort of "dumping effect" and all the alternative sources of news are inescapably put out of the mediatic scene. Another worrying problem is represented here by the fact that, having MTI a kind of monopoly in the production and distribution of news, it does not face any type of control. As a consequence, MTI's news have proved to be false and misleading, and because of this they encountered a sharp action of censorship. As a last point, it is important to stress the fact that the financial conditions of MTI are under the supervision and control of MTVA, which in turn is supervised by the Media Council.

Among the already mentioned functions, the Media Council has the power to manage the finances of MTVA[130] and to act as an overseer on online newspapers and journals[131], but the condition is the previous recognition as "press products" delivered by the MTTV. The work of supervisor made by the Council has been hampered by persistent protests, widespread criticisms. The result has been a division of labour: other newly introduced co-regulatory bodies substantially took in charge the tasks of the Media Council, which in practice has almost stopped to exert its functions and competences[132]. The only circumstance according to which the Council is enabled to take back any case requires an insatisfaction regarding the way in which the civil co-regulatory association is treating the problem.

As stressed in relationship with Poland, in Hungary it is relevant to put under attention the fact that funds or subsidies reserved to the press do not exist. Several associations of journalists tried many times to invoke the building of a general fund, but the idea has never been seriously taken into consideration from a political point of view.

---

[130] Article 136 Sections (6), (10), (11), (14), (16) Mttv.
[131] Articles 203, 42, 43, 60 (Definitions) Mttv.
[132] Article 190 Mttv.

The Internet remains in a certain level free in Hungary. Google actually remains the most used serch engine for Hungarian citizens. Online political journals are usually openly consultable for the citizens. In general, the online media system has been depicted several times as the world of left-wing media outlets or autonomous firms. The only exception in the actual scenario is represented by kuruc.info, an extremist right-wing website, characterised by radical and racist stances and opinions.

In the country, there are five online content providers which represent the biggest actors in terms of professionalism and capturing of the public's tastes and interests. Their names are Index, Origo, hirado.hu, hvg.hu and 24.hu: four of them are news websites that maintain indepencence, while hirado.hu is the tool that allows to find all public service television and radio contents, it is an aggregated website specialised in public service media. As far as Index and Origo are concerned, they have been the first online journals ever in Hungarian media market, and they did not have affiliated sister companies or offline forerunners.

Particular attention must be devoted to the particular relationship between television channels and the activity of political advertising. The MTTV established that this practice should not be put in place in television media outside the election campaign period. As a matter of fact, the central government often fills the different television channels with political advertisements. As a consequence, a Hungarian think tank called "Mérték" tried to draw the attention on the unfair practice. The answer given by the Media Council portrayed the video-advertisements which attempted to attract popular consensus on governmental measures and policies not as "political advertisements", but "social purpose advertisements"[133]. The curious thing is that when the radio channel Klubradio announced the organization of a pacific demonstration, it suddenly received a fine for illegally broadcasting political advertising[134].

Public media are sustained by state aid, which is distributed in several forms. Normally, budgetary contribution is beforehand decided in a law which appears every year in order to regulate the following twelve months. Moreover, there are several measures of tax

---

[133] http://mertek.hvg.hu/2016/02/17/politikai-celu-tarsadalmi-reklam/
[134] http://mediatanacs.hu/dokumentum/165407/m108620141111.pdf

relief that could be adopted in favour of public media. The distribution of state advertisements is not disciplined in a transparent and equal manner; laws or other binding legal tools are totally absent in this sense.

A high amount of scandals that has taken place in the last decade. Among the others, those related to Origo and Index were the most famous ones. As already mentioned, in these cases entire groups of journalists which populated editorial rooms decided to willingly move towards other media outlets. As a result, the scandals had also some positive implications: for example, the creation of two independent investigative online news websites, which are called Direct36 and 444.

The general situation induces a sense of insecurity and vulnerability, that also encompasses those journalistic sources which make confidential revelations to loyal beneficiaries[135]. The main cause is attributable to relevant bugs and disservices in institutional bodies, such as the MTVA, but also in public policy civil organisations. An increasing tendency to make a careful surveillance is to be noted in Hungary.

The Hungarian regime has to encounter frequent and deep pressures waged by the European Commission. The aim is to obtain amendments for a further development of the media law. The normal diplomatic confrontation is the peaking limit to which the two parts have arrived until nowadays. The series of pressures by the Commission are alternated with more serious infringement procedures, that are triggered in relation to other legislative and political matters.

The open contrasts that are in place between Hungarian government and the European institutions also regard the thorny issue of human rights. Hungary has been judged guilty or labelled as "non-democratic" because of the non-compliance of rules and guidelines proceeding from the European Union. The answer of the Eastern European country's government is the public and publicised disapproval of the sentences of the European Commission for Human Rights. Two troubled themes constitute the perfect example of

---

[135] http://444.hu/2016/05/25/lazar-titkosszolgalati-jelentesek-bizonyitjak-hogy-soros-gyorgy-szervezi-a-menekultvalsagot; http://444.hu/2016/03/31/bepoloskaztak-az-mtva-vezetojenek-irodajat; http://www.atv.hu/belfold/20160609-majtenyi-laszlo-eb.

the present struggle that is being carried out are the judgments on prison and detention conditions and on the illegality of the life sentence.

In this respect, there is a noticeable discrepancy between the judicial behaviour of the Hungarian Constitutional Court and the one of ordinary courts. The first often considers the judgments of the European Commission for Human Rights as a model in certain questions, and employs them as a parameter of reference in its jurisprudence. On the other side, ordinary courts in the country follow the political and diplomatic stances of the Prime Minister Orban and other high-ranking politicians and decide to completely ignore the sentences of the European Commission for Human Rights. They are never considered, cited or referred to in their decisions and deliberations.

FUTURE SOLUTIONS FOR A REGULATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The considerations that have been exposed with regard to the links between social media and politics lead soon to the research of available solutions in order to solve the most critical parts of their connection.

In order to foster resilience and capacity of reaction to these problems, scholars from all over the world imagine a system in which two elements are unavoidably intertwined. First, a detailed and accurate work of sharing of lessons, doctrines and good practices among different countries[136], which are placed on a same level in this field. The second point is a specific type of holistic approach, aimed at the establishment of functional key points that could last for a long-time period. The two conditions are strongly undermined by the lack of balance, so that the simultaneous presence of both becomes to say the least necessary.

or steps that have to be developed. Each of these phases has within its structure some limitation or asperity, but they have to be managed because, on the other side, they also have the possibility to introduce great improvements in relation to human and social rights, like, for example, right to privacy and freedom of expression or freedom of speech.

The steps of future implementations are referred to varying degrees in which a substantial intervention should be undertaken. Among them, it is crucial to consider the production of information, which entails the work of journalists and politicians, the distribution of information, with an obvious accent which has to be posed on social media, and the reception, comprehension and consumption of information, which is related to the direct recipients of it, that is to say citizens, voters, electors and consumers.

With particular attention to this latter step, it has been stressed the primary importance of having an electorate which is free to critically think and discern, develop an autonomous and independent political point of view and make its research skills grow without external

---

[136] Richard Youngs and others, 'European Democracy Support Annual Review 2021' [2021] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 58.

influences. The consequence is a heightened level of public awareness about the possible threats that are hidden behind the connection between politics, communication and media. In this way, some elements which could intervene to make the electorate more vulnerable, such as false information, hate speech and electoral manipulation are strongly hampered and do not find their application in a successful way.

In the actual context of an increasingly fast and interconnected world, a correct and mindful education becomes fundamental. Today, technologies that are more and more advanced and sophisticated continue to appear, with an increase in the levels of new risks and dangers.Among the other things, the establishment of a skeptical approach towards fake news or the construction of what has been defined a "cognitive firewall"[137] represent some practical examples.

Citizens have to be informed about all the factors that could potentially exert a negative impact on their lives and rights: education here means higher possibilities of resilience. A stronger resilience on its turn creates the favourable conditions for a more solid democratic system.

It is very important also for a second motivation: in the general process, education is placed before the occurring of possible harmful actions or activities. While on the one hand the majority of other strategies that have been outlined start as a counterreaction to damages, the educational plan intervenes before them, in an idea of prevention of negative developments. This is a very important point.

The natural extension of this educational work involves national governments and, in addition, sovranational organisations and institutions. They have to boost campaigns aimed at raising the level of awareness and preparation of citizens. The institutional engagement is particularly crucial in specific periods of political tensions or turmoils or, as it has been underlined in the past chapters, in election times.

In fact, this intervention creates added value when it has the possibility to reveal to citizens which are the motivation that underpin some political strategies and tactics,

---

[137] Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare: A Study of Disinformation' (Danish Institute for International Studies 2017).

which are difficult to detect from an external point of view. In phases that are characterised by several challenges, the added value is furtherly increased.

The activity of national and international institutions in this field does not end with a general raise of "digital awareness". According to the same studies, governments and communities should necessarily undertake initiatives with the objectives of the empowerment of citizens against the many forms of manipulation which they could suffer from. Some digital verification skills should be provided to the constituency, to enable the public to search and exploit new digital resources through their competences and, in a second moment, to reject the passive acceptance of news merely by their external facade[138].

One proposal that has been launched foresees that the educational system should include digital literacy among the voices of a balanced and exhaustive curriculum. Several studies demonstrated that the entire process should start from the older segment of the population. There are three main motivations that lead to this conclusion.

The first is that, in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complexity and of the difficulties of the phenomenon, all the society has to be involved and educated, with no possibility for an avoidance of some portions ofelectorate. This is true especially because the majority of current politicians, teachers and parents belong to that section of population.

The second refers to the fact that younger generation grew up with social media and, as a consequence, have more skills and ability to navigate and spend time on the Internet (but also to detect problems and digital risks) than people which is part of the earlier generations[139].

---

[138] https://www.medialit.org/sites/default/files/14B_CCKQPoster+5essays.pdf
[139] Katerina Eva Matsa and others, 'Younger Europeans Are Far More Likely to Get News from Social Media' (Pew Research Center's Journalism Project, 30 October 2018) <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2018/10/30/younger-europeans-are-far-more-likely-to-get-news-from-social-media/>

The third motivation comes from an interesting consideration which was presented in some studies: "people over the age of 65 are up to seven times more likely to share disinformation than people of age between 18 and 29"[140].

In general, the appearance of tough and serious challenges for democracy has been described here as the result of the rise of social media. As a matter of fact, there is a second substantial cause, which is maybe even more impactful: the correspondent dramatic collapse of traditional media.

The first element which led to this situation is the steady decrease in terms of support and trust from the public[141]. It has been followed by a multiplication of doubtful opinions in relation to the way of working and the veracity of the news reported by traditional platforms.

The second element is represented by the shift that characterised the business model in the recent years. Today, news production is mainly based on the necessity to publish a higher number of contents with consequently higher chances of engagement. The result is a higher quantity of news, but a lower quality.

This terrible tendency has to be fought by international institutions, which have to openly encourage and facilitate professional journalism while protecting and exerting a safeguard on the existing standards which guarantee acceptable levels of pluralism and quality. At the same time, the establishment of an exhaustive regulatory system to discipline the news coverage during the elections' periods and to defend it from external illegal influences and attempts of manipulation would be a great improvement and help.

With respect to the very heavy problem of false information, there are several pathways that could be taken. One provides that media outlets reinforce and consolidate its

---

[140] Alex Hern, 'Older People More Likely to Share Fake News on Facebook, Study Finds' The Guardian(10 January 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/10/older-people-more-likely-to-share-fake-news-on-facebook>
[141] Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Richard Fletcher, 'Democratic Creative Destruction? The Effect of a Changing Media Landscape on Democracy' in Joshua A Tucker and Nathaniel Persily (eds), Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform (Cambridge University Press 2020) <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/social-media-and-democracy/democratic-creative-destruction-the-effect-of-a-changing-media-landscape-on-democracy/8C6548E16FA63289FC4C731AC512B075>

interactions and confrontations with members and representatives of the governments. The strenghtening of a preferential channel between politics' officials and media platforms is an opportunity to contrast and disrupt the international spreading of misleading contents. Sweden offers a concrete example of a functioning permanent media council, which is able to play its fundamental role by periodically bringing together political figures and media outlets' workers on the same topics[142].

Another proposal requires the "arrival on the scene" of some civil society organizations. These have the possibility to best understand the language and the specific contours of the situation. Their work would be of primary relevance in the possible future establishment of institutions completely devoted to fact.checking activities, which is another idea that has been prompted by some researchers. The exclusiveness of these organisations in the complicated sector of "fake news rebuttal" should become in this context a sort of guarantee of total attention and dedication to the problem.

There is another idea that has recently taken hold and is addressed to authorities. They have to require more and more guarantees and data about the digital practices that have been implemented, and these data have to be supplied by the social media platforms themselves. The actual framework push to think that supranational bodies should impose severe obligations on media firms in order to give free and unconstrained access to their data to independent researchers that have to study them in a second moment.

Some concrete examples of studies that have to be developed concern the connection which creates between hate speech in the online environment and violence which flows offline, but also some investigations about the influence of social media on radicalisation and polarization or assessments related to bias towards extremist positions.

The establishment of an ombudsman related to the Internet at the European level is one more innovation which has been cited. For this purpose, a resolution has been issued in 2020 in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe[143]. The role which is to be

---

[142] Tim Maurer and Erik Brattberg, 'Russian Election Interference: Europe's Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks' [2018] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/23/russian-election-interference-europe-s-counter-to-fake-news-and-cyber-attacks-pub-76435>
[143] Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 2334 (2020), Towards an internet ombudsman institution

played by this constitutional figure is to adopt difficult decisions in relation to an eventual restriction of freedom of expression and whether an online content is legal or illegal. The institution of an ombudsman would also represent an important sustain to those social media firms that prefer not to undertake risky actions in controversial cases. This could allow media outlets to avoid severe fines and other types of sanctions due to wrong choices; the direct accountability of huge decisions would pass in the hands of the newly constituted body.

There are two main obstacle that could hamper the proper effectiveness of such a solutions. On the one hand, the global amount of requests and complaints is could be so enormous to block the general activity and force the whole process to a stalemate. On the other hand, there is the second question which is strictly related to the first: it could potentially take a really long time to bring to completion all the necessary procedures and all the issues that have been taken in charge. This lengthening of working time becomes of particular relevance relatively to threats like fake news, hate speech or foreign meddling: a direct response "could become pointless by the time it's addressed"[144].

The rush for technological innovation has lit the spotlight on the last fundamental development: artificial intelligence. This has been analysed and, as it will be described, employed also as an important instrument to carry out complex and delicate actions like, as an example, the discovery of bots, the identification of misleading information and hate speech messages, the annulment of the attempts of political and electoral manipulation.

For this purposes, with a particular attntion for fact-checking activities, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter started using the artificial intelligence, especially tools like FullFact. This implementation is due to the fact that these methods are very cheap and enabled to give answers in a fraction of a second. The strategy consists of an accurate evaluation of frequent statistical claims in order to check their veridicity in a structured

---

[144] Anna Bisoffi, Social media and democratic elections: a dangerous cocktail?
Towards the prevention of undue influence on voters' political opinions in the EU, Research Article, University of Coimbra.

general database. These lasts are becoming more and more huge, so that the research should become more precise and charged with details.

These are the more positive aspects, but the use of artificial intelligence for such matters has been several times defined as "inappropriate". The first critical point is the fact that its intrinsic way of functioning is something hard to comprehend and manage even for the people who designed the AI; their decisions and the criteria they decide to adopt are totally or partially unpredictable and inscrutable, so it is very difficult to explain the basis of their decisions to apply censorship, with an unavoidable lack of transparency towards platforms.

The ideal solution is represented by a combination of technology and human intervention: the first phase uses technological and digital resources in order to reveal misleading or manipulative contents, the second is underpinned by the choice of a human figure that has a specialized role in matters linked to human rights.

The approach which has been employed so far towards social media, and that pervades all the probable solutions displayed above, could be defined as "reconfigured" for the specific situation; in fact, the aggregate body of laws and norms typical of the offline sector have been applied and adapted to the online world[145], with mixed results.

The alternative strategy is developed on the reconstruction of the concept and the concrete structure of social media. In this regard, W. Lance Bennett affirmed that, in his opinion, in the debates aimed at a possible regulation of digital platforms individual matters are too predominant, with elements like disinformation or hate speech that are protagonists. In his personal view, the grassroots causes are those that really need to be faced: in other words, the economic interests or principles of "techno-capitalism"[146] or "business model" which represents the basis of the whole current system.

---

[145] Thomas Wischmeyer, 'Making Social Media an Instrument of Democracy' (2019) 25 European Law Journal 169.
[146] W Lance Bennett, 'Killing the Golden Goose? A Framework for Regulating Disruptive Technologies' [2021]
Information, Communication & Society 1.

According to several scholars, such as, among the others, Shoshana Zuboff, the core issue of the problem is this economic setting, this strategic framework of business which finds in activities of targeted advertising its main supportive element[147].

She gives her definition of this business model, named "surveillance capitalism" in order to stress the heavy interferences of factors aimed at the manipulation of voters and consumers' behaviour and habits. New media sell their users' data through different services and microtargeted ads; some companies try to gather the highest amount of information about their "community", which are directly transformed into an income of a commercial nature.

These firms have the evident and pressing need to push people on their applications and websites and to keep them there as long as possible. The system they use to incentivize their public makes them more similar to those actors who try to foment indignation and disappointment by spreading false information and directly resorting to people's political biases and opinions[148]. The clear distinction is presented with a reference to traditional media, which have among their main features the use of a conventional type of advertising mechanisms.

In this context, the attempts to find a broad and exhaustive regulatory system referred to social media have been numerous. There has been a shift from the national regulation, which was mainly used before, to an international or supranational dimension[149]. This happened because of two main elements that characterise social media: their privately owned nature and their ability to connect and establish interactions worldwide.

---

[147] Shoshana Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism (PublicAffairs 2019) <https://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/titles/shoshana-zuboff/the-age-of-surveillance capitalism/9781610395694/>; Ethan Zuckerman, 'The Internet's Original Sin' The Atlantic (14 August 2014) <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/08/advertising-is-the-internets-original-sin/376041/>
[148] Zeynep Tufekci, 'How Social Media Took Us from Tahrir Square to Donald Trump' [2018] MIT Technology Review <https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/08/14/240325/how-social-media-took-us-from-tahrir-square-to-donald-trump/>
[149] Daniela Stockmann, 'Tech Companies and the Public Interest: The Role of the State in Governing Social Media Platforms' [2022] Information, Communication & Society 1.

In the field of regulations, the predominant approach is to keep social media platforms completely free to regulate themselves with spontaneous, voluntary and self-inflicted measures. In fact, they are prevalently considered as the best informed actor and, as a consequence, the one in a better position to decide and discipline.

The problem is the short circuit which forms at this stage of the process: in reality social media platforms are not completely neutral, they have financial interests and have to undertake economic and commercial strategies in order to keep people on the sites and generate traffic. Among these strategies it is possible to find the maintenance of particular attractive contents, which could include hate speech comments and fake news. This missed remotion, mixed with the possibility to legislate on fundamental rights like participation in public affairs and freedom of expression given to impartial actors, led several specialized observers to conclude that the approach based on self-regulation and decision-making power of social media companies is not the best available.

Co-regulation, on the opposite, offers the possibility to create a more balanced criteria. In this case, norms are drafted and adopted through a continuous and fruitful dialogue between two parties: business entrepreneurs and authorities. The important distinctive element is the fact that authorities are enabled to oversight the correct and effective implementation of rules and to intervene in a concrete manner if they are not applied.

Another crucial point which makes co-regulation an interesting and resolutive approach is its capacity to regulate with efficiency in a short time: this represents a solution to the long-standing problem of the difference between the lenght of bureaucratic and legislative procedures and the quickness of new technologies.

The confrontation that is introduced by co-regulation manages to involve social media outlets, representatives of traditional media, civil society organizations, expertise and stakeholders in a multilateral, inclusive and comprehensive process of consultations.

The sector of regulation foresees a higher degree of engagement by supranational institutions and bodies. For example, it has been suggested that the EU could make sure that laws are up to the challenge and create bigger incentives to force social media

companies to detect deception tactics, share their own competences and remove false accounts in an active and direct way.

Moreover, the regulatory system is able to make his presence felt in favour of implicit personalization. The activity of regulation could also encompass an obligation for social media platforms to tamper with the algorithms they build. The aim is to be sure that users have multiple choices and sources of information that supply a multilayered and multi-oriented position, while explicit personalization creates different contents which are usually accompanied by micro-targeting, disinformation and foreign intromissions[150]. In this way, regulation could force platforms to establish a framework in which ads are linked not to people, but contents, with the relevant result of an everchanging diversification of algorithms.

In general, it is necessary to require a higher level of transparency by social media companies, with a particular accent on the presentation of reports and documents that make possible an in-depth analysis of the effects of social media on democracy at large and on the electoral cycle[151]. Other effective methods could consider auditions or activities of supervision on targeting tools, recommendation engines and the enlargement of algorithms[152].

The threats for democracy that have been raised by social media are of a multifaceted nature and need to be solved through a multifaceted approach. Every resolutive proposal that has been highlighted before has strenghts and weaknesses, pros and cons, and carry with them major prospects of development but also heavy limitations and constraints.

So it is impossible not to acknowledge the importance of the adoption of a comprehensive, holistic approach which could have relevant positive implications in a multidisciplinary framework. All the outlined strategies possess a high degree of capacity of resolution, but

---

[150] Gianmarco Gori, 'Social media ed elezioni. I limiti del diritto e il rischio di una modulated democracy' (2017) 26 Informatica e diritto; Dipayan Ghosh, 'Are We Entering a New Era of Social Media Regulation?' [2021] Harvard Business Review 5.

[151] Johan Farkas, 'Disguised Propaganda on Social Media: Addressing Democratic Dangers and Solutions' (2018) XXV The Brown Journal of World Affairs <https://bjwa.brown.edu/25-1/disguised-propaganda-on-social-media-addressing-democratic-dangers-and-solutions/>

[152] Yaël Eisenstat, 'How to Hold Social Media Accountable for Undermining Democracy' [2021] Harvard Business Review 5.

they have to be considered in a broader context which combines them accordingly to the situation.

In order to give concrete examples, policies that make the institutions stronger and that increase digital literacy as a fundamental cornerstone represent the most effective long-term strategies. In this scheme, technological resources could help to find harmful elements and correct algorithms.

The progressive shift from the actual self-regulatory system to a co-regulatory confrontation among different and influent partners could represent the crucial development that is long-awaited from an institutional point of view on the topic.

Lastly, the implementation of measures to push social media companies to cooperate by supplying their own data is something which has primary importance, because it would allow the establishment of an international model of collaboration, open confrontation and exchange of best practices.

To conclude, it is important to take into consideration the fact that the studies about the effects of social media on democracy and its processes are in their infancy and they are progressing with great speed, so the adopted solutions could change and evolve in the future, according to the evident results given by the analysis and experiences that will occur.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SITOGRAPHY

The Media and Democracy: Beyond Myths and Stereotypes, Annual review of political science 6 (1), 139-160, 2003

Rethinking media and democracy, James Curran, The political communication reader, 27-31, 2023

Social media and democracy, Brian D Loader, Dan Mercea, Oxon: Routledge, 2012

Social Media and Democracy, Irina-Ana Drobot, Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest, Romania, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.106660

Democratic backsliding and the media: The convergence of news narratives in Turkey, Defne Över, Media, Culture & Society 43 (2), 343-358, 2021

Tweeting apart: Democratic backsliding, new party cleavage and changing media ownership in Turkey, Omer Faruk Metin, Pedro Ramaciotti Morales, Party Politics 30 (1), 108-125, 2024

Media dysfunction and democratic backsliding, Shinji Koiso, 4-22, 2022

Free media as an indispensable element of democratic public space. The case studies of Poland and Hungary moving towards democratic backsliding, Milena Majewska

Tipping point: Democratic erosion and the assault on press freedom, Kate Musgrave

Democratic Backsliding and Political Polarization in Poland: Explaining the Erosion of Judicial and Media Freedoms, Cynthia Jordan Sweeney, Master's thesis. Universitat Wien, 2020

Judas Everett, Poland and Hungary: Democratic Backsliding and the Shifting European Political Landscape, Research Article, National Research University Higher School of Economics,Moscow, Russian Federation, DOI: 10.22363/2313-1438-2021-23-3-394-406

Silencing critics: Why and how presidents restrict media freedom in democracies, Marisa Kellam, Elizabeth A Stein, Comparative Political Studies 49 (1), 36-77, 2016

Democracy, autocracy and the news: the impact of regime type on media freedom, Sebastian Stier, Democratization 22(7), 2015: 1273-1295

Making social media an instrument of democracy. Thomas Wischmeyer, European Law Journal 25(2), March 2019: 169-181

Democracy and the press: a comparative analysis of pluralism in the international print media, Joshua Woods, Social Science Journal 44(2), 2007: 213-230

Social media and democratic elections: a dangerous cocktail?, Towards the prevention of undue influence on voters' political opinions in the EU, Anna Bisoffi, Research Article, University of Coimbra.

The violence of impact: unpacking relations between gender, media and politics. Source:Political Studies Review 18(2), May 2020: 277-293.

Through the media lens. Women activities in Italian politics, Marinella Belluati, Contemporary Italian Politics 12(3), 2020: 366-380

Backsliding: Democratic regress in the contemporary world, Stephan Haggard, Robert Kaufman

On democratic backsliding, Nancy Bermeo, Journal of democracy 27 (1), 5-19, 2016

Social media and democracy, Emma Price, Australian Journal of Political Science 48 (4), 519-527, 2013

Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform, Nathaniel Persily, Joshua A Tucker, Joshua Aaron Tucker, Cambridge University Press, 2020

Social media, democracy, and democratization, Daniel Gayo-Avello, Ieee Multimedia 22 (2), 10-16, 2015

Re-Public: la Democrazia nell'Epoca dei Social Media, Cass R. Sustein

Disinformazione e democrazia. Populismo, rete e regolazione, Claudia Hassan, Cesare Pinelli, Marsilio, 2022

Il mercato delle verità. Come la disinformazione minaccia la democrazia, Antonio Nicita, Il Mulino, 2021

Rete e democrazia. Politica, informazione e istruzione, Claudia Gina Hassan, Marsilio, 2010

Il nuovo fuoco. Guerra, pace e democrazia nell'era dell'intelligenza artificiale, Ben Buchanan, Andrew Imbrie, Bocconi University Press, 2024

Internet, controllo e libertà. Trasparenza, sorveglianza e segreto nell'era tecnologica, Giovanni Ziccardi, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2015

Le sfide della democrazia. La paura e la lusinga, Corrado, Longo, Tornesello, Vannucci, Edizioni Laterza, 2020

Innovazione tecnologica e democrazia, Giancarlo Vilella, Pendragon, 2015

Democrazia e conoscenza. Il dibattito contemporaneo, Paolo Bodini, Carocci, 2024

Is Democracy Failing?: A primer for the 21st century, Niheer Dasandi (Autore), Matthew Taylor (Curatore), Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2018

How Democracy Ends, David Runciman, Profile Books Ltd, 2019

Renovating Democracy: Governing in the Age of Globalization and Digital Capitalism, Nathan Gardels, Nicolas Berggruen, University of California Press, 2019

Social Media, Freedom of Speech, and the Future of our Democracy, Lee C. Bollinger, Geoffrey R. Stone, Oxford University Press Inc, 2023

The Democratic Regression: The Political Causes of Authoritarian Populism, Armin Schäfer (Autore), Michael Zürn (Autore), Stephen Curtis (Traduttore), John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2023

Platforms, Power, and Politics: An Introduction to Political Communication in the Digital Age, Ulrike Klinger, Daniel Kreiss, Bruce Mutsvairo, John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2023

www.europarl.europa.eu, A comparative analysis of media freedom and pluralism in the EU Member States, Directorate General for Internal Policies

The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism, Freedom House