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## Role of Social Media Manipulation in Promoting Democratic Decay: The Case of Poland

Rola manipulacji w mediach społecznościowych w promowaniu erozji demokracji –  
przypadek Polski

### • Abstract •

Recently, the scope of freedom in political systems has been undergoing considerable erosion. This phenomenon also refers to contemporary democratic systems, including those of long-standing and well-established traditions as well as to those that are often referred to as young transforming democracies. The study is focused on the erosion of democracy observed in the CEE countries based on Visegrad Group (V4) states, with particular consideration of Poland. A relationship between populism and very rapid development of social media is also emphasized, along with its dysfunctional features that are applied to form filter bubbles and social polarisation. The Author points out a correlation that favours restrictions imposed on the freedom of the political system in Poland and the development of right-wing populism with a negative aspect of the functioning of social media.

**Keywords:** social media; disinformation; right-wing populism; destabilisation of the rule of law; semi-consolidated democracy; authoritarianism; Poland

### • Abstrakt •

Zakres wolności w systemach politycznych ulega w ostatnich latach widocznej erozji. Zjawisko to dotyczy także współczesnych systemów demokratycznych, i to zarówno tych o długiej i wydawałoby się ustabilizowanej tradycji, jak i „młodych demokracji”, często określanych mianem transformujących się. Niniejsza praca koncentruje się na erozji demokracji państw Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej na przykładzie Grupy Wyszehradzkiej ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Polski. Zwraca się uwagę na powiązanie populizmu z bardzo szybkim rozwojem mediów społecznościowych, podkreślając ich cechy dysfunkcyjne, wykorzystywane do tworzenia baniek informacyjnych i polaryzacji społecznej. Autor wskazuje na korelację sprzyjającą ograniczaniu wolności systemu politycznego w Polsce z rozwojem pravicowego populizmu i negatywną stroną funkcjonowania mediów społecznościowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** media społecznościowe; dezinformacja; pravicowy populizm; destabilizacja rządów prawa; demokracja częściowo skonsolidowana; autorytaryzm; Polska

## Introduction and methodology

Despite the three decades that have passed since the beginning of the systemic transformation, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are often referred to as still developing ones. Such a definition seems reasonable, considering challenges posed by trends that can be observed in the systems of liberal democracies. Their contestation, development of a new formula for nativist identity politics, growing populism and also challenges resulting from the economic crises (the financial crisis of 2008, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis) affect an increase in the levels of social and political polarisation. The level of the institutional development presented by the V4 states indicates the extent of their adaptation to the systems of liberal democracies, while the extent of their resistance to the violent nature of political disputes exposes deviations from civil liberties and institutional weaknesses.

At the state level, political rivalry is driven by the internal logic of political elites who seek power or defend the power they have already gained. The weaknesses of the system are often used for concentrating power in a way that does not always follow the idea of equality democracy, understood as equal opportunities for all the candidates participating in elections. The notion of liberal democracy has been criticised by groups that define themselves as nationalistic, patriotic, or ideologically left-wing communising ones. Such radicalism is expressed not only verbally but also by some particular decisions that modify social and political systems with the use of a wide range of tools, including media communication.

The study presents an attempt at identifying the dysfunction of social media in promoting disinformation that destructively affects the stability of political systems, based on the example of Poland. The identification can be used for defining trends that may lead to an evolution of political systems toward authoritarianism, as opposed to the reform movements that emerged after the collapse of communist systems in the V4 states. The conclusions should be seen as guidelines for reforming the fields of the functioning of social media at the national and EU levels in order to limit, if not to eliminate, their further destructive influence on democratic state institutions.

Considering the methodology applied in the research, it is based on a comparison of the quality of the political system in Poland and in the countries of the V4 region. The key problem of the research is to present case studies that illustrate the destructive influence exerted by social media on the stability of the political system in Poland.

The qualitative identification of the condition of democratic systems in the V4 states is based on the freedom levels observed in particular political systems and on the relevant democratisation indices that are analysed every year by the Freedom

House (FHO), an organisation based in the United States of America. The data used for the analysis include the data starting from the accession of most of these countries to the EU in 2004, to the results presented of 2021.

Considering the comparative analysis of political systems, Poland is compared to other V4 states that are the EU members and are grouped into regions. The study provides an analysis of all the available results referring to the freedom of political systems presented by the Freedom House organisation in 2005–2021, focusing particularly on the analysis of the results that indicate worrying trends in the stability of political systems. Such trends include those that involve the whole political systems or their specified areas moving away from consolidated or semi-consolidated democratic systems.

The example of changes observed in the Polish political system is treated as a case study. Apart from indicating the areas of deconstruction of democracy, the study presents the public opinion on the problems referring to the current political rivalry which are related to the critical discourse that affects destabilisation of the Polish political system. Considering the identification of freedom level of the political system, the terminology applied by the FHO and in political sciences is also referred to in the study. Hence, the following categorisation is assumed: consolidated democracy, semi-consolidated democracy, transitional or hybrid regimes, semi-consolidated authoritarian regimes, and, in the most extreme cases, consolidated authoritarian regimes.<sup>1</sup>

## Literature review

The systemic transformation of the former communist countries has been a complex and unfinished process that is additionally heterogeneous in its qualitative aspect. It is also affected by global factors, elements resulting from the process of European

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<sup>1</sup> Such a terminology approach is mainly based on a dichotomy systematisation of political systems into two sub-categories: consolidated (stable–full) and semi-consolidated (unstable–flawed/limited). This approach is represented by Larry Diamond, Joseph Schumpeter, Robert Dahl, Andrzej Antoszewski, Ryszard Herbut and others. Consolidated democracies are those that respect the separation of powers, sustain competitive party systems and adequately competitive elections, do not include decision-making centres uncontrolled by voters, impose limits on executive authority, and guarantee civil rights, as reflected in the unfettered development of civil society. Semi-consolidated democracies are often “new”, or, as Dahl calls them, “newer” or “immature”; Diamond describes them as “electoral democracies”. Although they meet the basic criteria characteristic of consolidated democracies, there are nevertheless flaws in their practical application. Consequently, such democracies must be considered incomplete (Antoszewski & Herbut, 2001, pp. 18–49).

integration and also by conditions of the national rivalry of political parties. Ideologically, the transition process has been marked by a clash between liberal ideas and their counter-intuitive opponents – from both the left and the conservative parties. The process was not reversed by the financial crisis of 2008 but a fierce debate was expected on the problems of dysfunctions observed in the global market economies and the opponents of the developing system started attacking liberal democracies.

A difficult partnership of liberal democracies and democratic concepts is noted (Bobbio, 1987) along with the following polarisation of the public opinion in the economic and political fields, paving the way for the development of populism (Leick, 2018). Opposition movements channel the demands expressed by socially excluded communities, using both complex and simple arguments and referring to the communication channels naturally available in democratic systems (Ben-Ami, 2016).

Searching for a term to identify “the far right’s challenge to liberal democracy”, Feldman states that “‘post-fascist’ parties have entered coalition government in Austria (the Austrian Freedom Party) and Italy [...]; while [...] increasingly ‘illiberal democracies’ in Poland, Hungary and the US erode fundamental democratic norms by embracing far-right positions on nativism and authoritarianism” (2019, p. 24). At the same time, he provides a notion that refers to the “‘near right’, sometimes also called ‘right-wing populism’. One example of this trend is the Law and Justice Party in Poland (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), described by Jean Yves-Camus and Nicolas Lebourg in cognate terms as an example of a ‘radicalized conservative right’. Another instance is the ‘illiberal democracy’ now proudly touted by Victor Orbán’s Fidesz Party in Hungary, exemplified above all by its disgraceful attack on the CEU, on gender studies programmes generally, and on liberal scholarship everywhere” (Feldman, 2019, p. 41). Biskamp (2019) indicates some key theoretical foundations to the European populism but does not explain such a dynamic phenomenon.

Intentional or not, ignoring the role and impact strength of social media may become a missing link that explains the accelerated growth of the analysed populism. The results of a research study conducted in Portugal indicate that believing in and disseminating (fake) news are related to the political ideology of participants and show that ideologically right-wing participants are more likely to accept and disseminate fake news in comparison to those who represent left-wing or political centrists, regardless of the fact whether fake news favour the right or the left wings (Baptista et al., 2021, p. 13). The impact of disinformation on the restriction imposed on the scope of the freedom of political systems becomes an inseparable systemic threat observed in democratic countries (Kozłowski & Skelnik, 2020).

The European Commission's Joint Research Centre has published a study (European Commission, 2018a) indicating a growing role of algorithms in selecting information provided to receivers of the Internet media, including social media platforms. The two thirds of online news receivers use – consciously or not – algorithms which have been adequately designed by those who manage particular Internet platforms in order to provide marketing contents and information contents through the designed communication channels. Considering the quality of information, receivers of such media are led to the siloes or filter bubbles and they become susceptible to the impact of disinformation and fake news (Baviera, Sánchez-Junqueras, & Rosso, 2022). C.R. Sunstein (2002) indicates threats that follow the discussed phenomenon. They manifest themselves in the polarisation and radicalisation of groups formed on the basis of this type of media and used for further disinformation.

Contemporary populism is characterised by the exploration of topics that favour social dichotomy without any consideration of the actual status, in fact posing threats even where they do not actually exist but are convenient for the sake of surveys or go in line with the hope of populist parties (Balcer, 2019). Rehashing old disputes and developing new conflicts are to maintain constant mobilisation of voters who are fed with fear of losing privileges they have already gained on one hand, and to maintain their readiness to participate in surveys and/or elections on the other hand. Growing polarisation results in “undermining trust in public institutions, damaging the quality of policy processes, and facilitating the government's efforts to erode checks and balances” (Fomina, 2019, p. 127). Transferring political polarisation onto the sphere of the polarisation of traditional mainstream media is observed. A similar situation occurs with printed media and cinematography – if funded by the state, it is pro-government; however, digital media are those that facilitate channelling the information for targeted users.

Considering the dynamic development of social media that is significantly far ahead of their social domestication by mass users, a question of social media receivers' credulity is discussed, especially at the initial stage of their dynamic development. Restriction of the freedom of choice and, de facto, the autonomy of social media platform users is discussed by Sahebi & Formosa (2022) from a philosophical point of view. The authors indicate that autonomy of social media users can be disrespected and harmed through the control that social media can have over their users' data, attention, and behavior (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022). Growing amounts of fake news in media (Ziółkowska, 2018) complement the picture of contemporary post-truth (Lekach, 2017). Downing & Brun (2022) discuss the negative impact exerted by social media on the political system, especially on the voter turnout in France. Problems related to the impact of digital media on the quality of the democratic

process are also discussed by the European Commission from the research perspective (European Commission, 2018b) as well as from the regulative perspective of the European Union.

Even in mature democracies, threats posed to the stability of the political system by the functioning of social media are proven by the experience coming from, among others, activities undertaken by Cambridge Analytics to tip the scales of victory in favour of Great Britain seceding from the European Union (Sebastião & Borges, 2021). A number of techniques based on data algorithms were applied into social media to create filter bubbles that narrowed the receivers' attention to the arguments presented by well-paid specialists focused on the favoured option of seceding from the EU. Brexit won the support of the majority of referendum voters and the British public opinion accepted the final result.

Irrespective of their communication function that is positively perceived by some scientists (Špaček, 2018; Svidroňová, Kaščáková, & Vrbičanová, 2018), social media are also burdened with dysfunctions. In their present formula and considering the fact that the ability of receivers to perceive them with criticism has not been yet developed and, also, taking designed algorithms into account, social media come as tools for dissemination of disinformation, including social manipulation. Similarly to populism that has not been adopted everywhere, social media have not always and not everywhere provided manipulators with a guarantee of efficient disinformation. Consequently, social media do not always affect political processes of decision-making undertaken by citizens of democratic countries. The V4 countries come as a good example at this point. Three decades ago they were in a similar situation but each of them surrendered to populism to a various extent, despite the fact that they applied the same social media tools. In some particular circumstances, when properly managed and used intentionally in a particular way, social media can affect social processes of decision-making and, in this way, they can distort social choices. This research paper presents several case studies that indicate the use of social media in Poland for political purposes of the ruling political party who makes decisions that directly affect the level of freedom of the political system. The reference to the index evaluation of the democracy levels in the V4 states, including Poland, comes as a benchmark for the quality of democracy and for the regression in this field that has been observed since 2015.

## The weak areas of V4 states indicated by the freedom of democracy indices

The assessment of democratic freedom in the Visegrad Group has changed significantly since 2015. The status of consolidated democracy has been fairly maintained in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, with a little worse result. The tendency to move away from a consolidated democracy at the aggregated level can be observed in Hungary and, quite recently, in Poland. The situation in Hungary comes as a very serious warning to other countries in the region because the country has moved from the level of a fully consolidated democracy to the level of a hybrid regime, with a negative tendency moving the country away from democracy toward authoritarianism (Table 1).

Table 1. Regime Classification of the V4 States in 2005–2021

Regime Classification	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Czech Republic	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD
Hungary	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	SCD	SCD	SCD	SCD	SCD	T/H	T/H
Poland	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	SCD	SCD
Slovakia	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD

Legend: CD – consolidated democracies, SCD – semi-consolidated democracies, T/H – transitional or hybrid regimes.

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on the FHO data (Freedom House Organization, n.d.). Retrieved February 16, 2022.

The trend that illustrates moving away from the principles of liberal democracy in Hungary and a crisis in this field observed in Poland are presented by the qualitative indicators of the democratisation levels in these countries. Table 2 shows trends in scoring in the field of democratisation presented by the countries of the Visegrad Group in terms of the political system classification. Further in the study, the classification is applied to select the fields of systemic organisation of democratic activities undertaken in the particular countries where non-democratic tendencies or trends of a similar character are indicated.

The decreasing scope of freedom in Hungary and in Poland is mostly affected by such areas as national democratic governance, judicial framework and independence, independent media, corruption. The discernible decrease in the scope of freedom in

Table 2. Democracy Score in V4 States 2005–2021

Democracy Score	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Czech Republic	5,71	5,75	5,75	5,86	5,82	5,79	5,82	5,82	5,86	5,75	5,79	5,79	5,75	5,71	5,71	5,64	5,57
Hungary	6,04	6,00	5,86	5,86	5,71	5,61	5,39	5,14	5,11	5,04	4,82	4,71	4,46	4,29	4,07	3,96	3,71
Poland	6,00	5,86	5,64	5,61	5,75	5,68	5,79	5,86	5,82	5,82	5,79	5,68	5,43	5,11	5,04	4,93	4,57
Slovakia	6,00	6,04	5,86	5,71	5,54	5,32	5,46	5,50	5,43	5,39	5,36	5,39	5,39	5,39	5,36	5,29	5,32

Legend: Consolidated Democracies = 5,01+; Semi-Consolidated Democracies = 4,01–5,00; Transitional or Hybrid Regimes = 3,01–4,00; Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes = 2,01–3,00; Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes = 1–2,00.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the FHO data (Freedom House Organization, n.d.). Retrieved February 16, 2022.

the above-mentioned countries may not be observed in all the areas simultaneously but it occurs gradually, after the power was seized by Orban's right-wing party in 2010 and by the Zjednoczona Prawica [United Right] ruling coalition in Poland in 2015. In both cases, after the ruling parties came into power, a sudden fall in the scoring in the area of national democratic governance could be observed. The negative trend in this area led Hungary down to the level of hybrid regimes with authoritarian tendencies and in Poland it was below the level of a semi-consolidated democracy with a tendency oriented toward a hybrid regime (Table 3).

Table 3. National Democratic Governance Score in V4 States 2005–2021

NDG	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Czech Republic	5,50	5,50	5,00	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,00	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,00	5,00	5,00	4,75
Hungary	6,00	6,00	5,75	5,75	5,50	5,50	5,00	4,50	4,50	4,25	4,25	4,00	3,75	3,50	3,25	3,25	3,00
Poland	5,50	5,25	4,75	4,50	4,75	4,75	5,25	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,25	4,75	4,00	4,00	4,00	3,75
Slovakia	6,00	6,00	5,75	5,50	5,25	5,00	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00	4,75	4,75	4,75

Legend: Consolidated Democracies = 5,01+; Semi-Consolidated Democracies = 4,01–5,00; Transitional or Hybrid Regimes = 3,01–4,00; Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes = 2,01–3,00; Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes = 1–2,00.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the FHO data (Freedom House Organization, n.d.). Retrieved February 16, 2022.

The degradation of the freedom scope in the above-mentioned countries can be also observed in the field of traditional media (Table 4). The scope of media freedom indicates hybrid regimes with a tendency toward authoritarianism. In



Poland, the scoring has been indicating that direction, however the data of 2021 are close to a semi-consolidated democracy. Traditional state-owned media in Poland, particularly the main news release of the public TVP 1, have moved away from the implementation of the public mission in favour of disseminating pro-government communication and defaming the opposing party, especially its leader Donald Tusk. The role and the situation of media in Poland is discussed further in this study.

Table 4. Independent Media Score in V4 States 2005–2021

IM	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Czech Republic	6,00	6,00	5,75	5,75	5,75	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,00	5,00
Hungary	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,25	4,75	4,50	4,50	4,50	4,25	4,25	3,75	3,50	3,25	3,25	3,25
Poland	6,50	6,25	5,75	5,75	6,00	5,75	5,75	5,75	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,25	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00	4,25
Slovakia	5,75	5,75	5,75	5,50	5,25	5,00	5,00	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,00	5,00	5,25	5,25	5,00	5,00	5,00

Legend: Consolidated Democracies = 5,01+; Semi-Consolidated Democracies = 4,01–5,00; Transitional or Hybrid Regimes = 3,01–4,00; Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes = 2,01–3,00; Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes = 1–2,00.

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on the FHO data (Freedom House Organization, n.d.). Retrieved February 16, 2022.

In the area of judicial framework and independence Poland shamefully occupies the last position. Considering the above-mentioned area, the country has fallen from the level defining consolidated democracies to the level characteristic for hybrid regimes in a very short time, indicating a tendency toward authoritarianism. In Hungary, a similar trend has been observed, however by 2021 the indicators in this area have not fallen below the level of a semi-consolidated democracy (Table 5).

Table 5. Judicial Framework and Independence Score in V4 States 2005–2021

JFI	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Czech Republic	5,50	5,75	6,00	6,00	5,75	6,00	6,00	6,00	6,25	6,25	6,25	6,25	6,25	6,25	6,25	6,00	6,00
Hungary	6,25	6,25	6,25	6,25	6,25	6,00	5,75	5,25	5,50	5,50	5,25	5,00	5,00	5,00	4,75	4,75	4,25
Poland	6,00	5,75	5,75	5,50	5,75	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,50	5,25	4,75	3,75	3,75	3,50	3,25
Slovakia	6,00	6,00	5,75	5,50	5,25	5,00	5,25	5,25	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,25	5,00	5,25

Legend: Consolidated Democracies = 5,01+; Semi-Consolidated Democracies = 4,01–5,00; Transitional or Hybrid Regimes = 3,01–4,00; Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes = 2,01–3,00; Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes = 1–2,00.

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on the FHO data (Freedom House Organization, n.d.). Retrieved February 16, 2022.

Considering the interpretation of the rule of law, there has been an intense debate since 2015, after the PiS party came into power with two smaller coalition parties. The Solidarna Polska [United Poland] party, a co-governing group in the Zjednoczona Prawica [United Right] party, with its leader Zbigniew Ziobro, who simultaneously became the Minister of Justice and also the Attorney General, decided to take this area as its key distinguishing feature and use it as a weapon in their fight against EU institutions.

The Polish government has not been worried by the indices of the freedom of political systems. The government leaders, since the time when they formed the opposition, have been postulating a necessity of a systemic change, rejection of the legacy of the Third Republic of Poland and establishment of the Fourth Republic of Poland. The implementation of those postulates began after the party seized the power, announcing also the necessity of exchanging the elites. Stanley Bill argues that “PiS and its allies have attempted to enact a strategy of elite replacement in civil society in accordance with a broader rhetoric of ‘counter-elite’ populism. The ‘old-new elite’ of the ‘Third Polish Republic’ must be replaced by a ‘counter-elite’ that will represent the true political, economic, and cultural interests of ‘the nation’” (2022, p. 132). This strategy has resulted in a massive attack against the opposition with the use of all the available means, including traditional and social media.

## The use of media by Polish politicians

It is noted that under the rule of the United Right in Poland, there has been a correlation between the erosion of the areas of judicial and media freedom (Sweeney, 2020). The leader of the Solidarna Polska<sup>2</sup> [United Poland] party makes himself visible in the government by some controversial changes to the judicial system. In this way he focuses the attention of voters and defenders of the rule of law in Poland and in the EU on himself and his small party. Such an intentional line toward social polarisation has been intended to consolidate the electorate around his party and the broader right-wing. This confrontational policy finds support in state-owned media controlled by the government (OSCE/ODIHR, 2020, p. 28). Before the rule of the Zjednoczona Prawica [United Right], the Polish state-owned media were susceptible to political influence, however under the PiS, they have been transformed

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<sup>2</sup> On May 3, 2023, the “Solidarna Polska” party changed its name to “Suwerenna Polska” (“Sovereign Poland”).

into “an outright instrument of propaganda” (Sweeney, 2020, p. 28). In their report of 2019, the experts of the Economist Intelligence Unit state that the result and the purpose of actions undertaken by the United Right under the rule of the PiS party have been intended “to turn the country into an illiberal democracy, including by constraining the independence of the judiciary and consolidating media ownership” (The Economist, 2020).

An efficient way to subordinate traditional media has been applied by Victor Orban. His example was followed by the Polish United Right when they entrusted a company from the fuel industry (Orlen) with a mission of buying a chain of regional newspapers and Internet portals from their German owner. Undoubtedly, the aim of this operation from the outside of the business core activity of the Orlen company was to provide communication translation for the part of the society that can be additionally formed and activated for political purposes. Considering the volume of the transaction and subordination to the political structures of the ruling party, it is difficult not to define such influence exerted on the media market in any other way than intended “limiting independence through restructuring” (Sweeney, 2020; Surowiec-Capell, Kania-Lundholm, & Winiarska-Brodowska, 2020). Taking control over local press and Internet portals may significantly affect voters’ political decisions. The use of communication channels during the political is also growing (Karwacka, Gawroński, & Tworzydło, 2022).

At the time of growing populism accompanied by a trend of identity politics, political communication takes advantage of its presence in media through negative campaigns. Hence, in a theoretical approach, at a general level, negative campaigns run in traditional media have not directly brought any measurable outcomes, however, in social media the situation has been changing: “negative messages lead to decreased ratings – in the presented study, to lower level of perceived professionalism, especially” (Cwalina & Drzewiecka, 2014). Negative campaigns are remembered better, therefore they stimulate knowledge about them. Additionally, a target can be self-promotion among members of political parties who are perceived as rivals in the pursuit of attractive positions in the regime hierarchy.

Repetitiveness of messages in various media may lead to a development of non-objectively erroneous opinions, especially considering the restriction of media choice down to social platforms exclusively, which is more and more often observed. Consequently, it may result in political decisions that are actually desired by broadcasters. Considering social psychology, the research indicates how easy it is to form misjudging opinions about a situation, especially when opinions about new phenomena in the political world are shaped by analogies to some specific examples included in the scheme system of an individual (Skarżyńska, 2002, p. 173). Creating

and drawing social media users into filter bubbles are intended to reinforce and fix some particular schemes.

In Polish media, an example of a negative campaign under the rule of the United Right is the way of treating Germany in the mainstream news media, such as *Telewizja Polska* (TVP). It refers both to traditional communication provided by such media and to their social media profiles, such as Facebook, Twitter, or the Internet profiles of TVP or TVP Info. In her research analysis of the above-mentioned media covering three months of 2018 (from June 30 to September 28), Agnieszka Węglińska (2020) found 395 references to German, Germany, or Merkel – mainly negative ones. The picture characterising Germany and German people was not intended to present the mutual relations between both countries and their citizens but to stigmatize and arouse resentment or even fear to reinforce consolidation around the ruling party.

Another example of creating some imagined threats is Islamophobia stimulated by the Internet, especially by social media, by the right-wing groups in Poland, where the Muslim population is scarce<sup>3</sup> (Balcer, 2019). This was another stigma, successfully promoted to pave the way to victory for the PiS party in 2015. It was also exploited in favour of the consolidation of right-wing voters during the immigration crisis at the Polish and Belarusian border in 2021. Considering the immigration crisis of 2015, creating anxiety was efficiently underlain and exploited.

An entity under the massive criticism of the populist right-wing in social media is the European Union. An example is the use of Tweeter by the Polish politicians of the United Poland party to scapegoat the EU. The freedom of political opinions is respected in this case and it should not be restricted, however, receivers of the information should have the right to obtain information about the political affiliation of its senders (when a message/post is sent from a politician's account, the information is usually provided), about the use of bots to disseminate the information – because often this is what we do not know. Restricting the function of leaving comments under the messages is more often used for showing disapproval rather than expert polemics, which frequently makes the discourse quite superficial, bringing it down to the level of insults and disinformation and allowing algorithms to channel communication to some specific information siloes.

Based on the author's own findings from an analysis of tweets by *Solidarna Polska* members of the Polish parliament in December 2020 alone, it was found that 60% of tweets were openly anti-EU, 37% contesting the EU, and only 3% neutral, with no one making a neutral or positive reference to the EU. Social media platforms are

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<sup>3</sup> While Muslims in Poland constitute around 0.07 per cent of the total population, the 2016 iteration of a regular survey by IPSOS (Perils of Perception) found that Poles believe that 7 per cent of their country is Muslim (around 100 times more than in reality) (IPSOS, 2016, p. 211).

used by politicians mainly to maintain relationships with their ideologically formed receivers and to acquire new ones, who are susceptible to frequently repeated slogans that are usually of a negative character when presented by populists. An example of such activities can be those undertaken on Tweeter by Janusz Kowalski, a politician of the United Poland party (Table 6). In his negative messages, he often refers to

Table 6. Selected Posts from Janusz Kowalski’s (Deputy Minister of State Assets) Tweeter Account – December 2020

Subject	Tweet	Date	Anti-EU
	Janusz Kowalski @JKowalski_posel · 2 Dec. Remarkably, Germany can count on Buzek in pushing through the [German flag icon] model of energy transformation in our country, which is harmful to Poland. The award of the Brussels salon for the [Polish flag icon] politics is rather a token of gratitude for abandoning national aspirations, and not a reason to be delighted.	Dec. 2, 2020	X
Before the EU summit on the veto of the EU budget announced by Poland and Hungary	Janusz Kowalski @JKowalski_posel · 4 Dec. The United Right continues to veto the EU budget as long as the game does not comply with EU law and the draft regulation on the rule of law forced by Germany – I said at a press conference in the Sejm together with @KrajewskiJarek @pisorgpl	Dec. 4, 2020	X
Before the EU summit on the veto of the EU budget announced by Poland and Hungary	Janusz Kowalski @JKowalski_posel · 3 Dec. The regulation that Germany is pushing today, as disclosed by @JSaryuszWolski According to the legal opinion of the Legal Service of the Council of the EU, it is entirely contrary to the EU treaty, so if we obey the law, let us obey the law.	Dec. 3, 2020	X
Originally in English	Janusz Kowalski @JKowalski_posel · 6 Dec. Germany is heading for a clash. They insolently breach Art. 7 of Treaty on the EU. They blackmail Europe – Poland and Hungary defend Europe against German lawlessness and hegemony. If they want a clash – they will crash into (Polish flag) Veto. [German flag icon] They have learnt nothing from history.	Dec. 6, 2020	X
Attack on the Netherlands	Janusz Kowalski @JKowalski_posel · 7 Dec. We present a special report @SolidarnaPL “Violation of the rule of law by the Netherlands – tax fraud in the EU”. In the report, we describe the mechanism of the operation of the Dutch tax system. The PDF version is available below:	Dec. 6, 2020	X

Source: Author’s own findings and translation: Tweets analysis of Solidarna Polska members to Polish Parliament – December 2020.

hating Germans, the EU, Donald Tusk, who is a politician of the opposition, and also less frequently to other people or countries, such as the Netherlands.

A negative attitude toward the EU is also presented by other formerly high-ranking politicians of the right-wing, for example Jacek Saryusz-Wolski or Witold Waszczykowski. They changed their attitudes toward the EU after losing influential positions or any chances for obtaining them. Before the EU summit on establishing a conditionality rule that grants money for introducing country-specific reforms, Saryusz-Wolski undermined the rule of law in the actions undertaken by the EU, writing that: “The whole problem is that the EU has ceased to be rigorously law-abiding [...]. It was the moment when the left-liberal movement took power and is the political hegemon in the EU” (MEP @JSaryuszWolski, December 8, 2020). There are many more similar entries on this politician’s social media account.

While scapegoating the EU in the discourse, the United Poland exercises the right of the freedom of speech that is in accordance with the canon of a democratic, rule-of-law country, irrespective of the objective point in the formulated statements or the lack of it. Such a message is often and consistently repeated in social media and it favours development of communication siloes by using algorithms developed by particular social media platforms. As a result, receivers of such communication find themselves in a space that favours opinions that are perpetuated in this way. Breaking outside such an information silo requires a conscious search for substantive contents that differ from those acquired previously. However, receivers most often remain “faithful” to the messages they liked previously and they transfer their opinions onto the system of values and actions. Considering members and supporters of the political party that has taken responsibility for reforming the legal system in Poland, and which faces formal objections formulated against its line, it is manifested by encapsulation and exacerbation of the confrontational attitude toward the EU. Since 2015, instead of an improvement in the functioning of the justice system in Poland, systematic restrictions to its freedom have been observed in the FHO indices mentioned previously.

The erosion of the judicial area is accompanied by the restrictions imposed on the independence of media freedom (Sweeney, 2020). A communication tool in the politicisation of justice are social media. The case of a so-called “judge’s hate scandal” in Poland was rather a “manual” orchestrating of the populist agenda and was much less sophisticated than the Cambridge Analytica scandal in the UK Brexit referendum although it did influence the weakening of social trust in politics and judiciary. Media opposing the ruling coalition broadly described a disclosed conspiracy involving 24 people, including 22 judges, who were the supporters of the so-called “good change” at courts, a prosecutor, and a notary. The group discussed

the events taking place on a particular day at the justice system, the conducted proceedings and other judges who stood up for the rule of law.<sup>4</sup> The distortions and political engagement of the judges involved in the activities of the “Kasta” [Caste] were broadly broadcast only by media that were not controlled by the government. The political engagement of the judges was explained by Judge Cichocki, a member of the above-mentioned group, who claimed that such activities offered a chance for quick promotion and they were rewarded with considerable promotions in the justice system (TVN24, 2022).

The activities of the Polish United Right in the field of power concentration, including concentration of media and information communication, show strong determination to maintain power and to change the political elites of the country, which has never been denied by the party. The selection of an operational strategy based on social polarisation is a political choice that fits into the canon of a democratic discourse. The influence of social media on the radicalisation level and the depth of social divisions is a factor that is used independently and intentionally, if possible. Using that factor, the ruling party hardly does anything to change the situation and takes advantage of the maintained polarisation in favour of its own social support. A measurable reflection of a crisis developed in such a way is the erosion of the democratic system in Poland, with a shrinking general level of its freedom, heading toward an authoritarian system in the areas of judicial and media freedom.

## Discussion

In a democratic political system of the rule of law, the freedom of speech defines its maturity and the scope of civil liberties. Hence, it is understood that it should not be restricted. The contribution of social media into the public debate comes as a new dimension of forming information siloes and filter bubbles. The communication in social media is used not only for sharing information, observations and opinions but it also becomes a means of social engineering through the advanced IT tools – not always in the civil spirit. Citizens should have the right to freely use benefits of communication, the right to obtain reliable information and knowledge when a particular message deviates from facts or objective truth. Contemporary social media are characterised by possibilities to freely start user accounts, including fake

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<sup>4</sup> The existence of the informal discussion group Kasta/Antykasta on WhatsApp was revealed in 2022 by OKO.press with Onet and TVN24, independently.

accounts, so called bots, possibilities to observe or to block such accounts by other users, limited possibilities to respond to communication posts (like- and share-type responses), sponsored and free promotion of messages – and all that is encapsulated in complex algorithms favouring formation of filter bubbles.

Social media administrators have been many times accused of favouring dissemination of controversial and fake contents (fake news, deep fakes, etc.) in order to elongate the time spent by users on their platforms. The attempts at providing anti-fake regulations and orders to remove fake contents have been facing strong resistance and slow implementation of inefficient solutions.

The point is not to censure social media by restricting freedom of speech but to draw the attention of their owners, editors and legislators to the equal recognition of broadcasters and receivers' rights to true information. Social media have done very little, if anything at all, to implement fact checking-type solutions – verifiers of posts in relation to facts and verifiable knowledge. It seems that the principle based on the statement that “it is not actually important what users publish – it is important they publish it on our platform”, has been the key target of administrators of those companies. Yet, receivers are often not aware that they are pushed into filter bubbles which distort reality. Their perception of facts becomes controllable by proper algorithms that are often subordinated to the targets assumed by ordering parties to implement a slogan: “Be obedient in thinking and acting”.

Social media have encouraged all sorts of statements and have favoured their radicalisation and thereby social polarisation to such an extent that even stable democracies, such as American or British, have been shaken as well as relatively young and still transforming ones, such as Polish or Hungarian democracies. The use of social media by politicians exceeds the norms of public communication and becomes a tool of political fight, such as, for example, promoting negative campaigns. The level of applying such a tool in the Polish political discourse seems to be at the level of “manual” manipulation rather than advanced targeting, as it was in Great Britain during the Brexit referendum. The level of blame or hate speech is high. It is not intended to serve the society by providing information but to push receivers into filter bubbles.

## Conclusions

The study presents the decay of democracy under the rule of the right-wing parties in Poland since 2015. Compared to other countries of the region, the situation in Poland indicates that the democracy crisis pertains, first of all, to negative institutional



changes in the fields of media and the rule of law. The right-wing parties have been using both social and traditional media for the strong polarisation of the public opinion. The fact that media have become an active tool of political rivalry is proven by the interference of the state into the market of local media, made through the state-owned investor, Orlen, the fuel corporation, who took over a chain of newspapers from a foreign shareholder. In this way, the concentration of public media in the hands of the governing party has been progressing. The picture is completed by disinformation activities in social media that result in decay of trust in the rule of law and consequently, in a decline observed in the indicators of the freedom of democracy. In its current form, the functioning of social media is oriented mainly toward economic advantages obtained from drawing attention and time spent on particular platforms, regardless of their quality or reliability of contents.

Considering the field of public life and security, in some cases it may lead to the erosion of democratic systems. Institutions and services responsible for public security cannot ignore this fact and they should implement preventive actions. The legislation should be oriented toward verification of information reliability, prevention of disinformation and elimination of bots on the massive scale. On the other hand, however, it is important to popularise competences that enable citizens' critical reception of information presented by social media. To achieve this aim, some dedicated information campaigns should be launched, involving also particular social portals.

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