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MEDIA, POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY

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MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND EVALUATION OF GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE IN DEALING WITH COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SERBIA

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Introduction. Across the globe, societal reactions to the on-going Covid-19 pandemic revealed a close interaction between politics and the ability of societies to effectively deal with the pandemic. On the one side, political factors affected perceptions and preferred policies regarding the pandemic, while on the other side, the pandemic – the threat posed by it, restrictions, controversies – have affected political processes, and individual political attitudes and evaluations.

In this interaction between government actions and citizens' political attitudes, mass media are likely to play an important role. Normatively, the main role of the media is to transfer important information to the public in an objective and unbiased manner. It is, however, well known that this ideal image does not always fit the reality and that media are sometimes politically and ideologically biased.

It is known from the literature that politically biased media may affect citizen's attitudes, whether directly or through the so-called agenda-setting mechanism (Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Weaver, 2007). But, it is also documented that citizens select media outlets according to their preexisting political orientations (Barnidge et al., 2020). Thus, what may sometimes appear as the biasing effect of the media, may simply be evidence of selective media consumption on the part of the consumers.

Since the Serbian media supply is strongly politically colored, Serbia represents a favorable case to study the role of politicized media consumption in connection with the evaluation of government performance concerning handling the Covid-19 crisis. [Note that Serbia is ranked 93rd in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, preceded by Moldova and North Macedonia, and followed by Guinea Bissau, Liberia, and Ukraine (source: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>).] In this paper, we ask the question: Is selective media consumption associated with the evaluation of the Serbian government's performance concerning its handling of the Covid-19 health crisis? We answer this question with the help of survey data, collected in Serbia during the current Covid-19 epidemics.

Objectives. The main objective of this analysis is to examine the associations between specific media consumption patterns, and government evaluation concerning its performance vis-a-vis the Covid-19 pandemic. Evaluation of government performance tends to be politically motivated: governments led by preferred parties are generally evaluated more positively compared to governments headed by parties we dislike. At the same time, the consumption of specific media outlets can be based on similar political motives. Hence, we hypothesize:

1. Consumption of media outlets favorable towards government parties should be associated with more positive government evaluations.
2. Consumption of media outlets favorable towards the opposition parties should be associated with more negative evaluations.

The expectations about the effects of the consumption of politically neutral media outlets (those outlets that cannot be *a priori* classified as a pro or contra government, such as personal internet search, foreign media) are less clear. On the one hand, there may be no systematic association, since the media content reached in that manner could equally be favorable as unfavorable towards the government. However, the overall associations could resemble what is described under hypothesis 2, because the non-consumption of government-biased media could already indicate an underlying political leaning. Perhaps more importantly, such information sources may provide

more diverse, and perhaps more objective, information content compared to the content of the pro-government inclined media.

We focus on two groups of variables. One is represented by items operationalizing the evaluation of government performance concerning its handling of the Covid-19 crisis. Given the massive disruption of social life caused by the pandemic and the fact that societal reactions have been coordinated mainly through government actions, we expected that evaluations of government performance are likely to be influenced not just by one's personal experiences, but also by information delivered through the main media channels. Since the Serbian media tend to be politically colored, preference for certain media outlets is likely to be associated with the way the government's handling of the health crisis is perceived.

Hence, the second group of variables concerns the media consumption, which is the choice of the main media outlets that respondent has consumed in the recent period. The main media outlets in Serbia are heavily politically biased. The majority of the media, in particular, all TV networks with channels broadcasted nationally, including the Serbian public service broadcaster TV (Radio and Television of Serbia, RTS), can easily be classified as favorable towards the governing parties (in fact, the main government party Serbian Progressive Party, SNS). Nevertheless, there are several vigorously active opposition-supportive media, but somewhat less accessible to the wider public (e.g., those without a cable TV subscription, or internet access). We also asked about using individual internet searches as the main source of information, as well as the consumption of foreign media. The designation of the relevant media in these categories is presented in Table 1.

Based on the literature on the media effects on political preferences, we developed the following theoretical argument that underlies the presented analysis. Political preferences are hard to change and have already been set before the offset of the pandemic. Hence, the subsequent events are likely to have been seen and interpreted through the politically and ideologically colored prism. Supporters of the government parties are likely to approve the government's handling of the crisis, while the

opposition supporters are likely to be more critical. In brief, as the literature suggests, new events tend to be interpreted according to the preexisting schemes. Moreover, it is also known that individuals select media outlets they consume based on preferences that just reinforce them. Media that are likely to express contrary opinions are typically avoided, ignored, or otherwise discounted.

Hence, the choice of media outlets, according to our hypothesis, will predict government evaluation, because media have been politically aligned already before the pandemic. The opposition negatively evaluates government and consumes the opposition media, while incumbent government voters consume pro-government media, and evaluate government positively.

Method and procedure. This study is based on a public opinion survey, conducted in Serbia mainly between July 20th and September 10th, 2020. It was an online survey, based on several modes of respondent recruitment. About two-thirds of the sample was recruited using email addresses gathered from publicly accessible websites in the Serbian Internet domain. The remaining respondents were invited using various means of Internet advertising – in Serbian media, via Facebook, Google, and similar. It is a sample of convenience, but it has good coverage of the national territory (almost all municipalities are represented), and it is diverse in the main socio-demographic characteristics (age, education, occupation).

Assessment of government performance concerning Covid-19 was measured by four bipolar scales: 0. Capable – 10. Incapable, 0. Benevolent – 10. Malicious, 0. Unjust – 10. Just, 0. Clear – 10. Confusing. Media outlet use was captured by asking respondents to mark up to 3 sources of information they follow most often in recent days. There were 11 entries, 7 of which could be categorized as favorable to the government, 2 as oppositional, and 2 as nominally neutral.

Results. Correlations between media outlets use and government evaluation along 4 dimensions are presented in Table 1. Although the table contains 44 correlation coefficients, the main results are simple to summarize. Preference for pro-government media outlets is associated with more positive government evaluation, on all four

dimensions. For instance, those who indicated the national public service broadcaster (RTS) as one of their most frequently consumed outlets are significantly more likely to characterize the government's handling the Covid crisis as "Just" ($r = .30, p < .001$).

Table 1: Correlations between media outlets use, and government evaluation dimensions

	0.Capable – 10. Incapable	0. Benevolent - 10. Malicious	0. Unjust - 10. Just	0. Clear - 10. Confusing
<u>Pro-government media</u>				
B92	-.094**	-.114**	.104**	-.080**
Blic	-.091**	-.110**	.114**	-.088**
Kurir, Informer, Alo	-.078**	-.120**	.128**	-.074**
Pink TV	-.233**	-.204**	.238**	-.250**
Prva TV	-.171**	-.160**	.184**	-.194**
RTS, national public TV & radio	-.271**	-.272**	.300**	-.247**
Happy TV & web portal	-.070**	-.069**	.071**	-.077**
<u>Pro-opposition media</u>				
TV N1	.219**	.203**	-.196**	.224**
Nova.rs web portal & TV	.239**	.233**	-.220**	.227**
<u>Neutral media</u>				
Own internet search	.082**	.094**	-.101**	.071**
Foreign media (via Internet or cable)	.120**	.124**	-.141**	.122**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

According to hypothesis 2, reliance on the pro-opposition media is associated with more negative government evaluation. For instance, those relying on TV N1 are relatively more likely to see the government's policies as incapable, malicious, unjust, and confusing. Finally, it proved that the consumption of nominally neutral media sources (own internet search, foreign media) has a similar relationship with government evaluation, as the consumption of the pro-opposition media. However, the association concerning the 'neutral' media is overall somewhat weaker.

Conclusions. In an ideal democratic world, the evaluation of government performance should be based on unbiased information provided by objective media. The selection of specific media outlets should matter little concerning the quality of

policy-relevant information that reaches the average citizen. In such world, the above table would be mostly filled by insignificant coefficients. In reality, in this case, the Serbian reality, the situation is different.

The results demonstrated that preference for certain media outlets is associated with a more positive or negative evaluation of how the Serbian government has handled the Covid-19 crisis. We interpret these results as indicating that the preexisting political and ideological preferences are responsible for the observed associations. Political and ideological orientation affects one's media preference, as well as the attitude towards the governing (and opposition) parties. It is also possible that the content of the media influences the evaluations independently. For instance, being exposed to the content provided by the Serbian national public service broadcaster (RTS) may itself shape one's view of the government policies, regardless of the political orientation before the crisis. In reality, these channels of influence are likely to both contribute to the observed findings, although we propose that the role of preexisting orientation is more influential. However, to decisively test this interpretation remains a task for future research. The results emphasize the value of politically unbiased, trustful media.