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IX POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SELF-CONSTITUTION: EDUCATION FOR DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP IN POST- PANDEMIC TIMES

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**POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SELF-CONSTITUTION: EDUCATION FOR DIGITAL
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Media consumption and irrational beliefs about COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

Democratic citizenship implies reliable and objective sources of information. Its absence makes it difficult to make rational decisions, whether in the political realm or concerning other relevant social issues. In modern societies, citizens almost exclusively depend on mass media to obtain socially relevant information. “The media is the watchdog of democracy”, claim Sommer and Rappel-Kroyzer (2020, p.3), among many others. Yet, despite the normatively important role of the media in transferring information to the citizens timely, unbiasedly, and objectively, media sometimes fall short of the ideal.

This has been particularly visible since the outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic. Numerous media outlets, with examples probably in every country in the world, transferred and even generated information about the pandemic that is not objective and reliable, creating a global misinformation “infodemic.” Misinformation, when related to health issues, is likely to be particularly hazardous.

One particular example of misinformation transferred via mass media are various irrational beliefs about the COVID19 pandemic. ‘Irrational beliefs’ denotes various attitudes, views, and opinions about the pandemic that are easily recognized as incorrect. Here belong various so-called ‘conspiracy theories’ about the pandemic, but the category is broader and does not necessarily involve conspiratorial references. For instance, one irrational belief about the pandemic is that hydroxychloroquine (an anti-malarial drug) can help prevent or treat coronavirus infection, although scientific evidence suggests that it cannot (Vinetz, 2020).

Since it is possible to classify the media in many societies concerning the degree of irrational COVID beliefs presence in their content, it could be expected that an individual’s endorsement of those irrational beliefs should be related to the kind of media one is/has been predominantly exposed to. Thus, for example, individuals consuming mostly sources that proved to be more objective and balanced could be expected to endorse fewer irrational beliefs than those who are more exposed to media outlets that provide more unreliable and incorrect information about the pandemic.

Objectives

This study tests hypothesis that holding irrational COVID19 beliefs is associated with the character of the media outlets one pays attention to. The analysis is based on public opinion data from Serbia, collected after the pandemic outbreak in 2020.

Serbia is not an exception concerning the role of media in distributing accurate and misleading information about the pandemic. Different media proved committed to responsible information to a varying degree. However, public officials also contributed to the informational confusion by providing inaccurate, unreliable, and often changing statements themselves. Although no media source could go without at least transferring some irrational beliefs about the pandemic, the outlets differed in their relative presence.

Hence, we expect to find a significant correlation between higher consumption of media outlets characterized by more unreliable information content than those that are fact-driven and outside the scope of government-controlled media in Serbia.

Method and procedure

The data come from two national-level public opinion surveys conducted between April and September 2000 in Serbia.

- Study 1: COVID IDN 2020 (N=1876; Fieldwork: May 12, 2020 – July 30, 2020.)
- Study 2: CSES M5 2020 (N=3726; Fieldwork: July 20 – September 29, 2020.)

Both studies employed online surveys that used several modes of respondent recruitment. Most respondents were recruited using the Institute of Social Sciences' email internet panel and through various means of Internet advertising – in Serbian media, via Facebook, Google, and similar. Study 2 also included recruitment using the Viber social network. While both studies are based on convenience samples, the Viber sample is a random sample of Viber users. Since this network is the most widely used in Serbia, it resulted in the sample with socio-demographics closest to the general population. Note that the irrational beliefs questions in Study 2 were posed only to the Viber subsample and a subset of the Internet subsample (approximately 350 respondents in total).

Both samples have good coverage of the national territory, and they are diverse in the main socio-demographic characteristics (age, education, occupation). Data weights are developed and applied in order to secure an adequate representation of the basic socio-demographic characteristics.

Media outlet preference was captured by asking respondents to mark up to 3 sources of information they follow most often in recent days. There were eleven entries, seven of which could be categorized as right-wing, favorable to the government, two as oppositional, and two as nominally neutral (see Table 3). Within the pro-government group, some outlets could be described as tabloid-type (*Blic*, *Kurir*, *Informer*, *Alo*), some as ‘reality TV’ (*Pink TV*, *Prva TV*, *Happy TV*), one is a national public media house-*RTS*), and one is a slightly less right-wing, and semi-tabloid *B92*.

‘Own internet search’ and ‘Foreign media (via Internet or cable)’ are classified as ‘neutral media’. The reason is not that all content is ideologically neutral, but because the content is user-selected and its ideological orientation is not predetermined.

Items measuring irrational Covid-19 beliefs are presented in tables 1 and 2, together with the basic descriptive statistics. Each item represents an irrational attitude related to the COVID-19 pandemic that has been observed in Serbia in the early phase of the pandemic. For instance, item 2 from the Study 1 was nearly literally delivered by the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, at a press conference on February 26, 2020.

Table 1

Items measuring irrational COVID-19 beliefs, Study 1 COVID IDN 2020

	Mean	SD
1. COVID-19 disease is similar to the regular seasonal flu, and introducing measures such as restriction of movement and social isolation is unnecessary.	2.36	1.35
2. If one brandy is drunk in the morning, the risk of coronavirus infection is reduced.	1.59	1.02
3. The coronavirus is probably artificial, that is, laboratory-created.	3.33	1.40

Note. 5-point dis/agreement scales; Weighted by W4_SAE (Sex, age, education).

Table 2

Items measuring irrational COVID-19 beliefs, Study 2 JMS 2020 CSES M5 (Viber)

	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a biological weapon created by scientists.	7.09	3.67
2. Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a conspiracy to take away civil rights forever and establish an authoritarian government.	5.55	3.91

Note. 11-point disagreement scales; Weighted by W4_SAE (Sex, age, education).

Results

Correlations between media preference and support for irrational COVID19 beliefs, presented in Table 3, show several interesting findings. First, the coefficients are generally low and often below the adopted significance level. Thus, the association between media preference and irrational COVID attitudes is not very strong. The strongest associations are obtained for the two liberal (and oppositional) media outlets – *TV NI* and *Nova.rs* internet portal. Preference for these media outlets is accompanied by stronger disagreement with the irrational beliefs in both studies.

One exception concerns the association with the ‘seasonal flu’ item in Study 1, where the association is positive (for *Nova.rs*). The same item is negatively associated with preference for some tabloid media outlets (*B92*, *Pink*) and the national *TV RTS*. It may be that this seemed like a more reasonable opinion in this early period than later in the year. Although the three opinion items are positively and strongly associated among themselves, they have specific connotations.

Preference for some right-wing, pro-government media, including tabloids, is positively associated with items 2 and 3 in Study 1, but rather weakly. For instance, preference for *Pink TV*, *Happy TV*, *Prva TV*, and tabloids *Kurir* and *Informer* are all associated in the range of 0.06 to 0.10. So, the expected association is observed but is rather weak.

However, in Study 2, these weak associations mostly disappeared. The only remaining significant in this group concerns the national public media house *RTS* ($r=.17$, $p<.05$). It is not entirely clear why this is the case. It might be because this is one of the channels available to the broadest audience, especially the older and rural part of the population which is less likely to have access to cable TV and internet outlets. But, overall, the second study showed that the

association with right-wing media disappeared. The reason may be in the government’s radical shift in the policies concerning the pandemic. While in the early stages, the government dismissed the seriousness of coronavirus and the associated threat to public health, at the time of Study 2, the restrictive policies became among the strictest in Europe. Hence, it is likely that this shift had some effect on the public with pro-government sympathies and related media preferences.

Table 3

Correlations between media outlets use and support for irrational COVID19 beliefs

	Study 1			Study 2	
	<i>1. COVID-19 is like a seasonal flu</i>	<i>2. Rakija COVID-19 cures</i>	<i>3. Coronavirus is artificial</i>	<i>1. COVID-19 is biological weapon</i>	<i>1. COVID-19 is about taking away civil rights</i>
Right-wing, pro-government media					
B92	-0.07**	0.05	-0.01	0.01	-0.11
Blic	-0.04	0.02	0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Kurir, Informer, Alo	-0.02	0.05	0.07**	0.06	-0.03
Pink TV	-0.07**	0.07**	0.06*	0.10	0.02
Prva TV	-0.03	0.10*	0.10**	0.14	0.03
RTS, national public TV & radio	-0.15**	0.02	0.03	0.17*	-0.04
Happy TV & web portal	0.01	0.06**	0.10*	-0.05	0.10
Liberal, pro-opposition media					
TV N1	-0.03	-0.18**	-0.20**	-0.29**	-0.21**
Nova.rs web portal & TV	0.08**	-0.11**	-0.04	-0.27**	-0.21**
Neutral media					
Own internet search	-0.01	-0.05**	-0.03	-0.05	-0.12
Foreign media (via Internet or cable)	-0.01	-0.03	-0.08**	0.01	0.07

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

Consumption of the nominally neutral media is unexpectedly *not* associated with more accurate COVID-19 opinions. Of course, independent information search on the Internet can end up at sites promoting irrational views, perhaps just as likely as sites promoting scientific-based views. This point echoes Mackey et al.’s (2021) study, which “detected over 1 million

tweets, including various hydroxychloroquine misinformation topics, following President Trump's promotion of a misinformation video that was subsequently removed by Twitter."

Still, independent internet search is weakly negatively associated with the Serbian president's view (expressed in February 2020) that *Rakija* (Serbian traditional alcoholic beverage) prevents coronavirus infection. Also, preference for international media sources is associated with a weaker belief in the artificial creation of the coronavirus. Overall, the effect of these 'neutral' and individually chosen media sources is not a particular antidote for the examined irrational beliefs, as most of the coefficients are around zero.

Conclusions

The presented results provide modest support for the initial hypothesis that the acceptance of irrational COVID-19 views will be associated with preference for certain media outlets. The results showed a weak association between preference for right-wing, pro-government, tabloid-type of media with some irrational beliefs. A particularly worrying result is the association of the public media service RTS with the inclination to accept irrational views. It is regretful if consumption of a particular media contributes to the spread of incorrect, misleading views. Such media channels do not contribute to more accurate views and do not serve the expected function in a democratic society.

On the other side, consumption of liberal, pro-opposition media is more consistently negatively associated with the irrational COVID-19 beliefs. However, preference for nominally neutral sources is generally not associated with more or less belief in irrational COVID views. Perhaps, this reflects the heterogeneous content of information that could be encountered in this way (for related findings in Russia, see Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2021).

While the results support the initial hypothesis and conclusion that specific biases in resulting beliefs accompany the consumption of certain media channels, this does not prove the causal connection. Individuals with certain views may select media outlets for some other reasons. For instance, results not presented here also show that media preference is associated with individual authoritarianism, and authoritarianism is in turn associated with irrational COVID-19 beliefs quite strongly (for instance, in Study 1, the correlation between the 'artificial virus' item and authoritarianism is $r=.45$, $p<.001$).

Future research should explicitly test whether authoritarianism is responsible for the covariance between irrational beliefs and media consumption, or there is also a direct

contribution of media sources to the association with irrational views, apart from the level of individual authoritarianism.

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