

Review Paper

Axiological Fundamental Pillars of the Formation of Public Opinion in the Media

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ABSTRACT

In the conditions of increased instability and the emergence of significant destabilizing factors in the development of politics, the economy and the society, the issues of public opinion formation are becoming more acute, for which the media, which simulate various situations and form patterns of behaviour, are of crucial importance. The purpose of the research lies in substantiating the theoretical principles and applied recommendations regarding the axiological fundamental pillars of the formation of public opinion in the media. The methodological base of the research comprises the general scientific and special methods, namely: comparison and analogy, monitoring and observation, analysis and synthesis, systematization and generalization, cluster analysis based on the use of the k-means method, graphical and tabular methods. Concerning the results of the research on the axiological fundamental pillars of the formation of public opinion in the media, it has been established that the public opinion formation takes place under the influence of the media, taking into account social-political and cultural-spiritual values and such tools of the media as: persuasion, suggestion, imitation, psychological infection and manipulation. It has been found that from among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, three groups of countries have been distinguished, characterized by common features of the formation of public opinion in the media, as follows: countries with a relatively high level of democracy and resilience to disinformation (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic), which belong to the European Union and are able to ensure higher indicators of the democratic implementation of civil liberties and the ability to more effectively counter disinformation; countries with a medium level of democracy and resilience to disinformation (Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), in which the proper basis for the implementation of democratic principles of public opinion formation has been formed, however, there are a number of problems and obstacles causing significant deformations regarding the influence of the media on the society; countries with a low level of democracy and resilience to disinformation (Azerbaijan, Belarus), which are characterized by an authoritarian regime, and the formation of public opinion depends on public authorities and the media.

HIGHLIGHTS

- ① In the conditions of increased instability and the emergence of significant destabilizing factors in the development of politics, the economy and the society, the issues of public opinion formation are becoming more acute, for which the media, which simulate various situations and form patterns of behaviour, are of crucial importance.
- ② It has been found that from among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, three groups of countries have been distinguished, characterized by common features of the formation of public opinion in the media.

Keywords: Media, the public, the public opinion, the public values, the society

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In the modern world, the processes of forming a world-view, value-semantic guidelines and evaluation criteria and ways of understanding the world take place under the influence of media, the nature of which is determined by the information and social basis. The influence of the media on the formation of public opinion is particular importance in such conditions, constituting a special state of mass consciousness and a common understanding of socially significant phenomena, events and processes. The formation of public opinion under the influence of the media is based on a set of ideas, judgments and evaluations formed by the public majority, and their axiological concept is constructed on the basis of the information and axiological mechanism of ensuring the formation, selection and transformation of values in the society. It is obvious that the axiological modelling of media information uses a communicative and conceptual approach, which makes it possible to reveal the potential of media material in the formation of the public opinion by understanding the values of the society and the mechanisms of transformation of socially significant values into personal ones. Taking into account the outlined, the necessity for an in-depth study of the axiological principles of the public opinion formation in the media is actualized.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issues of investigating the influence of the media on the formation of public opinion in modern conditions of instability and uncertainty are particularly relevant, forasmuch as the functioning of the modern society takes place in conditions of intensive exchange of information, in which the media play a key role. Romanenko (2019) interprets the formation of public opinion as an integrative formation, characterized by the intensity of distribution, constant and clearly expressed social orientation. At the same time, public opinion is defined as a social phenomenon that positions society's attitude to specific problems. Gabore & Xiujun (2018) have established a significant influence of online factors on the formation of public opinion and claim that brief information displayed by the media has a greater impact on public opinion than detailed information. Ullah & Khan (2020) argue that it is the media that exerts a decisive influence on the public and the society and can quickly change their standpoints and beliefs.

McGregor (2019) has investigated the inter-relationship between the public opinion and the democracy, and considers the role of the media as a tool for highlighting the public opinion; however, Kuang (2018) claims that the public opinion, formed with the help of new media, in modern conditions becomes the mainstream of the implementation of the social opinion.

By analysing the main publications on the issue outlined, Mortimore (2014) has identified the main factors influencing the formation of public opinion, among which he points out media technologies. Herewith, he notes that the influence of the media on the formation of public opinion in highly developed countries is more significant than in countries of the transitive type.

Oluwakemi and Ogbemi (2016), systematizing the results of the studies carried out to confirm the hypothesis of the "third-person effect", have come to the conclusion that media messages have a more significant impact on the consciousness of the public than the expression of an individual opinion of each citizen separately and at the same time ensure the vital activity of the society. In this context, the remark of Bohush (2021) is sharp, who has revealed that in modern conditions the media determine the main aspects of the functioning of the public in the society, its social, cultural and spiritual values; along with this, he understands the concept of public opinion as the level of democracy of the political and economic social structure, guaranteeing free expression of standpoint by each individual, ensuring unhindered access to public information. Based on the above-mentioned, it can be assumed that conducting empirical evaluations of public opinion through the calculation of the democracy index in countries turns out to be justified.

Zhu, Ya. (2021) is convinced that the formation of public opinion is influenced to a greater extent by the Internet media, while the traditional ones to some extent weaken their positions and relevance, which is confirmed by Zhang & Chen (2021) and Burbach *et al.* (2020). At the same time, Rudyk (2020) claims that traditional media are monopolized and cover information in the form of frank propaganda, which significantly weakens their influence on the public; therefore, the formation of the public opinion using digital technologies is more acceptable (Frechette, 2019).

It is obvious that the formation of public opinion depends significantly on the level and quality of information presented by the media and their influence on the public values. It is beyond argument that the public opinion in the modern society is one of the main indicators of the democracy development; consequently, the information on the basis of which this opinion is formed is of great importance.

Research Goals

The purpose of the research lies in substantiating the theoretical principles and applied recommendations regarding the axiological fundamental pillars of the formation of public opinion in the media.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological base of the research consists of general scientific and special methods as follows: comparison and analogy in order to analyse the state and trends of the public opinion formation in the media; monitoring and observation in order to clarify the peculiarities of the formation of public opinion in the media; analysis and synthesis in order to determine the essence of public opinion and establish the role of the media in the public opinion formation; systematization and generalization for the formulation of hypotheses and the formation of conclusions based on the results of the research; cluster analysis based on the use of the k-means method in order to group the countries of Central and Eastern Europe according to the democracy index; graphical and tabular methods for visualizing the results of the research.

Some countries of Central and Eastern Europe were selected for the conducting the research, in particular as follows: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia.

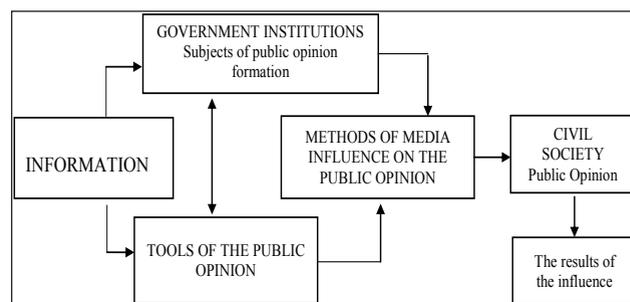
The information base of the research consists of the following reports, namely: Democracy Index for 2017–2021 according to the index of democracy and Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021 according to the index of resilience to disinformation.

RESULTS

The role of the media in the formation of public opinion is enhanced under the influence of external

and internal environmental factors, for as much as the media tools not only provide information, report and highlight it, but also intensively promote it, leading the public to adopt predetermined attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns. Algorithms for the formation of public opinion are the result of media logic and are aimed at implementing the interests of the public, forasmuch as the media is one of the main channels of influence on the public opinion. At the same time, the process of forming public opinion (Fig. 1) involves the interaction of government institutions, the media and the public, on the basis of which the desired result is obtained. In this context, the government institutions perform the function of the subjects of the public opinion formation, and the media – an instrument of influence on it.

From among the most common tools of media influence on the formation of the public opinion, the following ones can be distinguished, namely: (1) persuasion by means of argumentation of facts; (2) suggestion by influencing the emotions and trust of citizens; (3) imitation through behaviour modelling and formation of communication stereotypes; (4) psychological contagion through the transmission of an emotional state; (5) manipulation through targeted direct covert actions on the public.

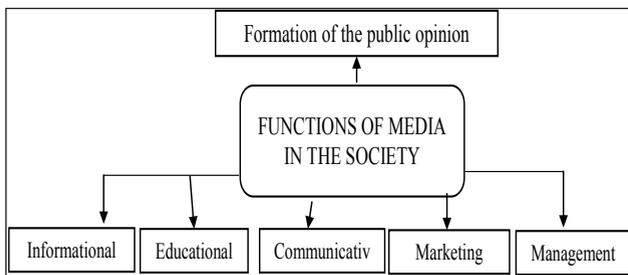


Source: It has been compiled based on: Bohush (2021)

Fig. 1: The process of the public opinion formation and the place of the media in it

Against this background, the media are a link in the interaction between public authorities and the public, conducting the transfer of information, on the basis of which the public opinion is formed, which actually proves that the formation of public opinion is a function of the media in the society (Fig. 2) and significantly depends on the level of the society development.

In highly developed countries, state authorities are obliged to conduct public discussions on issues of social and political life, which indicates that the public opinion is taken into account in their activities and that they observe the basic principles of democratic development of the country. It should be noted that ensuring democracy is one of the priority areas of state development and is related to the effectiveness of the functioning of political institutions and public freedom.



Source: Author's development

Fig. 2: The principal functions of the media in society

At the international level, the state of democracy in countries is measured based on the calculation of the democracy index, which is grounded on sixty indicators assessing the level of civil liberties, the electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of state administration, political participation and political culture. In order to identify the level of ensuring democracy in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, we will conduct the study of the value of the democracy index in these countries in the period of 2017–2021 (Fig. 3).



Source: It has been compiled based on: Democracy Index, 2017–2021

Fig. 3: Dynamics of the democracy index in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 2017–2021

The obtained results give grounds for asserting that the Czech Republic (DI: 7,62–7,74) and Slovakia

(DI: 7,50–7,54) occupy the leading positions in the analysed group of countries according to the democracy index; however, Azerbaijan (DI: 2,65–2,75) and Belarus (DI: 2,41–3,13) take the last places. At the same time, it should be noted the sharp decrease in the democracy index in Belarus in 2019–2021 by 23% is revealed compared to 2018, which indicates the strengthening of the authoritarian regime and significant violations of democracy, in particular as follows: the prevention of candidates from participating in the presidential elections from the opposition, their arrests, the ban on conducting pre-election sociological surveys and establishing pre-election ratings. Under such circumstances, a situation of complete levelling of public opinion in this country is observed. At the same time, a similar situation is revealed in Azerbaijan, where the democracy index is the lowest.

The in-depth studies of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe according to the democracy index in 2017–2021 should be carried out using the technology of cluster analysis based on the k-means method, as well as it is necessary to identify common features among the countries of the analysed group in order to ensure the implementation of the democratic principles of the development of states. The results of clustering (Table 1) have made it possible to distinguish three groups of countries based on common features of democracy.

The first group includes Slovakia and the Czech Republic, which are characterized by relatively high indicators of the democracy index, which is connected with their membership in the European Union and strict requirements for compliance with the democratic principles of the state development.

In 2018, 2020 and 2021, the first cluster also included Poland and Hungary, which are able to ensure the implementation of the basic principles of democracy, but have a number of unresolved destabilizing factors that position them as countries with imperfect democracy

In such countries, standards for the formation and implementation of the public opinion have been approved, a high level of media independence is observed, however, it is not possible to achieve the desired result to the full extent.

The second group includes Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, in which the so-called

Table 1: Grouping of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe according to the democracy index in 2017–2021

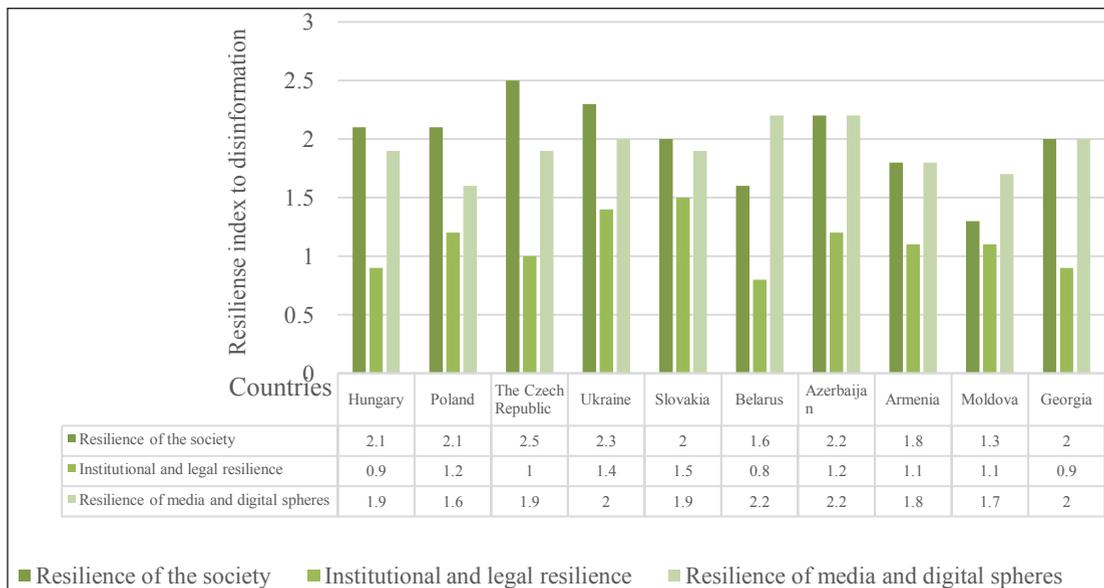
2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
Country	Cluster number								
Slovakia	1	Poland	1	Slovakia	1	Poland	1	Poland	1
The Czech Republic		Slovakia		The Czech Republic		Slovakia		Slovakia	
Georgia	2	Hungary	2	Armenia	2	Hungary	2	Hungary	2
Moldova		The Czech Republic		Georgia		The Czech Republic		The Czech Republic	
Poland		Armenia		Moldova		Armenia		Armenia	
Hungary		Georgia		Poland		Georgia		Georgia	
Ukraine	3	Moldova	3	Hungary	3	Moldova	3	Moldova	3
Azerbaijan		Ukraine		Ukraine		Ukraine			
Belarus		Azerbaijan		Azerbaijan		Azerbaijan			
Armenia		Belarus		Belarus		Belarus		Belarus	

“hybrid democracy”, that is, democracy with authoritarianism, has been approved. Such situation in relation to these countries is caused by their long-term transformational restructuring and transition to a market economy.

The third group consists stably of Azerbaijan and Belarus, in which the lowest level of democracy has been recorded, indicating the presence of significant problems in ensuring public freedoms, transparency and honesty of the electoral process and political pluralism, functioning of state authorities, political participation and political culture, and public opinion in most cases are not taken into account.

Moreover, the process of forming public opinion in these countries is influenced by the media, which promote information in the interests of pro-government forces and partially distort it. As a result, the society obtains information that has undergone significant deformations, and the public opinion is formed on its basis.

The study of the tendencies of resilience to disinformation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 2021 (Fig. 4) gives reasons to claim that the lowest values for the level of public resilience to disinformation were recorded in Belarus and Moldova.



Source: It has been compiled based on: Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021

Fig. 4: Dynamics of the resilience index to disinformation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 2021

Table 2: Grouping of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe according to the resilience index to disinformation in 2021

Disinformation Resilience Index					
Resilience of media and digital spheres		Resilience of the society		Institutional and legal resilience	
Country	Cluster number	Country	Cluster number	Country	Cluster number
Belarus	1	The Czech Republic	1	Slovakia	1
Azerbaijan		Ukraine		Ukraine	
Ukraine	2	Azerbaijan	2	Poland	2
Georgia		Hungary		Azerbaijan	
Hungary		Poland		Armenia	
The Czech Republic		Slovakia		Moldova	
Slovakia		Georgia		The Czech Republic	
Armenia	3	Armenia	3	Hungary	3
Moldova		Belarus		Georgia	
Poland		Moldova		Belarus	

Source: It has been compiled based on: *Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021*.

It is beyond argument that the functioning of the information space has a significant impact on the formation of public opinion, on its changes and implementation. The existence of significant problems of ensuring resilience to disinformation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe actualizes the problems of providing countries with effective mechanisms for countering threats and challenges of managing information flows and their perception by the public. Strengthening the resilience to disinformation in this context takes on special importance, for as much as the objectivity of the public opinion depends on it.

We propose to conduct the study of the state and trends of resilience to disinformation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 2021 using a cluster analysis based on the k-means method, which will help to divide the countries of the analysed group into clusters and identify common signs of resilience to disinformation.

The obtained results of the grouping of Central and Eastern European countries according to the resilience index to disinformation in 2021 (Table 2) give grounds for asserting that it is impossible to identify clear trends among the countries. While, according to one sub-index, the countries occupy higher positions, then, according to another one, they lose them significantly.

The analysis of the resilience of the media and the digital sphere to disinformation has recorded the highest values in such countries as Belarus and Azerbaijan, in which the level of democracy is the lowest, indicating the political bias of the media of these countries and their displaying information in the interests of the political forces in power. The second group consists of Ukraine, Georgia, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, in which the medium level values of the resilience index to disinformation under the sub-index “resilience of the media and the digital sphere” has been revealed; the third group includes Armenia, Moldova and Poland, which provide the lowest level of protection against disinformation.

Studies of the society’s resilience to disinformation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe confirm significantly different positions of countries. In particular, the highest rates were recorded in the Czech Republic, Ukraine and Azerbaijan, the medium ones – in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Georgia and Armenia, and the lowest ones – in Belarus and Moldova.

In terms of institutional and legal resilience to disinformation, the highest level is ensured in Slovakia and Ukraine, medium values are recorded in Poland, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Moldova,

and the lowest values are revealed in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Georgia and Belarus.

Therefore, based on the calculations conducted, it is possible to assess the level of the public opinion formation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the influence of the media on it. It has been established that the media play a significant role in the formation of public opinion in all countries under consideration. As a result of the research, it has been revealed that in countries with higher values of the democracy index, higher indicators of resilience to disinformation are observed, and the formation of public opinion takes place on the basis of objective, complete and reliable information about the activities of public authorities, political structures and public organizations.

DISCUSSION

The results of the conducted studies of the theoretical principles and applied recommendations regarding the axiological fundamental pillars of the public opinion formation in the media give grounds for asserting that in modern conditions, it is the media that have a significant impact on the public and the identification of its public standpoint. The analysis of the process of the public opinion formation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe makes it possible to identify the main factors of influence on the formation of public opinion, among which it is necessary to note the level of the democracy development and the level of resilience to disinformation.

It has been established that countries with the highest level of democracy provide higher indicators of the implementation of public freedoms, the electoral process and pluralism, the effective functioning of public administration, political participation and political culture than countries of the transitive type that have not completed the processes of transformational restructuring yet and are still developing.

The results of the in-depth research have made it possible to identify three groups of countries among Central and Eastern European states, which are characterized by common features of the public opinion formation. They are as follows:

Group 1: Countries with a relatively high level of democracy and resilience to disinformation (Poland,

Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic), which are able to ensure the implementation of civil liberties, provide for active public participation in decision-making by state authorities and consideration of public opinion in the activities of public authorities, and the media cover information in compliance with censorship and taking into account the interests of all subjects.

Group 2: Countries with the medium level of democracy and resilience to disinformation (Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), in which the democratic principles of forming the public opinion are developing, however, significant deformations are recorded regarding the influence of the media on the society and the coverage of information that does not always correspond to reality in order to manipulate the consciousness of citizens. This group of countries has not completed the process of transformational restructuring yet; consequently, this slows down the process of transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic political culture and public freedom, as a result, the formation of public opinion is significantly influenced by the media.

Group 3: Countries with a low level of democracy and resilience to disinformation (Azerbaijan, Belarus), where an authoritarian regime is established; in these countries, significant governmental influence on electoral processes is observed, and the formation of the public opinion depends on the aspirations and infusions of the ruling political structures.

Taking into account the above-mentioned, it can be argued that in all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe being analysed in the course of the research, there are problems with the formation of public opinion in the media, which requires the development and implementation of balanced measures in order to ensure democratic principles of public interaction with state authorities and the media.

CONCLUSION

The conducted studies of the theoretical principles and applied recommendations on the axiological fundamental pillars of the public opinion formation in the media provide an opportunity to assert that the public opinion is formed taking into account the social, political, cultural and spiritual values of the society and depends on the level of democratic

development of the country and the ability of the state to ensure resilience to disinformation. It has been established that in countries characterized by a higher level of development and belonging to the European Union, the formation of public opinion in the media takes place in compliance with democratic standards, and the information that is the basis for the opinion formation is more complete, reliable and objective than in developing countries. A particularly critical situation in the formation of public opinion has been identified in Azerbaijan and Belarus, where an authoritarian regime has been established and the principles of democracy are not observed, and the media are biased by the ruling political forces. Taking into consideration the fact that the public opinion in the modern society is one of the indicators of the democracy development, then the issue of its formation with the avoidance of outside interference by both representatives of public authorities and the media is actualized.

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