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## **Civic Education for Democracy During Crisis: Measuring State Media Engagement**

### **Abstract**

Informed by a research problem of explaining the relationships between the specificity of civic education and public support for authoritarian politicians, this paper aims to propose and test an analytical tool for measuring media engagement in civic education. It contributes methodologically to studies on civic education by delivering a tool that applies to identify and trace state media's efforts to shape either democratic or autocratic citizenship models. Thereby, it allows monitoring current challenges to civic education for democracy in individual countries. The test contributes empirically to the studies on state-orchestrated civic education by revealing civic education for autocracy in pandemic-driven Poland. It enriches the knowledge of the use of Polish state media by the anti-democratic ruling actors to maintain the status quo.

**Keywords:** *neo-militant democracy, autocracy, civic knowledge, contentious politics*

### **Introduction**

After the financial crisis of 2008, researchers seek to explain why European Union (EU) citizens are willing to support and vote for anti-democratic candidates (Kreuder-Sonnen, 2018). First and foremost, the governance of democratic actors ended with accusations of causing crisis and social impoverishment. Many left public offices in an atmosphere of scandals from leaked tapes that exposed their cynicism. Nevertheless, other democrats failed to replace those democrats. What

appealed to ordinary people were anti-democratic promises to improve the quality of life of societies that have suffered materially from austerity policies introduced to lift national economies out of the crisis (Bochsler & Juon, 2020). At the same time, European civil societies turned out to be willing to give up at least some of their democratic rights and freedoms in favour of anti-democratic populists who skilfully channelled their emotions by addressing material needs (Rezmer-Plotka, 2020). Along with a decrease in the sovereignty of political nations and an increase in the power competencies of anti-democratic actors, the progressive autocratisation of European political systems unfolds. Additionally, the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has reinforced these trends (Rak & Bäcker, 2022). Under the guise of crisis management and public health protection, anti-democratic governments introduced unlawful and often unconstitutional restrictions on democratic freedoms and increased the scope of their power competencies. If people had opposed autocratisation, the pandemic could have become a turning point.

These observations motivate the research problem of why European societies are reluctant to withdraw their support for anti-democratic actors despite unfulfilled political promises. For years, researchers have been pointing to the weakening of civic competencies due to neglected and careless civic education, but no efficient measures have been taken (Galston, 2004; Lührmann, 2021). The existing civic competencies and knowledge were insufficient to defend democracy against anti-democratic actors manifesting support for democratic institutions and values and referring to them to claim the right to rule (Tannenberget al., 2021). At the same time, contemporary educators face the challenge of modernising civic education (Petrova & Pospieszna, 2021). The question is how to shape new civic education in the post-pandemic world, educate citizens who protect democracy, do not support its enemies, and drive democratisation.

Informed by a research problem of accounting for the relationships between the specificity of civic education and maintaining, regaining, or increasing public support for authoritarian politicians, this paper aims to propose and test an analytical tool for measuring media engagement in civic education. It contributes methodologically to studies on civic education by delivering a device that applies to identify and trace state media's efforts to shape either democratic or autocratic citizenship models. Thereby, it allows monitoring current challenges to civic education for democracy in individual countries. The test contributes empirically to the studies on state-orchestrated civic education (Dimitrov, 2011) by revealing civic education for autocracy in pandemic-driven Poland (Rezmer-Plotka, 2021). It enriches the knowledge of the use of Polish state media by the anti-democratic ruling actors to maintain the status quo.

On the one hand, this article draws researchers' attention to civic education as the reason for uncritically accepting the ongoing autocratisation. As such, it seeks to formulate recommendations on adjusting civic education to constrain autocratisation. On the other hand, the article focuses on counter-narratives that mislead people and reveal weaknesses in their civic competencies and knowledge. It results from the assumption that counter-narratives' creators are undemocratic actors who use civic education for autocracy. Undemocratic actors must ensure themselves social support and legitimacy, which are the guarantors of the stability of autocracy (Gerschewski, 2013). Like democratic actors, they use the media they control for this purpose (Tannenberget al., 2021). Citizens acquire civic competencies and knowledge of democracy or autocracy primarily through education in schools, parents, and the general political culture (Doğanay, 2012). Whereas most studies focus on these significant educators, this article draws scholarly attention to media engagement in civic education. In other words, the paper draws on the premise that there is a need to understand what kind of citizen is formed by undemocratic actors and what civic knowledge they instil to modernise the new civic education for democracy.

The remainder of the article consists of five parts. The first one modifies William A. Galston's (2004) model of civic education to build an original analytical tool for measuring the engagement of media in civic education. It is the dyad of antinomic ideal types of civic education for democracy and autocracy. The second part presents methodological assumptions for the empirical test of the analytical tool. It establishes a research field, questions, methods, and a corpus of sources. Discussing research results, the third part uncovers the applicability of the analytical tool. It locates the engagement of Polish state media in shaping citizenship between the ideal types of civic education for democracy and autocracy. Embedded in research findings, the discussion introduced in the fourth part puts forward recommendations for major developments in Poland's civic education. The paper concludes with avenues for future research.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The excellence of citizens depends on the political regime within which they function. Accordingly, the type of political system embraces peculiar definitions of citizenship and criteria for a good citizen (Fratczak-Rudnicka & Torney-Purta, 2003). While civic competencies needed in a democracy are "democratic citizenship", civic competencies required in autocracy are "autocratic citizenship". By assuming that those competencies are taught through the transfer of civic knowledge typical of

the political regime, the dyad of the antinomic ideal types includes civic education for democracy and autocracy. This theoretical tool is specific in treating media as an educator imparting information and civic knowledge to citizens. Accordingly, it applies to studying how the media engage in civic education.

The tool is theoretically embedded in Galston's model of civic education (2004). Culturally rooted in the US context, Galston treats civic education as a solely democratic product and means, whereas anti-democratic actors use it even if others call it propaganda. In addition, the model can be inferred from Galston's thorough literature review, examples, and conclusions on the quality of civic knowledge rather than formulated. Finally, the model's components are not operationalised. Therefore, the modification of Galston's model includes defining the characteristics of civic knowledge for democracy based on his explanation of why civic knowledge (CK) matters and thus building the ideal type of civic education for democracy; formulating the antinomic ideal type of civic knowledge for autocracy; and operationalising the essential features of both types to contribute to concept-coding necessary for thematic analysis.

The criteria for identifying civic education for democracy through the essential features of democratic civic knowledge (DCK) it transfers are as follows:

- (1DCK) promoting support for democratic values (codes: respect for the rule of law, democratic decision-making, equality before the law, freedom of speech, association, and organisation into political parties, and social justice),
- (2DCK) promoting political participation (codes: when people are encouraged to develop and manifest their political views through voting in elections, supporting political campaigns, holding, and participating in protests),
- (3DCK) helping citizens learn about civic affairs (codes: information offers factual knowledge and avoids instilling opinions),
- (4DCK) assisting citizens to reduce mistrust and fear of public life (codes: people are encouraged to engage in public life with trust),
- (5DCK) preventing political divisions based on hostility (codes: society is shown as a group of equals living in peace and no one is discriminated against) (Galston, 2004).

The antinomic ideal types of these criteria constitute the ideal type of autocratic civic knowledge (ACK) peculiar to civic education for autocracy. They include:

- (1ACK) devaluating democratic values (codes: disrespect for the rule of law, democratic decision-making, equality before the law, freedom of speech, association, and organisation into political parties, and social justice),

- (2ACK) discouraging political participation (codes: people are prevented from developing and manifesting their political views through voting in elections, supporting political campaigns, holding, and participating in protests),
- (3ACK) convincing citizens of the rightness of the ruling's policy (codes: the information favours the ruling and detracts from the opposition to prove the ruling's policy is right),
- (4ACK) spreading mistrust and fear of public life (codes: people are warned against imagined enemies and encouraged to report on other citizens),
- (5ACK) forging political divisions based on hostility (codes: society is divided into "us" supporting the ruling and "them", "they" put "us" in jeopardy).

## **Research Methodology**

Where does the model of civic education developed by Polish state media during the Covid-19 pandemic lie on a continuum of antinomic ideal types of civic education for democracy and autocracy? The study was theory-grounded in the presented theoretical framework to address this research question and make sense of state media engagement in civic education. It drew on a qualitative document analysis of news released by TVP Info from the declaration of the pandemic until the lifting of the state of the epidemic in Poland, from March 12, 2020, to May 16, 2022. To avoid analysing secondary issues and limit the number of news items for analysis, only those materials that contained the search phrases election or/and protest or/and assembly were included in the source corpus. They dealt with the most critical issues for the quality of the Polish political system during the pandemic.

The media outlet selection results from the quest to delve analytically into state-orchestrated and commonly available narratives used in civic education. TVP Info is a Polish free-to-air television news channel controlled and managed by state broadcaster TVP. It has been a partisan institution subordinate to the ruling party, Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS*), since the 2015 parliamentary election. Then, PiS passed a media act providing the government with direct control over public broadcasting. According to the Institute for Media Monitoring, TVP Info fulfilled the unique role of the most opinion-forming state media during the Coronavirus crisis. At the same time, it worked as a powerful propaganda tool (Rak, 2021).

The document analysis combined content and thematic analysis of news. The content analysis started with distinguishing text fragments from the source corpus that included direct references to the essential features of CK. Next up, data was organised into clusters related to individual CK characteristics included in the research question: DCK and ACK characteristics. The theoretical thematic analysis was employed to identify themes fundamental to civic education for democracy and autocracy. It began with concept-driven coding of news content founded on identifying the properties of DCK and ACK. Data analysis was enhanced by a constant comparative method based on an inductive approach. The latter was essential to recognise autocratic or democratic theoretical qualities in the data (1-5DCK/ACK). A back-and-forth interplay with the data facilitated the investigation of the codes and concepts. The codes served researchers to organise ideas and describe clustering concepts (Bowen, 2009) necessary to establish consistent themes and patterns across CK on its five definitional levels.

## **Research Results**

### **1CK**

Devaluating democratic values took place throughout the research caesura. It was mainly by treating all protest participants opposing de-democratisation as criminals breaking the law and madmen putting Poles' health and lives at risk. The delegitimised group included politicians linked to the opposition and the incumbent president's opponents in the presidential elections.

TVP Info also devaluated the principle of equality before the law when presenting protests. While public gatherings held by the pro-democratic Committee for the Defense of Democracy or Citizens of the Republic of Poland were considered illegal, the mass celebration of the Smolensk anniversary was a moral duty. The ruling camp and its supporters could participate in public meetings and exercise freedom of public assembly.

The solutions implemented from PiS's electoral victory regarding the judiciary became a clear example of the government's disrespect for the rule of law. It resulted in the EU's threat to make the flow of money dependent on the rule of law in the state. Contrary to the facts, journalists justified autocratisation with the need to strengthen the sovereignty of the political nation rather than objectively presenting what democratic freedoms were violated. Additionally, democratic decision-making was infringed by introducing legal solutions despite consider-

able social resistance. TVP Info sought social support for the prerogative state characteristic of autocracy.

Civic knowledge of democratic values locates TVP Info on the continuum between 1ACK and 1DCK, very close to the former, since devaluing democratic values took an extreme form. Action against democratic values was shown as consistent with the national interest of Poles. As such, it was oriented towards strengthening support for the government's efforts contrary to these values. The latter has even become the subject of interest of the EU based on democratic values.

## **2CK**

TVP Info discouraged political participation in protests against democratic backsliding in Poland and LGBT, health care workers, entrepreneurs, and women's strikes. The media outlet downplayed the importance of anti-government mobilisation and promoted the Prime Minister's statement that contentious performance neither served to work out an agreement nor aimed at dialogue. In the case of protests related to the media law, at the end of 2021, information appeared indicating a meagre turnout of participants opposing the restriction of media freedom. Journalists showed that the effort to participate in the protests was pointless because only a few people from all over the country supported the anti-government protests.

Protests became the subject of news intended to prevent people from developing and manifesting political views that were contrary to those promoted by the ruling camp and supporting political campaigns of the incumbent president's counter-candidates. These groups were marginalised and considered a threat to the public order and values shared by Poles. The right to peaceful assembly became a tool for fighting people with different political views. At the same time, the opposition protests in Belarus against the oppressive government were repeatedly mentioned. Unlike news about protests in Poland, this news was informative and even aimed at the 1DCK criterion promoting support for democratic values. However, the way of approaching protests in Poland locates TVP Info on a continuum between 2ACK and 2DCK, very close to the former. This extreme type resulted from forcing submission and avoiding promoting free political participation.

## **3CK**

Instead of providing factual knowledge, journalists focused on instilling opinions favouring the rulers. Simultaneously, they detracted from the opposition to

emphasise that there was no alternative to the ruling's policy. The most common tool was the ridiculing of individual politicians, e.g., interviewing people with mental disorders participating in protests and presenting them as representatives of opponents of the government. A comparatively widespread practice was to highlight internal conflicts among protest movement leaders and in the opposition when the polls indicated an increase in support for the incumbent president's counter-candidate Szymon Hołownia and his Poland 2050. As a result, viewers were not provided with an objective overview of all candidates' political offers.

In lieu of helping citizens learn about civic affairs, journalists invited pro-government experts, other journalists from state media, and politicians from the ruling camp as authorities to justify the government's decisions, confirm that crisis management was efficient, and legitimise the commonly challenged decision to hold the presidential elections during the pandemic peak, when the incumbent president had the largest chance to win. At the same time, they strived to convince the audience of the correctness of the government's decisions by referring to the President of PiS as a "voice of reason", emphasising that with society discipline, the epidemic is under control.

This aspect of civic knowledge situates between 3ACK and 3DCK because, on the one hand, TVP Info news played an informative role and provided a substantive explanation of the results obtained in the survey. On the other hand, the outlet became a tool for discrediting and diminishing the role of the opposition, gaining significant social support, and threatening the rulers. Moreover, journalists avoided summarising Poland's development or the following governments' achievements but aimed to boost the historical role of the incumbent rulers. Omitting any discussion, they pointed to the president as the best strategist of Polish politics after the political transformation in Poland or the best prime minister of the Third Polish Republic.

#### **4CK**

TVP Info warned Poles against the following imagined enemies: the opposition, Tomasz Grodzki, Marshal of the Senate of the Republic of Poland coming from the opposition, civic organisations opposing democratic backsliding, and anti-government protest participants. Importantly, they all belonged to the Polish political structure, which gave rise to a sense of fear and the need to be constantly alert in the face of a ubiquitous internal danger. The aim was to induce escapist attitudes, trigger withdrawal from public life, and encourage the political nation to cede some of its sovereignty to deal with public enemies to the rulers. It was so much



a threat to the democratic legal order that it could lead to consent to the use of the protest policing model called escalated force and other repressions characteristic of autocratic regimes.

During women's protests against the tightening of the abortion law, one could also notice the disclosure of criterion 4ACK, e.g., in words "Women's Strike scares: We will gain power in Poland", "pro-abortion militias escalate violence" or quoting words taken out of context with a negative meaning. Striking women were considered a threat to the current social order due to being in favour of legalising crimes such as killing conceived but unwanted children and sick children after birth. Furthermore, they were blamed for endangering the health and safety of Poles. Journalists illustrated those claims with examples of scuffles, arrests, vulgar slogans (including desecration of Carols, calls for setting fire to churches), aggressive behaviour (including attacking police officers), and devastation of public property.

During anti-government protests, TVP Info aimed to spread mistrust and fear of their participants, considered public enemies. Journalists gave the floor to police officers and encouraged Poles to report to the police all apparent violations of the public order, rules of the sanitary regime, and the law introduced unconstitutionally. Instead of discussing the applicable legal order and showing the objective validity of specific legal solutions, journalists called for denunciations and conveyed that anyone's behaviour could be denounced. The cases of discouraging Poles from engaging in public life with trust based on fear of imagined enemies locate the state broadcaster's efforts between 4ACK and 4DCK very close to the former.

## **5CK**

Forging political divisions based on hostility increased closer to the elections and in the case of protests. The central axis of the division was between the government and its supporters and the political opposition and the movements supporting them. Journalists discriminated against the opposition, women opposing tightening of abortion law, entrepreneurs opposing government anti-crisis shields, LGBT community, and health services challenging government crisis management. They were blamed for exposing citizens to political destabilisation while the government was a responsible saviour ensuring order and stability. The government also became the guardian of Polish morals, values, and traditions infringed by protestors. Accordingly, TVP Info's task was to strengthen social divisions and generate social legitimacy for the government's policies as an apt response to the threat of political destabilisation and violations of social order.

Attempts to create an image of national unity were illusory. TVP Info promoted the image of a community that supports the government with one voice and respects all restrictions, even those introduced unconstitutionally. However, the practices of excluding from the community of Poles those who did not obey were dominant, especially by expressing their opposition in public during protests. On the continuum between 5ACK and 5DCK, civic knowledge distributed by TVP Info is very close to the former because the existing divisions were regularly deepened and multiplied.

## **Discussion**

The case study revealed an urgent need for learning media literacy to support civic education for democracy in Poland. However, this empirical observation may be generalised since it applies to all social and political structures that face democratic backsliding. In such structures, media literacy is important to detect news manipulation, which makes it worth including in democratic civic education in schools. Promoting awareness of potential media influence and resulting political consequences is essential. Mindless consumption of autocratic civic knowledge can strengthen citizens' subordination, escape from political life, and thus the emergence of parochial or subject political cultures. School curricula should include practical classes on differentiating messages peculiar to political regimes and encourage critical thinking, formulating and expressing informed opinions, and using reliable information sources devoid of emotional and political charge. Citizens should learn to distinguish reliable information from opinion and commentary and spot political biases. Besides, in the face of increased instillation of authoritarian civic knowledge, fact-checking, comparing, and verifying the diverse sources of information and the credibility of institutions distributing information become desired democratic civic competencies.

Possible barriers and obstacles that may arise while implementing changes in curricula are primarily the resistance of the political environment and part of the teaching staff. Mainly, convincing them to limit their political influence and change how they think about teaching and performing their social roles poses serious challenges. Political preferences should not obscure understanding of the importance of democratic civic education for transformations in the political system. It is worth focusing on workshops based on the joint and independent reading of various media materials. Interactive teaching, the use of modern technological solutions, and training for the teaching staff are necessary so that they understand

not only the changing student but also the political system and its actors who have their own particularistic interests and use advanced public engagement strategies.

Finally, how content is conveyed to young people, who are now increasingly experiencing difficulties in concentrating attention, acquiring knowledge, and are focused on receiving fast, concise, catchy information and images, is also essential. In this way, properly developing a curriculum adapted to contemporary needs is challenging. It can be useful to conduct engaging projects that allow students to develop creativity and learn about the mechanisms of media content production. Getting to know the mechanism of creating politically biased news aimed at generating public, democratic or authoritarian engagement allows students to understand the perspective of the message sender. Thus, it sensitises to the dangers of receiving this type of message in the daily role.

## **Conclusions**

The study confirmed that the analytical tool applies to identify the elements of democratic and autocratic civic knowledge. Nevertheless, state media engagement in civic education is country-specific. It alters over time, depending on the degree of dependence, the legitimacy needs, and the interests of rulers and media outlets' owners.

It is worth monitoring the state discourse focused on the transfer of civic knowledge on an ongoing basis to update civic education for democracy and comprehend the goals of state actors. It is a time-consuming task requiring significant analytical efforts related to media content analysis but necessary for understanding the mechanisms shaping social and political structures. The main focus should be on the most opinion-forming media with the most significant share in mass media-mediated civic education. It is advisable to conduct country case studies of researchers who understand specific cultural codes.

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