ETHNONATIONAL AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AS A MEDIATOR OF PRO-

NATIONAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL MISPERCEPTION IN MONTENEGRO

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Ana Nenezić

Dr. Benjamin R. Warner, Thesis Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis

entitled

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presented by Ana Nenezić

a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

BENJAMIN R. WARNER

MITCHELL S. MCKINNEY

BRETT JOHNSON

J. BRIAN HOUSTON

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LISTS OF FIGURES AND TABLES

List of Figures

List of Tables

ABSTRACT

Recognizing the potential threat of political misperception to democracy and democracy processes, scholars have extensively studied the causes and effects of this phenomenon. It is well documented that partisan and social media play a role in the spreading of political misperceptions in part through their contribution to affective polarization. However, most previous research on political misperceptions has focused on divisions along partisan lines and partisanship as group identity (Iyengar et al., 2019). The extent to which affective polarization is associated with hostility directed at the opposition, partisans could be more inclined to accept opponents' unsupported or poorly reasoned criticisms.

Other identities such as nationality, ethnicity, and religion have not received much scholarly attention in the context of political misperceptions and partisan media. Furthermore, scholars have tended to focus on western democracies, and the majority of scientific conclusions are based on the two-party system, while fewer studies focus on the complex multiparty systems of underdeveloped countries, with turbulent and complex political relationships underlined with layers of other divisions are deficit.

Having that in mind, this thesis will focus on a historically and strategically important yet unconsolidated democratic country in South-East Europe – Montenegro, with a multiparty system and internal divisions along ethnonational lines. Montenegro is a NATO member county, on a path to become the next member state of the European Union with a turbulent and complex relationship with Russia. Thus, it is an important and interesting case study.

vi

Furthermore, to understand the underlying mechanisms linking media exposure and increased dissemination of political misperceptions, it is important to understand the role of group identity salience. Garrett et al. (2019) argues that the more individuals rely on partisan outlets, the greater their dislike of the out-group vis-a-vis the in-group, which unconsciously triggers affective reactions associated with the subject of a false claim. Thus, Garrett et al. (2019) find that affective polarization is an important mediator linking partisan media exposure and misperceptions.

This thesis argues that the pro-national media will be associated with a higher level of ethnonational affective polarization and that pro-national and social media will increase political misperceptions. Additionally, I argue that pro-national media will have an indirect effect on misperceptions through affective polarization such that pro-national media will increase affective polarization and subsequently increase misperceptions. These hypotheses were tested with a large and nationally representative probability sample of the population of Montenegro conducted in consultation with the author. Results confirmed the above expectations. However, for social media contributing to a higher level of political misperception, results were reversed than expected, social media was actually associated with fewer political misperceptions.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A disrupted informational environment poses a challenge to democracy, where citizens are expected to make decisions based on accurate information (Carpini & Keeter, 1997). Hameleers et al. (2020) argue that this kind of informational environment undermines the function of the media to inform citizens by disseminating truthful information. The mass media are expected to help citizens access relevant information to increase their political knowledge. Precondition for well-informed citizens is exposure to diverse and opposite standpoints (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010, p.2) who are open and tolerant of the ideas of others, even the ones they disagree with, and can make informed decisions based on factual information. Contrary, exposure to only like-minded opinions can contribute to polarization toward the extremes (Warner, 2010). The spread of disinformation and misinformation can have consequences, such as undermining democracies, beliefs in democratic institutions and processes, polarizing debates, spreading distrust and confusion, and sharpening existing societal divisions. However, the systematic spreading of political misperceptions can cause even more significant harm to democracy and democratic processes by fostering political polarization based on inaccurate beliefs (Garrett et al., 2019).

Scholars debate whether misperceptions are the product of information deficiency or acquiring false and inaccurate information. Thus, there is an important distinction between being uninformed and misinformed. In the first instance, people hold false beliefs mostly because they lack factual and accurate information, while misinformed people are ignorant and confidently hold false beliefs based on inaccurate information (Kuklinski et al., 2000). On the other hand,

misinformed people believe they hold facts, do not believe they are uninformed or ignorant of existing evidence contradicting their beliefs (Mair et al.,2019), and have "weak incentives to hold accurate beliefs and strong directional motivations to endorse beliefs that are consistent with a group identity" (Nyhan, 2020, p.1).

To explain why people believe inaccurate information even when there is evidence available contradicting the information they believe, scholars have investigated the causes and effects of political misperception and offered several external and internal sources contributing to the people's false beliefs. Much scholarly attention has focused on partisan media as an external source of misperceptions (Sunstein, 2009; Nyhan, 2020).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) can be a useful theoretical framework linking the role of group identity salience in understanding false beliefs. Political decisions are strongly influenced by group identities such as partisanship, ideology, nationality, and ethnicity. Garret et al. (2019) explains that promoting animosity between the ingroup and outgroup is how media shape beliefs and conclude that the results of their study confirmed that "partisan media do not have to advance falsehoods explicitly to promote their endorsement. Encouraging hostility toward political opponents has the same effect while allowing outlets to avoid the reputational harms of sharing inaccurate information" (Garret et al., 2019, 506).

Therefore, this thesis aims to expand knowledge on the role of pro-national media in fostering inaccurate political beliefs, particularly the ones that members of certain ethnonational groups are likely to be predisposed to believe. Most existing scholarship on this question has focused on western democracies, and the majority of scientific conclusions are based on the two-

9

party system in context of divisions along party lines. There is a deficit of research focused on complex multiparty systems of underdeveloped countries with turbulent and complex political relationships, underlined with layers of other divisions. Therefore, this thesis has significance in terms of theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretically, it showcases the application of communication theories in a country with a different media ecosystem, political dynamics, and societal complexity from a consolidated Western democratic country. It is important to study the role of fragmented media in political misperception beliefs in a global context because refocusing from fully developed democracies to anocracies-semi-democratic societies and underdeveloped transitional democracies-hybrid regimes, with emphasis on multiparty systems, can provide a broader understanding of this phenomena. Specifically, such a focus will broaden scientific discussions of polarization from the sole context of political parties and divisions along party lines to other possible social divisions grounded in ideology, nationality, ethnicity, religion, etc. This is especially important because most Eastern and South European countries and almost all Central Asia countries are classified as unconsolidated democracies (Freedom House, 2020), with high political polarization.

Despite the preponderance of these democracies, and despite their geostrategic importance in global affairs, there is a lack of political communication research focusing on these types of governments. Iyenger et al. (2019) invited future research to focus on building bridges between American and comparative studies by concentrating on the literature on

ethnicity and distributive politics, which could provide important theoretical and empirical insights for the study of affective polarization.

Having that in mind, this study will contribute to the theoretical understanding of political misperceptions by focusing on a historically and strategically important unconsolidated democratic country in South-East Europe – Montenegro.

As for the practical implications, the results of this thesis add to the understanding of the role of national group identity salience as a mechanism linking exposure to pro-national partisan media and dissemination of political ingroup misperceptions. Particularly, this thesis will provide empirical evidence that could be useful in understanding underlying processes contributing to the ethnonational affective polarization in Montenegro and other Balkan countries. These insights will be helpful for stakeholders developing policy proposals to decrease the spread of misperceptions through pro-national media fueling divisions along ethnonational lines.

To this end, the remainder of this chapter will provide an overview of Montenegro's political, social, and media contexts. The second chapter will review existing literature related to political misperception, affective polarization and media effects, and other relevant theoretical frameworks used for this thesis. The third chapter will outline the research methodology, including how a survey was conducted and how the conceptual variables were operationalized, and the measures included in the survey. The fourth chapter will present the results of the study, which will be discussed in the fifth and final chapter.

The Geopolitical Context of Montenegro

To understand the nature of political misperceptions in Montenegro, it is important to understand the geopolitical context in which these rumors circulate. Although one of the smallest countries in Europe, Montenegro has a very long and turbulent history.

Its strategically significant position makes this country more important than its size could suggest, with the presence and influence of the United States and the European Union on one side and Russia and China on the other. Situated in the Balkan area of Eastern Europe, Montenegro has been balancing the various powers' geopolitical interests for centuries. Because of Montenegrin's Orthodox Christian and Slavic heritage, Montenegro (like its Balkan neighbors) has had strong ties with Russia throughout history. Still, the county shifted its foreign course toward the Western liberal democracies, which is why Montenegro became a NATO member in 2017 and is in the process of becoming an EU member country. After becoming a member of the NATO alliance, Montenegro was bizarrely characterized as a strong and aggressive nation by President Trump during an interview with host Tucker Carlson broadcasted on Fox News, who suggested that the U.S. NATO security guarantee for Montenegro might drag the alliance into World War III. (Wagner, 2018).

Montenegro is an internationally recognized independent country that regained its independence by leaving the union with Serbia in 2006. However, referendum results deepened polarization along national lines when 55.5 % of citizens voted for independence and 44.5 % voted for staying in union with Serbia. Moreover, this division was further strengthened with

Montenegro's entry into NATO. The war in Ukraine represents the latest push towards deeper divisions along the national lines of Montenegrin society.

Even though Russia was among the first countries to recognize Montenegrin independence, after which socio-economic ties were strengthened, relations have abruptly changed after the decision of the government of Montenegro to join NATO. One of the explanations for this shift was the Montenegrin government's decision to decline the Russian request to install a naval base in Montenegro, and as it was later explained, "Lacking a reliable port in the Eastern Mediterranean, Russia's strategic capability in the region is limited" (Bajrovic et al., 2018, p.8). As it was later observed in Ukraine, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs interpreted NATO's invitation to Montenegro to join the alliance as openly provocative and directly affecting the interests of Russia, which is forcing them to react and protect their interest.

The United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (2018) also concluded that "Russia was strongly opposed to Montenegro's desire to join NATO, but it did not resort to the conventional military tactics used in Ukraine and Georgia, but instead relied on a hybrid mix of disinformation and threat of force to send the same message that integration with the West was unacceptable" (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2018, 115-21, p.78).

Furthermore, as they noted, a coup was organized to overthrow the government following the 2016 parliamentary election, "which was not a one-off event, but the culmination of a sustained propaganda and interference campaign to persuade the Montenegrin people to oppose NATO membership" (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2018, 115-21, p.78).

During and after this process, Russia's main strategic goal had been to "foster national division amongst the population and stop Montenegro from joining the NATO alliance" (Milosevich, 2020, p.2). However, since this attempt was unsuccessful, Russia continued weakening the Montenegrin state and institutions to discredit a NATO country by increasing influence over the pro-Serbian population in Montenegro and presenting Russia as a great guardian.

Montenegro is a deeply polarized society, divided along ethnic national lines, making it a fertile ground for Russian influence performed dominantly through disinformation campaigns. As Milosevich (2020) noted, these strategies echo similar disinformation campaigns conducted in other Eastern European counties striving to become NATO members, such as Ukraine and Georgia, among the others. In many ways, Montenegro is used as a testing hub for disinformation campaigns later implemented in bigger countries. From Russia's perspective, the Balkans and Montenegro are the front lines of a global power struggle between East and West, or more precisely, between Russia on one side and the United States and the European Union on the other.

There are two soft power mechanisms of Russia's malign influence in Montenegro: The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the media (both traditional and social). However, malign Russian influence in Montenegro is hard to measure because it is led through proxies such as the SOC, local media, and the Government of Serbia (Jovanovic, 2022). The main nationalist narrative spread by these proxies is that Montenegro must return to traditional values within the wider Orthodox community, under Russian motherhood as protector of the faith. In short, Russia

is needed to protect Orthodox Christian and Slavic heritage in the Balkan region against evil Western countries. In the light of the existing war against Ukraine, the European Parliament, in its Resolution on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union (including disinformation) warned that conflict could expand to Western Balkan countries (European Parliament, 2022). This report recognized Serbian Orthodox Church as a cause of "tensions between ethnic groups in the Western Balkans in order to inflame conflicts and divide communities." (European Parliament, 2022, article 123). As Milosevich (2020) detected, the root of strong Orthodox Church influence in Montenegro and other Balkan post-communist countries can be explained by observing religion as an instrument of reclaiming lost identity and regaining forgotten heritage and historical memory, all of which form a national identity.

The current global crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the importance of Montenegro's NATO membership, but it has also highlighted internal weaknesses reflecting political, national, and social fragmentation, which could be easily exploited for further divisions along national lines. Possible conflict, as a result, should not be ignored. In recent years Russia violated the sovereignty of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine and, in a way, was testing the West's response. However, targeting a NATO country could cause a stronger response and significant consequences. Russia's strategy to influence perceptions within Montenegro directly engages the concept of Montenegrin national identity. At stake in these narratives and representation of Montenegrins as a part of the Serbian nation is a negation of Montenegrin identity, culture, and history.

The ethnic composition of the Montenegrin population has been dramatically shifting throughout history. During these times, the national composition of the Montenegrin population changed radically, without significant demographic changes. In other words, people have changed their ethic national identification over time – the number of Serbian people has not increase, the number of people who identify as Serbs has. One of the explanations could be transitional political system changes from one party to a multiparty system. This process started in 1991 when the first multiparty elections were held in Montenegro (Goati, 1999).

ETHNIC	CENSUS 1991		CENSUS 2003		CENSUS 2011	
GROUP	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
MONTENEGRINS	380,647	61.9	267,669	43.2	278,865	45
SERBS	57,453	9.3	198,414	32	178,110	28.7
CROATS	6,244	1	6,811	1.1	6,021	0.9
YUGOSLAVS	26,159	4.3	1,860	0.3	1,154	0.2
MUSLIMS	89,614	14.6	24,625	4	20,537	3.3
BOSNIAKS			48,184	7.8	53,605	8.6
ALBANIANS	40,415	6.6	31,163	5	30,439	4.9
ROMANI	3,282	0.5	2,601	0.4	6,251	1
MACEDONIANS	1,072	0.2	819	0.1	900	0.1
OTHERS/UNDECLARED	10,149	1.7	379,992	6.1	445,244	7.2
TOTAL	615,035		620,453		620,029	

Figure 1: Ethnic population of Montenegro 1991–201 (Statistical Office of Montenegro)

The Communist Party won these elections with more than 60% of the total votes, later renamed itself the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and ruled the country for more than 30 consecutive years until 2020. During that period the ruling party shifted its position from advocating for strong ties and unity with Serbia to promoting and conducting a referendum for Montenegrin independence. Other similarities can be observed while comparing the first multiparty elections and today's political composition. As a alternative to the nationalist parties, United Reform Forces had the second-best result with 13% of the votes. In contrast, the third strongest party, the People's Party, represented an extreme Serb nationalist platform, and the Democratic Coalition, comprised of an Albanian and a Muslim party, won 10 percent of the vote (Pavlovic, 2003).

Similarly, the dominating political party today is the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) which frames its political program around promoting and protecting Montenegrin identity against the Democratic Front coalition (DF), aiming at protecting Serbian national identity in Montenegro while holding close political ties with Serbia and Russia, and Civic Movement United Reform Action (GP URA) balancing between two strong ethnonationalist political platforms. Other ethnicities in Montenegro are also gathered around pro-ethnonational parties.

As shown in Figure 1, Montenegro is a multinational country, without a dominant majority, including its constituents, Montenegrins, who constitute 45% of the total population in Montenegro. Three other major ethnic groups are Serbs (28.7%), Bosniaks (8.6%), and Albanians (4.9%). Additionally, 72 % percent of the population identifies as Orthodox, 19 % as Muslim, and 3 % as Roman Catholic.

There are two main nationalisms among the majority populations: Serbian and Montenegrin nationalism. This is reflected in all other areas of society. Most Montenegrin political parties are formed around these two national groups and primarily advocate for the interests of these ethnics group while derogating others. Media outlets supporting political parties also frame their reporting to support the beliefs of ethnic groups while mispresenting facts against the others.

In the light of the existing war against Ukraine, similarities of narratives disseminated in Ukraine and Montenegro can be observed. Russia and Serbia see Ukraine and Montenegro as creations of Western powers to undermine their influence and importance. As it was observed by DFC (2022), "The Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine have a similar appearance in the relevant information space of Montenegro and Ukraine. SOC operations aim to undermine pro-NATO and pro-Western initiatives, similar to the RPC-MP in Ukraine. Both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the RPC-MP deny the existence of the Montenegrin and Ukrainian identities, respectively, and seek to undermine the sovereignty of Montenegro and Ukraine" (Jovanovic, 2022, p. 12).

Another mechanism of spreading disinformation and misinformation in Montenegro is through media outlets and social media. The spread disinformation and misinformation can have a variety of consequences, such as undermining democracies, belief in democratic institutions and processes, polarizing debates, spreading mistrust and confusion, and sharpening existing divisions in society. In short, disinformation disrupts the flow of accurate information by

flooding a communication ecology with false messages (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). All these consequences can be observed in Montenegro.

In a society deeply polarized along national lines, this is especially concerning. Although there is no registered editorial office of any of the leading Russian media in Montenegro, there are several media outlets openly spreading narratives and disinformation. The Digital Forensic Center of Montenegro has analyzed the deceptive narratives that most often come from Sputnik or RT and which these portals have widely disseminated (Jovanovic, 2022).

Media context

The media scene in Montenegro is deeply polarized along ethnonational partisan lines. The Press Freedom Index, published by the international nongovernmental organization Reporters Without Borders in 2021, ranked Montenegro 104th among 180 countries as partly developed. As European Commission noted in their yearly report on Montenegro, "The media scene remains overall highly polarized, often marked by politically biased and unbalanced reporting, including extensive involvement of foreign media from the region, which was particularly notable during election periods. Self-regulatory mechanisms remain weak" (EC, 2021).

There are slightly more than 150 media outlets operating in Montenegro, with 22 TV stations and 53 radio stations, while the number of registered electronic publications, i.e., web portals, is 70. There are also four daily newspapers, one weekly newspaper, and one news agency. As per the ownership structure, 8 out of 22 TV stations are public broadcasters, while

the others are privately owned. Montenegro has one national public broadcaster, financed by the

Government, Radio and Television of Montenegro (RTCG), and several local public

broadcasters in the municipalities (Nenezic & Vukovic, 2020). In addition, there are four

national commercial TV stations: TV Vijesti, TV Prva, TV Nova M, and TV Adria, all of which

are owned by Serbia companies (Scepanovic, 2022) leaving national broadcaster RTCG as the

only television owned by Montenegro. However, even though it is expected for the national

broadcaster to be independent and diverse in reporting, the fact that the government finances it

makes it vulnerable to political influence.

Hence, although the media system in Montenegro is pluralistic, there are no conditions

for economic or political independence. Additionally, even though there are no visible

mechanisms of direct censorship, because of limitations prescribed by the Constitution and

media laws, another form of control is present, dominantly implemented through soft censorship

or financial pressure against media reporting unfavorably against the government and other state

institutions. Furthermore, economic dependence makes media outlets vulnerable to foreign

influence, and consequently, they can be strategically used for spreading disinformation and

misinformation campaigns aligning with the interests of different external and internal

stakeholders.

All of this makes Montenegro distinct from the U.S. and other Western democracies.

Though most research on polarization and misperceptions focuses on partisan identities (i.e.,

Republican/Democrat), politics in Montenegro align with national identities. Thus, the media,

churches, and international influences contribute to Montenegro's polarization along the axis of

Serbian/Montenegrin identity. As with the U.S., where polarization results from identities being sorted by race, partisanship, ideology, and religion, national identity replaces or is aligned with partisanship in Montenegro. National identities are sorted by ideology (East vs. West), religion, and international alignment (Russia vs. Europe/U.S.).

Considering all the above, internal and external factors contributing to affective polarization in Montenegro, a multiparty system characterized as underdeveloped transitional democracy, with ethnicity, ideology, and religion as political polarization identifiers, studying affective polarization, political misperceptions, and media effects in that context can provide important theoretical and empirical insights.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this thesis is on the role of ethno-national media in promoting political misperceptions. Most previous research on political misperceptions has focused on partisanship as group identity. In contrast, other identifiers such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, etc., have not received much scholarly attention regarding their influence on accepting false political beliefs or on causes of societal divisions. Iyengar et al. (2019) demonstrate that political differences are reflected in emotional impressions, which can be explained as party hostility and reflective like or dislike of voters about their party (in-group) and other party (out-group). Garrett et al. (2019) argue that affective polarization is an important mediator linking partisan media exposure and misperceptions. They explain that political polarization, or negative partisans' feelings toward their political opponents, is growing and cannot be explained by their different views on policy preferences. On the contrary, they propose that online and offline media be studied in these relations.

Considering that, it is important to understand and determine how exposure to disinformation, misinformation, or, more specifically, political misperception affects opinions, attitudes, and behaviors by following the premises of social identity theory and theories of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias.

I will briefly explain this theory because selective exposure and political misperceptions share a motivated reasoning framework. Hence, Lodge and Taber (2001) offered a theory of how motivated political reasoning works, arguing that people cannot ignore their preconceived opinions. They claim all political reasoning involves "the constant tension between the drives for

optimal accuracy and belief perseverance" (Lodge & Taber, 2001, p. 187). They have created a

typology in which people can be characterized as having strong or weak accuracy and directional

(belief preservation) goals. The combination most prone to motivated reasoning is strong

directional goals and weak accuracy goals, which they called partisan reasoners. Partisan

reasoners employ biased strategies in their search for information and evidence. Corresponding

new information is consequentially regarded as more accurate and positive, whereas messages

that are distinct with prior attitudes are judged as negative and inaccurate or actively counter-

argued (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

Garrett et al. (2019) argue that partisan outlets contribute to the process of motivated

reasoning by creating greater dislike of the out-group vis-a-vis the in-group (Hmielowski, Beam,

& Hutchens, 2015), which unconsciously triggers affective reactions linked with the subject of a

(untrue) claim. An important finding here is that anger promotes partisan bias, making

individuals uniquely susceptible to ingroup-affirming misinformation (Weeks, 2015).

Additionally, there is evidence that individuals sometimes endorse falsehoods strategically,

either as a form of party cheerleading (Bullock et al., 2015) or as a means of social-identity

protection (Kahan, 2013).

Furthermore, Garrett et al. (2019) claim that affective polarization is likely to encourage

both these behaviors: "the more unfavorable the attitude toward the out-group, the more the

individual will want to promote the in-group and reinforce their position within it" (Garrett et al.,

2019, p.494.). Also, they are positioning the message as the main motive for affective

polarization by stating that indirect effects of partisan media use on misperceptions would be

moderated by party affiliation, similarly to Iyengar et al. (2012), who claimed that partisan identity is activated by exposure to political messages.

Compared to the other available studies, which have mainly analyzed the causes of affective polarization, Garrett et al. (2019) investigated its consequences. They have found that the hostility felt by partisans on both sides makes compromise less likely. Still, it also makes partisans more likely to accept falsehoods critical of the political out-group. Additionally, they did not find that ideological media reduce awareness of evidence, but they confirmed that the use of ideological media is consistently associated with holding misperceptions (Garrett et al., 2019). This means that by using ideologically favored media outlets, the users will hold beliefs even if they know they are inconsistent with factual evidence.

In one of the previous studies, Garrett et al. (2016) found that citizens' beliefs can deviate from what they know about the evidence reported in the media. Moreover, this deviation appears to be significantly impacted by their use of ideological websites. For example, "those using conservative (liberal) news outlets are more likely to believe falsehoods that favor conservatives (liberals), even if they know that experts, such as journalists, fact-checkers, or scientists, disagree with them" (Garrett et al., 2016, p.343). Also, they have reported that the consistency of their results is striking because, for all misperceptions they have measured, the use of ideologically oriented websites appeared to have a reliably strong influence on audience members' beliefs.

Given the above research, it is clear that polarization facilitates the motivated reasoning process that fosters belief in misperceptions. Thus, the following section will review relevant literature on affective polarization and partisan media.

Partisan Media and Affective Polarization

Though there are many causes of polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019), partisan meida play a part. Knobloch-Westerwick (2012) found that greater selective exposure to attitude-consistent messages activates political self-concept. Self-perception based on group membership might be so salient that it can get activated automatically even with subtle stimuli (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). By following this principle, Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) showed that political campaigns and political massages heighten the salience of partisan identity and are stimuli that strengthen partisanship and increase the biased perception of opposite groups.

Consequently, scholars have suggested that one of the identifying factors contributing to affective polarization are partisan media and selective exposure, which activate partisan identities and cause people to interpret issues through a partisan lens and form polarized opinions (Stroud, 2010, Garrett et al., 2014). Partisan media can be defined as news outlets that not only cover the news but also express distinct opinions by framing the reporting in favor of one political party or a certain viewpoint, which activates partisan identities and consequent feelings toward the political parties (Iyengar et al., 2019). Selective exposure is a motivated selection of media messages that support existing opinions and attitudes, rather than challenging them (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012). Additionally, not just the existence and escalation of partisan media outlets contribute to the increase of affective polarization, but the language and tone of the messages these outlets are using are important to consider. For example, Berry & Sobieraj (2014) showed that harsh rhetoric, or outrage, in partisan media is always directed at political opponents or outgroups and invokes a strong emotional response of

ingroup members, directing them to extreme positions, which consequently increases affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019). Also, Levendusky (2013) found that exposure to partisan news makes those with extreme attitudes even more extreme.

Scholars mainly focused on measuring changes in political attitudes as an outcome of selective media exposure. It has been proposed that an attitude-confirmation bias in selective consumption of political news limits informed opinion development and increases polarization, and most of the studies focusing on selective exposure to partisan media confirmed an increase in affective polarization. For instance, Stroud (2010) found that reported partisan-aligned selective exposure led to greater polarization over time, Knobloch-Westerwick (2012) found that selective exposure to political messages aligned with pre-existing attitudes affected attitude accessibility and partisanship, whereas Kim & Zhou (2020) confirmed that selective exposure to media is linked to increased affective political polarization. Additionally, Levendusky (2013) demonstrated that partisan media polarize the electorate by taking relatively extreme citizens and making them even more extreme and concluded that "Partisan media heighten mass polarization not by turning moderates into extremists, but rather by further polarizing those who are already away from the political center" (Levendusky, 2013, p.612). An important finding from this study is that polarizing effects are the strongest among the more informed and politically active partisan media users who consistently watch partisan media programs. Garret et al.,2014 et al. (2014) came to a similar conclusion by measuring "exposure to information reinforcing individuals' partisan identity versus information representing the views of a partisan opponent" (Garret et al.,2014, p.309) in two countries, the United States, and Israel. They found that when

individuals extensively rely on partisan sources affirming their political viewpoint, they become more polarized towards the outgroup. Furthermore, Garrett et al (2019) claim that the more individuals rely on partisan outlets, the greater is their dislike of the outgroup, which unconsciously triggers affective reactions associated with the subject of a (false) claim (Hmielowski et al., 2015).

Consistently, Warner (2018) confirmed a polarizing effect of pro-partisan media and demonstrated that "partisan media effects can result from the intergroup competition even when new information acquisition is unlikely," as well as that "the effects of liberal media are indistinguishable from those of conservative media" (Warner, 2018, p.661).

Compared to the other available studies, which have mainly analyzed the causes of affective polarization, Garrett et al. (2019) investigated its consequences. They found that the hostility felt by partisans on both sides makes compromise less likely, but it also appears to make partisans more prone of accepting inaccurate information against the political outgroup. Additionally, they did not find that ideological media reduce awareness of evidence, but they confirmed that the use of ideological media is consistently associated with holding misperceptions (Garrett et al., 2019). What this means is that by using ideologically favored media outlets, the users will hold beliefs even if they know they are inconsistent with factual evidence.

However, some scholars presented opposite findings and concluded that exposure to partisan media does not increase affective polarization. For example, Wojcieszak et al. (2021) found null effects of partisan media on affective polarization among strong and weak partisans

and Democrats and Republicans. Additionally, they argue that previous findings, which were shown to reinforce prior attitudes and out-party hostility, were specifically based on surveys or experiments, which face various challenges in measuring exposure to partisan media and ascertaining their polarizing effects in the real world. In contrast, they measured actual exposure to partisan websites causally and over time. Partially similar findings were presented by Johnson & Lee (2015). They found that mainstream news media at both the national and local levels are not statistically associated with polarization, while partisan media is positively associated with a polarized atmosphere in society (Johnson & Lee, 2015, p.218).

Considering all above, specific socio-political context of the research area, as well as the conclusion that partisan identities in the United States became progressively associated with other salient social and political divisions (Abramowitz, 2013), I will focus on national affective polarization by following the partisan affective polarization identifiers. Considering that group polarization is heightened when people have a sense of shared identity, it is expected that the effects should be the same whether individual identity is created around partisan or national lines. More precisely, the effects of partisan media on affective polarization should be observed with pro-national media, and the use of pro-national media will correspond to an increase in affective ethnonational polarization. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: Pro-national media will be associated with a higher level of ethnonational affective polarization

Many scholars have observed the disruption of information in the public sphere of many nations. As Delli Carpini & Keeter (1996) noted, citizens are expected to make decisions based

on reliable information; therefore, a disrupted information environment threatens democracy by destabilizing democratic institutions and processes. This is the risk of political disinformation campaigns that sharpen the existing divisions in society by spreading mistrust and confusion. Bennett & Livingston (2018) showed that disinformation and misinformation disrupt the flow of accurate information by flooding the public sphere with sensational and false messages, which subsequently undermine the trustworthiness of official information in the media and push the public towards alternative information sources. They found that the main sources of misperceptions are often "both nationalist (primarily radical right) and foreign (commonly Russian) strategies to undermine institutional legitimacy and destabilize center parties, governments, and elections" (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p.1)

Even though misinformation and disinformation are often mistakenly confused and used as synonyms, there are important distinctions between them: intent and consequence. Misinformation is mostly an unintended spread of misleading and incorrect information, while with disinformation, incorrect information is deliberately and strategically disseminated to achieve a certain political goal (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Nyhan and Reifler (2010) define misperceptions as beliefs people hold about factual matters that are not supported by clear evidence or expert opinion, while Kuklinski et al. (2000) conceptualized political misperceptions as beliefs about politics that are inconsistent with the best available evidence.

It is important to distinguish between misinformation and misperception for further explanations. The focus of misinformation is on information, false or misleading, which is spread

unintentionally, but, as such, can cause misperceptions or inaccurate beliefs people hold based on this kind of information.

These beliefs may originate internally and result from cognitive bias or be influenced by external sources. For example, Garrett et al. (2016) argue that misperceptions reflect individual-level information deficits. Other scholars argue that misperceptions result from the psychological processes through which information is interpreted and perceptions formed, such as confirmation bias or motivated reasoning. Confirmation bias is our natural inclination to adopt information that supports our pre-existing beliefs and disregard the ones that contradict them, whereas motivated reasoning is our desire to form conclusions consistent with pre-existed beliefs, which often leads to biased information processing (Kunda, 1990). Furthermore, when combined with ideological orientation, these psychological drivers can lead equally informed citizens to form completely different conclusions, consistent with their ideological and group affiliation (Nisbet et al., 2015).

The role of partisan media in this process is well documented, and most scholars agree that exposure to partisan news fosters polarizing emotions or, more precisely, positive feelings about the political ingroup and, on the contrary, negative feelings towards the political outgroup (Levendusky, 2013, Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012).

There are several explanations for why partisan media users are more likely to be politically misinformed. Weeks et al. (2021) propose two. First, in offering coverage favoring one political side, partisan media provide misleading information favoring one party, and secondly, partisan media actively promote content that is false or misleading, sometimes with the

intention of creating confusion or incorrect beliefs (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). Thus, I propose the second hypothesis:

H2: Pro national media will be associated with a higher level of political misperception

Selective exposure to partisan media can induce misperceptions aligned with users' beliefs (Meirick & Bessarabova, 2016). Moreover, Garrett et al. (2019) argue that "as individuals grow increasingly hostile to those with whom they disagree, they become more likely to endorse misperceptions consistent with their political worldview" (Garrett et al., 2019, p.491). Partisan news outlets systematically promote political misperceptions to support the political interests of certain political parties by misrepresenting the existing evidence. However, the diversity of available media outlets should be an effective corrector in these instances, and users can or at least should be able to obtain accurate and evidence-based information from other sources. Thus, selective presentation of facts can hardly be enough to prove the influence of partisan media on individuals' beliefs. Garrett et al. (2016) argue that affective polarization is a mediator linking partisan media exposure and misperceptions. Their argument is in line with previous findings that users are inclined to modify their beliefs to correspond with the supported party's positions (Lenz, 2009) reject experts' explanations of the claims by like-minded partisans (Darmofal, 2005), which can further be an important identity-expressive function, as Kahan (2013) argues.

By following Garrett et al.'s (2019) explanation that "to the extent that partisan media are engaging in tribal politics, building up their ingroup while denigrating the outgroup audiences that share an outlet's political orientation, who belong to the ingroup, are more likely to be

polarized by its messages" (Garrett et al., 2019, p.7.) and growing evidence that exposure to these biases directly shapes users' beliefs (Feldman et al., 2014; Meirick, 2013), I am arguing that pro-national media will be associated with a higher level of political misperception because these media increase affective polarization.

I will define pro-national media by following the Iyengar et al. (2019) definition of partisan media. National media are news outlets that report news by directly framing the narrative in favor of one ethnonational group while at the same time framing the news to spread inaccurate information towards other ethnonational groups or cast doubt on the validity of their arguments.

Following the social identity theory, biased media, or in this case pro-national media, will activate positive feelings toward a certain ethnonational identity (ingroup) and negative feelings toward the other ethnonational identities (outgroup), which will consequently support their beliefs in the presented information.

I will demonstrate that pro-national media outlets play an important role in this process, supporting outlet favored beliefs, regardless of the existing or contradicting evidence previously known to the user, and that use of pro-national media will influence ethnonational members' beliefs regardless of their awareness of accurate and evidence-based information.

Previous studies have confirmed that affective polarization is a key mechanism linking traditional and social media use to political misperceptions (Garrett et al., 2019). Therefore, to assess the level of affective polarization, the focus should be on measuring how people like their political allies and dislike their political opponents (Iyengar et al., 2012) or on emotional reaction

to party identifiers (Gaertner et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is well documented that partisan media exposure fosters affective polarization (Levendusky, 2013; Garrett et al., 2019) and that the effects of traditional and social media on misperception are most pronounced among strong partisans when affective polarization is assessed along partisan lines. Therefore, it is expected that increasingly negative feelings toward a political outgroup would boost individuals' belief in political misperceptions consistent with the interests of the ingroup, even when this information is not necessarily factual. For instance, the more individuals rely on liberal outlets, the more likely they will endorse falsehoods about a Republican candidate and vice versa (Garrett al., 2016). In addition, the more salient the group to the sense of personal identity, the stronger these intergroup divisions would be (Gaertner et al. 1993).

Typically, partisanship indicates identifying with a certain political party. For example, in the United States, that means identifying with Democrats or Republicans, which instinctively drives individuals to identify and divide into two groups: ingroup-the one we support, and outgroup-the opposite party (Tajfel & Turner 1979). As previously explained, this concept will be used to determine whether national affective polarization belonging to and supporting a specific ethnonational group will be an identifier, the same way as partisanship was used for previous studies.

Considering that the metric for assessing affective polarization is the level of positive or negative emotional responses towards ingroup and outgroup and that it was confirmed that individuals would become more hostile to those with whom they disagree and consequentially more acceptive towards misperceptions consistent with their prior political beliefs (Garrett et al.,

33

2019), I argue that the level of national polarization will enhance the effects of pro-national and social media on misperception, or more precisely, individuals who have stronger negative feelings towards the outgroup will be more acceptive to falsehoods about that group. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: Pro-national media will have an indirect effect on misperceptions through affective polarization such that pro-national media will increase affective polarization and subsequently increase misperceptions.

The emergence of digital media platforms as a primary source of information has transformed the way citizens consume the news. However, without the interference of journalistic gatekeepers verifying information, citizens may not be able to make informed decisions as they are increasingly uncertain about the validity of the news they are receiving. Moreover, it has become easy to spread false or misleading information about almost everything and everyone.

There is significant concern on the role that social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, have in fostering misperceptions. Most scholars expected that the rise of social media platforms would allow citizens easier access to relevant information and contribute to increasing political knowledge and understanding of their users. Exposure to a "diverse range of viewpoints is crucial for developing well-informed citizens, who are also tolerant of the ideas of others" (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010, p.2).

However, Hameleers et al. (2020) argue that today's digital media environment can be easily exploited, and social media's mis advantages can be easily used by different political and

34

nonpolitical actors to spread false or inaccurate information and to create desired narratives. Likewise, the originators of political misinformation and misperceptions are taking advantage of this development by creating "alternative information systems that block the mainstream press and provide followers with emotionally satisfying beliefs around which they can organize" (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 132).

Scholars envisaged that disrupted media environment would encourage misperceptions (Sunstein, 2009). Previous findings showed that online partisan news exposure shapes beliefs even when consumers are familiar with evidence reported by less biased sources (Garrett et al., 2016). Furthermore, users encountering news through social media appear to place as much weight on the social identity of the sharer as the reputation of the creator in determining informational credibility (Messing & Westwood, 2012). Garrett (2019) noted that "in a complex information environment, individuals' cognitive limits and biases do make them susceptible to (political) misinformation, and people are prone to believe messages that affirm their political viewpoint or identity regardless of the strength of the evidence" (Garrett, 2019, p. 2).

Following further, Warner (2010) noticed that "the Internet provides people with an opportunity to preselect the ideological perspective of the political content they encounter, allowing them to fragment themselves into narrow interest groups and ultimately polarize along ideological lines" (Warner, 2010, p.1). This is why online misinformation is amplified in partisan communities of like-minded individuals, where it goes unchallenged due to ranking algorithms that filter out any opposing voice (Del Vicario et al., 2016). Shao et al. (2018) analyzed 14 million messages and 400 thousand articles on Twitter and observed that social bots were crucial

in spreading articles from low-credibility sources, while Del Vicario et al. (2016), who focused on Facebook, concluded that users mostly select and share content related to a specific narrative while ignoring everything else, thus confirming that pre-existing beliefs play an important role in selecting the information they expose themselves to.

With homophily and algorithmic filtering, social media constrain the information sources, protecting them from challenging and opposing information and encouraging them to accept more extreme viewpoints (Kitchens et al., 2020). As an explanation, Donovan (2018) argues that the Internet infrastructure allows for decentralized command and control of information flows and that the technical design of platforms is reflected in the communication structure of networked social movements. Furthermore, focusing just on social media, Yarchi et al.'s (2021) findings indicate that political polarization on social media cannot be conceptualized as a unified phenomenon, as there are significant cross-platform differences.

However, most previous research has shown a limited link between social media use and the rise of political misperceptions. Garrett et al. (2019) confirmed that social media use had a small but significant influence on misperceptions and that this effect was most pronounced among strong partisans. To that end, I argue that social media will be associated with a higher level of political misperceptions by following nationalist affiliation on two social platforms: Facebook and Twitter. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H4: Social media will be associated with a higher level of political misperceptions.

To summarize hypothesis in a theoretical model of direct and indirect effects of pro-national media on political misperception, I expect that ethnonational affective polarization

36

mediates the relationship between pro-national media use and political misperceptions, as well as

that pro-national and social media directly influence the level of political misperception and

finally, that pro-national media will be associated with a higher level of ethnonationalism
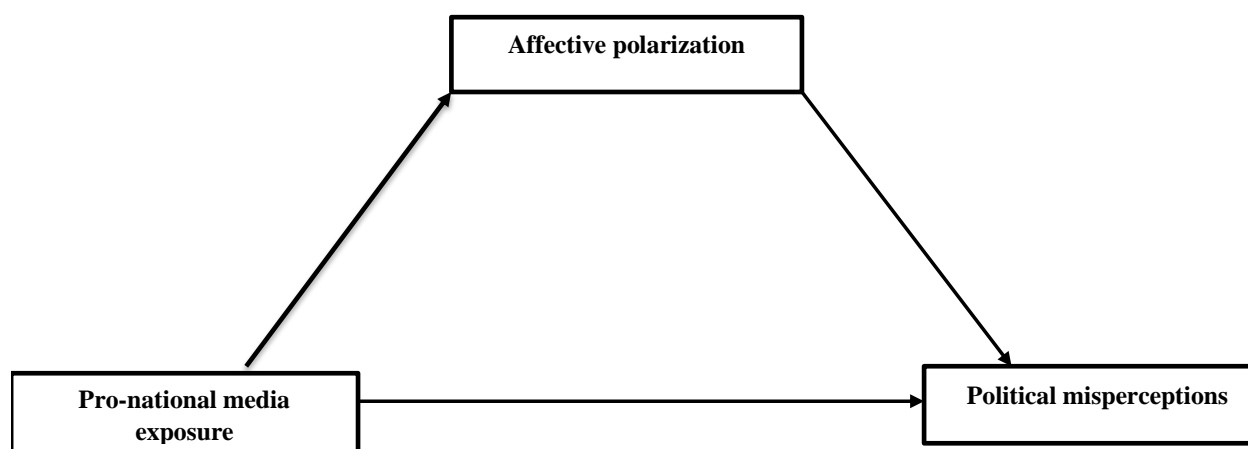
affective polarization.

Figure. 2. Hypothesized theoretical model of direct and indirect effects of pro-national media on

political misperception.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary focus of this thesis is to assess how media will influence affective polarization and subsequently misperceptions and whether media effects will depend on ethnic nationality. I pursued this question in three primary areas. Firstly, I examined if exposure to traditional and social media and its content are associated with greater belief in misperceptions in line with users' ethnonational identities.

Second, I test whether affective polarization can act as a mechanism to help understand media effects on political misperception; the main question is whether traditional and social media use will be associated with a higher level of belief in political misperceptions and whether this effect will be direct or indirect through affective polarization. Third, considering that the metric for assessing affective polarization is the level of positive or negative emotional responses towards ingroup and outgroup, I examined whether increasingly negative feelings toward an outgroup would boost individuals to belief in political misperceptions consistent with the interests of the ingroup, even when this information is not necessarily factual. The fourth and distinctive element included, which makes this thesis distinctive from previously conducted studies, is the inclusion of ethnonationalism as a polarization identifier.

Therefore, I will first define and then measure the effects of exposure to pro-national media by following the partisan media explication. Consequentially, in line with the above, my focus will be on ethnonational affective polarization considering that, based on a specific socio-political context, a sense of shared identity will be created around ethnonational lines.This

chapter will elaborate on the survey procedure, sample, variables, and measures relevant to this study.

Procedure

The data for this study came from a survey conducted in consultation with the author from 21 to 26 December 2021 by the Damar Agency, a national public opinion research agency in Montenegro. The sampling frame was the total population of Montenegro above the age of 18, randomly selected from census data and voters' list, with a sample type of three-stage stratified random sampling. The first stage selected primary sampling units which were polling stations, the second stage used random route procedures to select sampled households, and the third stage selected respondents within a household randomly by birth date. After stratifying each member of the population into relevant subsections, random sampling techniques to select participants from each stratum were applied. The survey type was face-to-face interviews using CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing) system in all (24) municipalities in Montenegro, including urban, suburban, and rural settlements.

Sample

The survey sample included 1001 respondents. Data were cleaned for non-responses and inapplicable responses as detailed below, resulting in 737 total respondents. Data cleaning first started by excluding all nationalities/ethics groups with less than 10% (6.4% Albanians, 3.4% Bosniaks, 0.4% Croats, and 0.6% others), leaving two dominant categories of Montenegrins (48.9%) and Serbs (32.1%) to be further analyzed to access affective polarization along national lines. There were 190 respondents who were not members of either Montenegrin or Serbian

ethnic groups, and after they were deducted, the total number of respondents was 811. The second step was cleaning all non-responses (N/A) from the initial data set. Specifically, some people did not provide responses to the feeling thermometer questions utilized in the measure of polarization. After removing these non-responses, the final number was 737 respondents.

The sample included 50.8% males and 49.2% females. *Gender* was coded as a control variable for the analyses, and Male was coded as 1, while Female was coded with 0 Respondent's age breakdown was: 18-24 (n = 122, 12.2%), 25-34 (n = 169, 16.9%), 35-44 (n = 184, 18.4%), 45-54 (n = 205, 20.5 %), 55-64 (n = 169, 16.9 %), and 65 and above (n = 152, 15.2%). Regarding education level, the survey asked respondents, "What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?". Response options included: *no degree, elementary school diploma, high school graduate - high school diploma or equivalent, bachelor's degree, graduate degree: master's or Ph.D.* Data showed diversity in education level with 62.9% high school, 15.1% bachelor's degree, and 17.7% graduate. Regarding political ideology, the survey asked respondents to self-identify on a 3-level scale "Do you consider yourself: Liberal, Moderate, or Conservative." Respondents described their political views as 29.07% liberal, 53.8% moderate, and 17.8% conservative. The survey also asked respondents to self-assess on a 3-level scale their level of political interest with a question, "How interested are you in politics and public affairs?" The percentage of respondents who are not interested in politics and public affairs is 25%, somewhat interested 63%, and interested 12%.

Control variables

Control variables included political ideology (range=1–3, M=1.88, SD=0.67) and political interest (range=1–3, M=1.87, SD=0.59).

Measurement

Media exposure

Respondents were asked about the most trusted news sources from a prepared list of traditional and social media. The list of media outlets was composed based on Nilsen ratings and IPSOS data on the most popular media outlets in Montenegro. The list was created to include sources with known bias along national ethnic's lines. Respondents choose the most trusted source from the pre-prepared list. The following media outlets were included in the analysis: *Montenegrin national broadcasting service (RTCG), 19.58%, Vijesti 45.45%, CDM 7.7%, Pobjeda 2.4%, Antena M 3.9%, In4rs 1.5%, Borba 0.99%, Facebook 6.5%, Twitter 1.1% and other 10.9%.* I then created media use variables, one for each type of media, and four media trust variables based on the nationalist reporting approach to the objective, pro-Montenegrin, pro-Serbian, and social media spectrum on which participants were placed. RTCG and Vijesti were marked as objective with a combined 65.03% of respondents, CDM, Pobjeda, and Antena M were marked as pro-Montenegrin with 14%, while In4rs, Borba as pro-Serbian have 2.49%. The pro-Montenegrin and pro-Serbian media were transformed into pro-national media using the respondents' self-reported national identity.

Political misperceptions

Political misperceptions were measured by asking respondents to assess whether they believed each of several statements about the two prominent political figures on opposite ideological and, consequently, national sides in Montenegro. The two people were Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić, a conservative (Serbian) political block representative, and President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, a representative of the social democrats (Montenegrin). Because Montenegro is a multiparty system, it has several parties in the parliament. Thus, questions about Deputy Prime Minister Dritan Abazović were also included. Abazović is moderate for whom misperceptions have been circulated by the conservative pro-Serbian political block. Respondents were presented a statement about a misperception and asked whether they thought it was true or false on a 5-level scale: definitely true (coded 5), probably true (4), probably false (2), definitely false (1), and unsure (3).

In total, seven claims were included in the questionnaire, and complete wording is included in Appendix A. First, I coded misperception variables for all seven claims from high, which equals belief, to low, equal to don't believe. Then I created two misperception variables for each nationality such that one variable represented anti-Montenegrin misperceptions and one represented anti-Serbian misperceptions. Using the respondent's nationality, these were then transformed into a single variable representing outgroup misperceptions (M=3.48, SD=1.13, α=.64).

Affective polarization

Following Gidron (2019) operationalization that affective polarization in multiparty systems should be conceptualized as the average distance between positive feelings towards the party for which one intends to vote (the in-party) and negative feelings towards all other parties (the out-parties), affective polarization was measured using favorability ratings of in- and out-party members. Feeling thermometers are the most common measure of affective polarization (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012).

Specifically, respondents were asked to rate their feelings on a scale from 0 to 10, in which 0 indicated least favorable, and 10 indicated most favorable. In addition, feelings were assessed for each political party leader, political party, and political group. Parties and political leaders were then categorized as pro-Serbian or pro-Montenegrin.

I took the evaluations of the political groups and leaders to create an overall polarization score towards *pro-Serbian* ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 3.03$) and *pro-Montenegrin (M = 4.55, SD = 2.79)*. Furthermore, I computed Montenegrin feeling thermometers for Serbs and Serbs feeling thermometers for Montenegrins. Then I combined them into a single outgroup feeling thermometer ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 2.9$, $\alpha=.63$). Thus, my analysis focuses on outgroup hostility (Iyengar et al., 2012) rather than the combination of outgroup hostility and ingroup favorability (Gidron, 2019).

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter will discuss the results of my analyses. I will follow the theoretical model for this study to test whether affective polarization will mediate the relationship between national media exposure and misperceptions and social media exposure and misperceptions, respectively. This was tested with a linear regression model with affective polarization as the outcome, then an additional model with traditional and social media explaining misperceptions about nationality groups (political leaders and political parties), and finally, formal mediation analyses building on both models.

Hypothesis One.

The first hypothesis predicted that pro-national media would be associated with a higher level of national affective polarization. Based on the assumption that group polarization is heightened when people have a sense of shared identity, I argue that the increase in affective polarization along national lines will be higher.

To test this hypothesis, I conducted a linear regressions model with pro-national media exposure and nationality as the independent variables and outgroup feeling thermometers as the dependent variable. The overall regression model was significant, $F(5,731) = 7.448$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .48$, indicating that increases in pro-national media use were linked to increases in national affective polarization among both Montenegrins and Serbs. This model explains 48% of the variance in national affective polarization, and two predictors are statistically significant: pro-national exposure ($p < .05$) and nationality ($p < .001$). Social media was statistically insignificant.

Results are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Model 1 Affective National Polarization

	Coef.	S.E.	p
(Intercept)	2.69	0.42	***
Pro-national media	-0.05	0.02	*
Social media	-0.25	0.31	
Montenegrin	0.67	0.18	***
Ideology	-0.50	0.12	***
Political interest	0.31	0.14	*

Note: $* = p < .05$, $** = p < .01$, $*** = p < .001$

Hypothesis Two. The second hypothesis predicted that pro-national media would be associated with a higher level of political misperception. To assess the influence of pro-national media exposure on political misperceptions, I conducted linear regressions with political misperception as the dependent variable and with pro-national media exposure, social media, nationality, and outgroup feeling thermometer as the independent variables. The regression model was significant, $F (6,730) = 95.2$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .43$. This model explains 43% of the variance in political misperception. As reported in Table 2, all four predictors are statistically significant. The effect of pro-national media was relatively small but statistically significant and consistent with the hypothesis, those who primarily trust pro-national media are more likely to believe political misperceptions about the national outgroup.

Table 2: Model 2: Outgroup Political Misperceptions

	Coef.	S.E.	p
(Intercept)	4.47	0.16	***
Pro-national media	0.02	0.01	*
Social media	-0.22	0.12	.
Montenegrin	-0.37	0.06	***
Outgroup feeling	-0.29	0.01	***
Ideology	0.10	0.04	*
Political interest	-0.11	0.05	*

Note: * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Hypothesis Three

The third hypothesis predicted that pro-national media would have an indirect effect on political misperceptions through affective polarization such that pro-national media will increase affective polarization and subsequently increase misperceptions. I argue that pro-national media will have a significant relationship with political misperception. Additionally, I predicted that affective polarization would mediate this relationship. A mediation analysis was carried out to test this hypothesis as a separate mediation test in the *R* ecosystem using the mediate package (Rosseel, 2012).

To conduct mediation analyses, first, I created and tested a linear regression model with affective polarization as the outcome, results presented in *Table 1,* and then the linear regression model with political misperceptions as to the outcome, results presented in *Table 2*. After this step, it was possible to test mediated hypothesis by creating a product of the two direct effects from each of these models. I then tested the significance of this indirect effect using bootstrapping

procedures. The product of the two direct effects was drawn for each of 1000 bootstrapped re-samples, and the 95% confidence interval was computed.

The results indicate that there was an estimated overall indirect effect of .016 (95% CI .007–.03; p=.04). More precisely, the effect of national media's influence on political misperceptions was mediated via affective polarization.

Results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Mediation

	Estimate	CI Lower	CI Upper	p
ACME	0.16	0.007	0.3	*
ADE	0.24	0.06	0.4	**
Total Effect	0.41	0.17	0.6	***

Note: * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Hypothesis Four

The fourth hypothesis predicted that social media would be associated with a higher level of political misperception. This hypothesis was also tested with the linear regressions model reported in Table 2, with political misperception as the dependent variable and social media (Facebook and Twitter) trust, nationality, and outgroup feeling thermometers as the independent variables. As reported in Table 2, the coefficient was negative, indicating that those who primarily trust news received from social media were less likely to believe misperceptions about the outgroup.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This thesis makes three core contributions: (1) examining the role of pro-national media in promoting political misperceptions, (2) testing the role of affective national polarization in strengthening people's acceptance of inaccurate beliefs, and (3) considering both effects in a novel context in which partisanship is dictated by ethnonational identities in a small eastern European multiparty emerging democracy.

Drawing upon the proposed theoretical model to test whether affective polarization will mediate the relationship between national media exposure and misperceptions and social media exposure and misperceptions, respectively, I predicted that pro-national media will be associated with a higher level of ethnonational affective polarization and that pro-national and social media will increase political misperception. Furthermore, I argued that pro-national media would have an indirect effect on misperceptions through affective polarization such that pro-national media will increase affective polarization and subsequently increase misperceptions.

Summary of Results and contributions

The results demonstrated a significant effect of pro-national media on ethnonational affective polarization. Results confirmed that trust in pro-national media was linked to increased ethnonational affective polarization among both Montenegrins and Serbs. Misperceptions were also prominent among conservatives and those more interested in politics and public affairs.

One of the main contributions of this thesis is demonstrating that group polarization is heightened when people have a sense of shared identity and that selective trust in pro-national media outlets facilitates both polarization and heightened belief in divisive misperceptions.

Because these outlets support existing beliefs and attitudes, rather than challenging them, they activate national identities and, consequently, result in more negative feelings toward the national outgroup group (Iyengar et al., 2019). The result is that people interpret issues through a national lens (Stroud, 2010, Garrett et al., 2014) and are more prone to accept misperceptions about the outgroup (Garrett et al., 2019).

The literature cited above comes primarily from the U.S. context and focuses on political party affiliation. However, political parties in Montenegro are divided along ethnonational lines, and most of them represent and advocate for certain ethnonational groups. The media can be said to be pro-national in the same way that some media in the U.S. are pro-partisan – they advocate on behalf of the ethnonational political faction.

Montenegro is similar to many other emerging democracies around the globe, where the U.S. two-party system does not correspond to the complex intermingling of (1) ethnicity, (2) national identification, (3) church, (4) political parties, and (5) outside actors (i.e., Russia, the EU, the US, China). Ethnonational partisanship in Montenegro aligns people on a spectrum from Western-Montenegrin to Eastern-Serbian identities, and each pole on this spectrum has institutions such as political parties, churches, media outlets, and international actors competing for influence and power.

Political misperceptions are dominantly spread in Montenegro with the aim of infusing the divisions along these lines and increasing ethnic tensions. Considering the history of previous conflicts in Montenegro and the Balkans, ethnonational identifications and divisions among the population were used to inflame wars. As Hamilton (2017) concluded, "Institutionalized identity

divisions occur when states label people according to ethnic, religious, or other objective criteria, and then apportion benefits based upon these labels. In a state with institutionalized identity divisions, a shock or crisis can catalyze conflict among identity groups since leaders will use these identities as potent and readily available means of mobilizing followers. This escalating conflict inside a state often invites intervention by other states, further escalating the conflict" (p.1). That is why it is important to understand internal and external factors contributing to the political misperceptions, which can additionally divide citizens with inflaming pro-national media reporting aligning with their pre-existed beliefs which are not based on factual information.

In sum, the first contribution is to demonstrate that media can contribute to divisions in societies polarized along ethnonational lines and make people who are already inflamed even more affectively polarized by increasing their negative emotions. By fueling the division, promoting animosity between the ingroup and outgroup, encouraging hostility towards political opponents, and pushing people toward extremes, pro-national partisan media can cause even deeper divisions and influence people to become more susceptible to misperceptions.

The second hypothesis was also supported. There was a significant indirect effect between pro-national media and political misperceptions, confirming that exposure to the pro-national media contributes to a higher level of political misperception. This effect was prominent among Montenegrins, liberals, and those not interested in politics and public affairs. Also, the outgroup feeling was an important predictor of political misperception, confirming that the higher the division along the ethnonational line is associated with greater belief in political

misperceptions. It is worth noting that the linear model used to test this hypothesis explains the variance in the political misperception of 43%, which is substantively important.

Considering these results, another significant contribution is demonstrating that people are more likely to accept misperceptions aligning with their political views if they hold negative emotions towards those they do not agree with (Garrett et al., 2019), no matter what the cause of division is, partisanship or ethnonationality. These results, which were previously confirmed in studies conducted in the United States with a two-party system, are similar in a country with a multiparty system divided along ethnonational lines.

These misperceptions can be more damaging in this context because fragmented media on national lines advocating for political parties that dominantly support members of a certain ethnonational group can inflame ethnic division in the country. Including international actors as a significant influence on politics in Montenegro, I can observe these divisions as geostrategic ones between the Western and Eastern systems and values. The ones who proclaim they have the most trust in pro-Serbian media identify themselves as a part of a pro-Serbian group and believe political misperceptions about Montenegrin political parties and political leaders, the Montenegrin church, and have negative feelings toward the Montenegrin outgroup. Also, by observing themselves as ethnonational Serbs subsequently, they support Serbian culture, values, and political positions, which presumes cooperation and close ties with Russia, not the Western international partners such as the United States and the European Union.

At the moment, the government in Montenegro is led by pro-Serbian politicians thus, its decisions are influenced by Serbian leaders and leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which

51

was one of the reasons why Montenegro was one of the latest countries to impose sanctions on Russia even after becoming a NATO member county. This illustrates the possible consequences of affectively polarized groups inflamed along national lines by belief in political misperceptions spread through pro-national media. Observing this in underdeveloped transitional democracies or hybrid regimes with weak and politically influenced institutions like Montenegro is worrisome.

My findings align with previous studies indicating that increasingly negative feelings toward a political outgroup would encourage individuals to believe politically expedient falsehoods (Garret et al., 2019). Putting this in perspective of underdeveloped, politically unstable, and traditional democracies, such as most countries in South-Eastern Europe, Africa, and Central Asia, this is an important contribution, especially when referring to possible consequences to these countries characterized by fragmented, economically weak, and therefore frequently influenced media landscape. Governments (both domestic and foreign), political parties, and other transnational economic and political actors often find incentives to interfere in these emerging democracies. Societies that are divided along ethnonational lines, where pro-national media can infuse negative feelings toward outgroups, thus become more susceptible to misperceptions and sensitive to internal and external influences. Various actors can influence media for political or economic gain.

Hence, there is a considerable need for more research in contexts like Montenegro, where the fragmented media landscape intersects with ethnonational political identities and is subject to considerable international influence.

More research should be done in the Balkans, characterized by countries with the same or similar political, national, and religious compositions, to additionally confirm the level of pro-national media influence on political misperceptions. Research should also consider similar contexts in the global south, where political communication research is limited.

It should be noted that, as a part of the same model, I tested whether trust in social media would contribute to a higher level of political misperception (hypothesis four). The relationship is present, but it is a week, and the results are the reverse of what was expected. The ones who trust social media the most as a news source are less likely to believe in misperceptions. Even though this result was surprising, it can be explained by possible younger people choosing social media, Facebook or Twitter, where they obtain different types of information that can be less framed along ethnonational lines than in traditional media. Future research should continue to explore the role of social media in emerging democracies where these media may be utilized by younger consumers who may appreciate access to more international (and presumably independent) media outlets.

Limitations

Being the first study attempting to investigate the relationship between pro-national media, ethnonational affective polarization, and political misperceptions in Montenegro, this research provides insight into the effects of affective polarization as a mediator increasing the influence of pro-national media on the increase of political misperceptions in Balkans, and further in South-East Europe. However, several limitations must be addressed. First, media exposure was measured by asking respondents which media outlet they trust the most, not by

what media outlet they were exposed the most. Even though the program list approach for measuring self-reported exposure to media "produces indicators with relatively high true score reliabilities, very promising predictive validity, and impressive discriminant validity" (Dilliplane, Goldman, & Mutz, 2012, p.11), the list did not contain all media from Montenegro, nor did it allow respondents to report the full range of media they consulted. Additionally, the media were not grouped as television, print media, web portals, or the radio; all the media were grouped regardless of media outlet types. Only a modest percentage of respondents selected pro-Serbian media, and I can assume the reason was limited pro-Serbian media outlets offered. The benefit of this approach is that I was able to test the relationship between trust in media outlets as a source of polarization and misperceptions (i.e., confirmation bias), thus illustrating how individuals in a fragmented media environment like the one in Montenegro are choosing to trust media outlets that coincide with their beliefs, consistent with their group identity, even though they can choose any other source, from traditional or social media. However, it would provide a more powerful test of the hypothesis to generate a complete measure of media use. Because the data came from a secondary source, I could not fully dictate the nature of the media use measure. Still, it would be important to include all media outlets for results to be more precise for further research.

Another limitation relates to the cross-sectional nature of the data. The link between the outcome and the exposure cannot be determined because both are examined at the same time (Di Girolamo et al., 2019), and results from the cross-sectional design cannot establish causality.

Also, the results of this thesis are based on a case study of one country. Even though socio-political complexities, type of the political system observed, different layers of divisions

among populations, the influence of ethnonationality, religion, ideology on internal and external policies of the country, different foreign political actors influencing the political system and other complex characteristics of Montenegro, still results based on research in one country is a thesis limitation. This thesis raises important questions regarding how misinformation and polarization interact with the media in a society divided along national lines. However, more research is needed from the other countries outside the global north.

Conclusion

The results of this thesis can be important for future research in countries with similar complexities in South-Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Africa, and South America. This thesis is just one step forward in that direction.

Political misperceptions are a substantial problem. This thesis demonstrates that the fragmented media common in emerging democracies allow for both domestic and international actors to further sew ethnonational partisan divisions by fueling polarization and thus increasing people's susceptibility to inflammatory misperceptions. Ethnonational divisions, when they become intense, often result in civil war. Furthermore, these divisions can be stoked by international actors to pursue a variety of agendas. Thus, it is important to understand the role of media in the complex geostrategic information competition taking place across the globe. This thesis is an important step in that direction.

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Political misperception

 What do you think about the accuracy of the following statements?

1) Zdravko Krivokapic is conducting politics of „Serbian world"in Montenegro

     1. Definitely True

     2. Probably True

     3. Probably False

     4. Definitely False

     5. Unsure

2) Zdravko Krivokapic is planning to reunite Montenegro with Serbia?

     1. Definitely True

     2. Probably True

     3. Probably False

     4. Definitely False

     5. Unsure

3) Dritan Abazovic is suporting Goverment because he is blackmailed or agent of Serbian sercet service?

     1. Definitely True

     2. Probably True

     3. Probably False

4. Definitely False

5. Unsure

4) Milo Djukanovic organized violent protests against the enthronement of a new Serbian Orthodox Church leader in the country.

    1. Definitely True

    2. Probably True

    3. Probably False

    4. Definitely False

    5. Unsure

5) Milo Djukanovic is supporting and financing Komite movement to provoke national clashes in Montenegro.

    1. Definitely True

    2. Probably True

    3. Probably False

    4. Definitely False

    5. Unsure

6) A coup d'état in the capital of Montenegro was organized on a day of parliamentary elections in 2016 by pro-Serbian and pro-Russian opposition leaders, with support from Russia, to prevent Montenegro's accession to NATO.

    1. Definitely True

    2. Probably True

3. Probably False

4. Definitely False

5. Unsure

7) A coup d'état in the capital of Montenegro that was allegedly organized on a day of parliamentary elections in 2016 never happened and was created by ruling DPS party to win the elections.

1. Definitely True

2. Probably True

3. Probably False

4. Definitely False

5. Unsure

Affective polarization

We would like to know your feelings towards some political figures and political groups on a scale from 0 to 10. If you feel very favorable towards this person, you can give him the highest score of 10; if you feel very unfavorable towards this person you can give him a 0 (zero); if you feel absolutely neutral towards this person, you can give him a 5. If you have not heard enough about this person to have an opinion, feel free to choose that option.

1)How much do you tend to like or dislike each of the following persons?

1. Milo Djukanovic

2. Zdravko Krivokapic

3. Dritan Abazovic

4. Aleksa Becic

5. Draginja Vuksanovic

6. Andrija Mandic

2) How much do you tend to like or dislike each of the following groups?

1. Supporters of Democratic front

2. Supporters of Democratic party of socialist

3. Supporters of URA

4. Supporters of Democrats

5. Supporters of Komitas Movement

6. Supporters of Serbian Orthodox church in Montenegro