The Role of Media Competition in Elections: How Right-Wing Alternative Media Affect Educated Voters in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

In the competitive landscape of political communication, alternative right-wing media have become a key player in shaping public trust and opinion, often spreading narratives that challenge traditional information sources and include misinformation. Although a relationship between the consumption of alternative right-wing media and voting preferences has been established, it remains unclear what role education plays in this connection. Recent research suggests that this role may not be statistically significant, even though it is often assumed that educated individuals should be more critical of misinformation. The objective of this study is to investigate the validity of this relationship in the Czech Republic. A sample of 807 Czech respondents was used to test the influence of higher education on the choice of the type and number of sources of political news, the belief in the information published in these media, and finally, the role of education level between the consumption of political news and the choice of illiberal political parties such as ANO, SPD and KSČM. Interestingly, alternative news media are perceived as a reliable source of political information, particularly by those with a college education. However, exposure to such media does not appear to be a significant predictor of support for populist anti-system political parties, in contrast to less educated citizens.

1 INTRODUCTION

Alternative right-wing news media, which discredit the information provided by mainstream media and label these outlets as mouthpieces of the political establishment (Holt, 2019), have become a significant force in shaping the political landscape. These media actively compete with mainstream outlets for the public's trust, leveraging narratives that resonate with certain voter groups and contributing to the radical and polarized worldview of the public in Europe and the U.S. (Tuomola, 2020). For example, Nordheim et al. (2019) found in a sample of 1,346 German respondents that frequent exposure to alternative news media increases citizens' support for the right-wing populist AfD party in elections. In the U.S., right-wing media contributed to Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 election and even participated in public policymaking during his administration (Haller, 2018). However, the influence of alternative media is not confined to these regions. In Scandinavia, they contribute to the radicalization of society by spreading controversial news about immigrants, crime, and Islam (Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021).

Although much evidence suggests a relationship between alternative media and citizens' voting preferences, little is known about how they compete with mainstream media to shape public

opinion. This paper situates itself within this competitive framework, examining whether education can act as a mitigating factor in this competition by reducing citizens' trust in alternative media and their subsequent support for extremist political parties. Previous research has provided evidence that education eliminates citizens' trust in alternative media as well as in anti-system political parties (Holt, 2019; Hopkin, 2020). However, the current situation suggests that even educated citizens may succumb to misinformation disseminated through alternative media under certain conditions (De Coninck et al., 2021). To the best of our knowledge, insufficient evidence exists to explain whether highly educated people support extremist political parties, even when they might trust the disinformation. This prompts the necessity to examine the function of education in the context of moderating the impact of alternative media in politically polarized and competitive environments.

Moreover, studies on the relationship between the media consumption of political content and citizens' voting preferences often fail to examine this issue in Central and Eastern European countries, where democracy was established after 1989. Many citizens in these countries are still living with memories of the past socialist regime, and alternative media can offer them a worldview more closely related to their views. Central and Eastern European countries also differ from Western democracies in terms of the characteristics of their media. Hungary represents a typical example, where right-wing populism—characterized by xenophobic, anti-liberal, and anti-European attitudes—is actively promoted by mainstream media controlled by authoritarian political parties and leaders (Surowiec & Štětka, 2020). A similar trend is currently emerging in Slovakia (Žuffová, 2024), where media independence is increasingly under threat. In contrast, the situation in the Czech Republic and Poland remains relatively stable at the moment, with mainstream media largely adhering to democratic principles. However, the stability of media independence in these countries is influenced by the ruling political coalition, with shifts in governance often bringing changes to the media landscape and editorial freedom (Goldstein, 2021; Bobinski, 2024).

The Czech Republic represents a distinctive case for the study of this phenomenon. The Czech media market is characterized by a combination of Western and Eastern European influences. While mainstream media outlets, particularly public television, adhere to liberal democratic principles, they face pressure from right-wing populist parties seeking to exert control over them (Kristen, 2021). Concurrently, alternative right-wing media outlets engage in active competition by disseminating pro-Kremlin propaganda, conspiracy theories, and fake news with the objective of eroding trust in the European Union and NATO (Mölder & Sazonov, 2019). This competitive media environment renders the Czech Republic an optimal setting for investigating the impact of media consumption on voting preferences and the moderating influence of education.

This paper bridges the gaps left by previous research, making both theoretical and empirical contributions. Firstly, our study makes a contribution to the field of public choice theory by examining the impact of education on citizens' voting preferences in the context of a competitive media market. In particular, we investigate whether education can break the link between citizens' trust in alternative media sources and their support for extremist anti-system political parties. Secondly, our research enhances the empirical understanding of the relationship between media and political behavior by analyzing unique data from the Czech Republic, a country that has been under-represented in comparative studies of media influence.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical background and research questions, followed by the data and methodology in Section 3. Section 4 presents detailed results, followed by the discussion and conclusion section.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Alternative News Media

Alternative right-wing news media are one of many sources that citizens can use to inform themselves about political issues. According to Bailey et al. (2007), these media were created in response to the perception that certain issues were underdeveloped in the mainstream media and the belief that the intention of alternative media producers is to give a voice to minorities. For example, left-wing alternative media are mainly efforts to overcome the hegemony of economic and political elites supported by the established mainstream media (Schweiger, 2017). In contrast, the content of right-wing alternative news media often includes conservative, libertarian, populist, or far-right issues (Haller et al., 2019).

The reasons for the existence of alternative media can also be seen also in the economic interests of their owners. By publishing interesting, unusual content, these media can generate extraordinary profits. It is not surprising, therefore, that alternative media are dominated by news and opinions that are contrary to those of the mainstream media (Müller & Schulz, 2021). In addition to economic interests, the existence of alternative media can also be traced to political interests — of both domestic politicians (Hameleers, 2019; Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010) and foreign governments. A typical example of the pursuit of foreign governments' interests via alternative media is the spreading of pro-Kremlin rhetoric (propaganda) in countries of the European Union in an effort to destabilize the current political systems in each country (Golianová & Kazharski, 2020; Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2021).

Evidence of alternative media's negative consequences on the stability of liberal democracies comes from many empirical observations. Alternative media became an important determinant of the success of the far-right civic initiative PEGIDA in Germany (Haller et al., 2019), contributed to citizens' Brexit decision in the United Kingdom (Schapals & Bruns, 2018), raised the profile of the populist Five Stars Movement in Italy (Sauer et al., 2017), and deterred citizens' demand for controversial political icons, such as Marina Le Pen in France (Atkinson, 2019).

In searching for the reasons for the successful integration of alternative news media into the media market, it is also necessary to examine the demand side (i.e., citizens' motives to consume content from alternative media). In this context, Noppari et al.'s (2019) study in Finland used qualitative analysis to explore the reasons for citizens' interest in the populist content published by alternative media. The results showed three main types of citizen motivations: system skeptics dissatisfied with the political and media system; critics with skepticism towards journalistic representation of issues; and randomly dissatisfied citizens using alternative media for information and entertainment.

Schulze et al. (2020) extended research on citizens' motivations to consume alternative media content to other countries in Northern and Central Europe. Their research found varying levels of popularity of alternative media across countries and identified specific factors motivating citizens to consume content from these media — namely, political interest, critical attitude to immigration, skeptical assessment of news quality, distrust of public media, and use of social media as a primary news source. Other studies, such as Macek et al. (2018) and Holt (2019), have presented the same findings and confirmed citizen dissatisfaction and distrust as two important causes that determine the consumption of populist right-wing content published by alternative media.

In addition to these factors, scientific research focuses on another relevant group of determinants of alternative media content consumption: demographic factors. In this context, Baptista and Gradim (2020) found that conservatives, right-wing citizens, the elderly, and less educated citizens more strongly believe fake news spread through alternative media. Many studies examining the problem of believing the content published by alternative right-wing news media have shared similar conclusions. However, the list of predictors can be also extended to include the influence of gender. Almenar et al. (2021) found interesting results when they examined differences in the perception of fake news between males and females in a sample of 1,001 Spanish citizens. The results concluded that both males and females perceive fake news similarly but differed in the topics of fake news consumed. Males were more likely to consume fake news about politics, whereas females consumed fake news about celebrities.

2.1 The Impact of Education on Consumption of Alternative Media Content

The media play a central role in shaping citizens' political inclinations through their content (Bartková & Veselovská, 2020; Kuba & Meričková, 2023). The problem arises when they publish misinformation that people start to believe and that can erode trust - one of the factors affecting innovation in the region (Prokop & Stejskal, 2019), thus negatively affecting the economic maturity of the country. A perplexing question in this area is the extent to which education influences public trust in alternative news sources, i.e., those that deviate from mainstream narratives. While research shows that education can, for example, positively influence the quality of governance (Halásková et al., 2023), its impact on public trust in alternative media remains uncertain. The first group of research shows a significant relationship between education level and consumption of alternative media content — a relationship confirmed by Merpert et al. (2018) in their sample of 3,357 Argentinian respondents. The results of the analysis showed that young university-educated citizens, especially men, can distinguish controllable facts from misleading opinions. The level of education undermined confidence in the published information. Evidence of the importance of education in the ability to detect fake news is supported by other research, including studies by Reuter et al. (2019), Hwang et al. (2021), and Allcott and Gentzkow (2017).

Kim and Kim (2020), who investigated the issue in more depth, found that citizens with less than a secondary school degree were more likely to believe fake news than citizens who had graduated from university. Specifically, individuals most vulnerable to believing misinformation reported higher levels of perceived bias, higher levels of depression, and lower education, among other things (Delmastro & Paciello, 2022).

However, the opinions of researchers and the results of some recent studies suggest that the level of citizens' education does not affect the level of trust (distrust) in the information (misinformation) published by alternative media. De Coninck et al. (2021) examined citizen trust in disinformation and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 in eight countries from several continents. The results showed that, although higher levels of education among citizens undermined trust in conspiracy theories about COVID-19, this relationship was not found for citizen trust in disinformation. The authors concluded that highly educated citizens do not trust disinformation narratives significantly less than citizens with less education. Evidence of educated people's trust in disinformation has also been provided by Mujani and Kuipers (2020), whose study focused on the issue of citizens' trust in disinformation in the 2019 Indonesian elections; the results provided evidence that younger, wealthy, and more educated voters believed disinformation.

In summary, the results of previous studies are contradictory. Some evidence indicates that education is important in detecting fake news and, therefore, the belief that alternative media are producers of fake news should decrease with increasing levels of education. In contrast to these results, more recent results have suggested that highly educated people are potentially as prone to misinformation as less-educated citizens. These mixed results motivated us to establish our first research question to explore the situation in the Czech Republic — where, to the best of our knowledge, no similar research has been conducted — to contribute to the worldwide discussion on the influence of education on believing alternative media. Our first research question is as follows:

RQ1: How does university-education affect Czech citizens' belief of information published by alternative right-wing news media?

Starbird (2019) argued that misinformation is often based on the rhetoric and techniques of critical thinking, thereby developing, or strengthening citizens' nihilistic skepticism. They may subsequently believe fake news despite being highly educated. Kahan et al. (2017) provided another explanation,postulating that highly educated people may be prone to misinformation if the published topics are relevant to their personal identity. This assertion is supported by Johnson and Kaye (2015), who suggested that citizens are willing to exchange the credibility of published content to satisfy their needs. In this case, citizens may uncritically accept arguments that support their political ideology regardless of their level of education (Strickland et al., 2011).

Partisanship (ideology) is an important determinant of citizen trust in misinformation (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). In the context of growing support for populist anti-system political parties, the issue of selection bias has often been highlighted in academic studies (Barnidge et al., 2020; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020; Parmelee & Roman, 2020). The range of published information is so wide in developed democracies that it forces people to filter information based on individual preferences — to the extent that they often become part of an "information bubble" (Bruns, 2019). These people intentionally consume only information that supports their current opinion and do not want to read/hear dissenting opinions. This behavior limits the portfolio of sources from which they can consume political information and encloses them in an "echo chamber" (Cinelli et al., 2021).

These assumptions lead us to speculate that the ideological conviction of citizens in favor of anti-system (anti-establishment) political parties, reinforced by their belief of alternative media and life in an "echo chamber," is a threat to the existence of liberal democracy. Based on the evidence from the literature, we can assume that this democracy-threatening combination can be eliminated by university education. However, this may not be true in each situation. Citizens' belief in the disinformation published by alternative media, combined with anti-system (anti-liberal in this context) preferences, may outweigh the influence of higher education. As we consider prior research on this issue (especially in Central and Eastern European countries) to be insufficient, we decided to examine the influence of university education on the democracy-threatening combination in the Czech Republic. Therefore, our second research question is as follows:

RQ2: How does citizens' university education influence the democracy-threatening combination in the Czech Republic?

The combination in RQ2 means combination of the consumption of content from alternative right-wing news media and anti-liberal preferences.

To better understand the relationship between trust in content published by alternative media and education level, it is necessary to investigate the effect of education level on the choice of information sources. Hillygus (2005) suggested that education is the strongest determinant of an individual's political interest, which translates into a greater level of consumption of political content (Boulianne, 2011). This assumption was tested in Sweden (Strömbäck et al., 2013), where the researchers found that citizens became more polarized in 1986–2010 due to an increasing media supply. They were polarized into those who consumed political content and those who avoided consumption altogether. Only those citizens who consumed political content showed an interest in politics.

Political interest (education) acts as both a determinant of the consumption of political information and a tool to eliminate the "information bubble" effect. Thus, as Ksiazek et al.'s (2010) study demonstrated, the number of sources from which citizens consume political content increases with political interest. In their study, outside of political interest, citizen education also showed a similar effect directly (the exception was the consumption of content from local news). Prior (2007) added in this context that political "addicts" are likely to consume large amounts of information and, therefore, may encounter multiple perspectives and arguments.

In contrast to the previous claim that education is the strongest predictor of political interest and can determine higher levels of political content consumption, Geers (2020) found that citizens' consumption of political content is determined primarily by their level of political interest and political knowledge, not their level of education. Although we know a great deal about political interest as a determinant of political news consumption, we know less about the effect of education on the type and number of media outlets from which citizens consume news. Therefore, our third research question investigates from which sources and in what quantities educated citizens consume news. Through this question, we also determine whether these citizens are at risk of living in an "information bubble:"

RQ3: How does the level of education influence the choice of the type and number of media sources from which a Czech citizen consumes political information?

2.3 Alternative Media and Political Markets in the Czech Republic

The issue of right-wing alternative news media in the Czech Republic has recently been investigated by, for example, Štětka et al. (2020), whose research describes the media ecosystem in the Czech Republic and identifies media that publish political information not in line with the mainstream media (alternative media). These media are defined as platforms that deliberately challenge mainstream narratives (Holt, 2019), often presenting themselves as outlets for marginalized voices or as alternatives to what they frame as biased or censored mainstream media. Their typology includes news websites, blogs, and forums, with notable examples such as Protiproud.cz, Aeronet.cz, Eurasia24.cz, Sputnik (cz.sputniknews.com), and AC24. Among these, ParlamentniListy.cz stands out as the most visited site, with 6.27 million monthly visits. Although these platforms vary in form, their content shares common themes—typically anti-liberal, nationalist, and socially conservative topics. They often focus on extremely negative attitudes towards the European Union, Islam, and migration. Additionally, they provide space for authors promoting pro-Russian, pro-Chinese, and pro-Trump positions, reflecting broader geopolitical influences. These topics align with similar patterns observed in alternative media across Western Europe and Scandinavia (Berning et al., 2019; Nisbet et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2021).

Čižik (2017) summarized the cause of alternative media in the Czech Republic, which the study indicated are the most common tool of Russian propaganda. The period of massive development of alternative media in the Czech Republic coincides with the massive disinformation campaign of the Russian Federation throughout the European Union, starting in 2014. Alternative media in the Czech Republic spread disinformation, conspiracy theories, and hoaxes aimed at making institutions such as the European Union and NATO incredible to the public (Mölder & Sazonov, 2019). This political information is spread not only through web servers, but also through social networks and chain emails.

During the period of the alternative media expansion, the political party system in the Czech Republic gradually became unstable. The political party system has been stable since the establishment of the independent state in 1993. Two mainstream right-wing and left-wing political parties (ODS and ČSSD, respectively) rotated in the government. In 2010, the populist anti-establishment party Věci Veřejné (Havlík, 2015) succeeded for the first time and later participated in the government. This party broke up in 2012 due to internal party problems and ceased its activities.

The resistance of some voters to the political establishment and the hegemony of mainstream political parties did not subside. Therefore, other populist parties — namely, the ANO and Úsvit movements — succeeded in 2013 by distancing themselves against the mechanisms and practices of mainstream political parties. The Úsvit movement later disintegrated, but in the 2017 parliamentary elections, members of the movement were candidates under the SPD brand (Dvořák, 2022). Yet, even beyond these movements are the achievements of the Communist Party (KSČM), which has long been opposed to mainstream political parties promoting liberal democracy.

The political entities ANO, SPD, and KSČM are still active, unlike Věci Veřejné, although KSČM failed to exceed the necessary threshold of 5% of the vote to enter the Chamber of Deputies in the last parliamentary elections (2021). Even so, these "lost" anti-system votes of the voters in the research cannot be ignored because the party is still politically active, and its representatives are speaking at anti-government demonstrations.

In the context of this paper, we consider the votes for ANO, KSČM, and SPD to be an expression of voters' anti-system preferences. We draw on the definition put forth by Capoccia (2002), who argues that an anti-system political party is any party that opposes the current opinion (in this case, liberal democracy). We therefore consider any anti-liberal party to be an anti-system political party. The fact that selected political parties oppose the principles of liberal democracy is evidenced by previous research (e.g., Naxera, 2018; Kubát & Hartliński, 2019). The results of these studies agree that the public policies these actors proposed are based on populist, anti-system, anti-immigration, anti-establishment, and nationalist tendencies. Table 1 presents the success of anti-system political parties in the Czech Republic between 2013 and 2021.

Tab. 1 – Seats won by anti-system parties in parliamentary elections. Source: own research

Political party	2013	2017	2021
ANO	47	78	72
Úsvit (SPD)	14	22	20
KSČM	33	15	0
Share of seats in the total number (n = 200)	47 %	58 %	46 %

Citizens' demand for populist anti-system political parties grew in parliamentary elections from 2013 until the most recent elections held in 2021, when there was a slight decline. However, this was not due to a declining demand from citizens for anti-system parties, but to the fact that in these elections almost 1/5 of the electoral votes cast for other (unsuccessful) anti-system parties were lost.

The success of the ANO movement is partly connected with the corruption scandal of Prime Minister Petr Nečas in 2013 (Culik, 2017), which caused the breakdown of the government and led to early elections. ANO presents itself as an anti-political movement that prioritizes the rule of experts over corrupt mainstream political parties and adjusts its rhetoric accordingly.

SPD also draws attention to the problem of the existence of corruption in Czech politics. Unlike ANO, SPD is a right-wing extremist party that does not hide its nationalism and xenophobia (Balík et al., 2019). The SPD movement was established in 2015, and the success of the movement relates to the migration crisis in the European Union (Císař & Navrátil, 2019).

KSČM is a political party with a long history. It is the successor to the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which was the ruling party in Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1989 and maintained a totalitarian regime in the country. After the revolution in 1989, this party simply changed its name; the ideology remained the same. The existence of KSČM has never been banned and has never been transformed (Kunštát, 2013), as has been the case in other countries. KSČM has lost voter support since 1989 and has never been a government party. A characteristic feature of KSČM is its social populism (Havlík, 2012) associated with nationalism and the orientation of foreign policy to the east (Ditrych & Souleimanov, 2006; Hloušek & Kaniok, 2021; Kříž, 2021). KSČM (like SPD) disagrees with the Czech Republic's membership in NATO and is skeptical about the European Union (Oxford Analytica, 2017).

3 METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The findings of the literature review revealed gaps and ambiguities in the existing research. In light of these findings, the objective of our study is threefold. Initially, we seek to ascertain the impact of university education on Czech citizens' perceptions of information disseminated by alternative right-wing news media. Secondly, we aim to determine the influence of citizens' university education on the emergence of a democracy-threatening combination. Thirdly, we investigate the relationship between the level of education and the selection of political information sources among citizens.

To answer the research questions, we used unique data that we collected through a survey in the Czech Republic. We constructed a survey that examined citizens' use of media, their voting preferences, and current social sentiment. Data were collected through an online web survey conducted by the Sociores sociological agency in the first week of May 2020. As shown in Table 2, quota selection was used to obtain representative results. Respondents included the general population.

Tab. 2 – Survey information. Source: own research

Characteristics	Detail
Survey type	Quantitative
Sample size	N = 807
Sample selection	quota sampling from the online panel of the Czech National Panel (age category, gender, education)
Data collection method	online survey

Pilot survey	March 2020
Data collection	May 2020

The questions in the questionnaire were developed based on the theoretical findings presented in the previous chapters and our previous results (Kuba et al., 2023). We adjusted the data obtained according to common sociological rules and transformed them into model variables in the required format. These were usually modifications of the categorization type or conversion to the binary format. To address the research questions (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3), we operationalized the theoretical constructs into measurable variables. For RQ1, which investigates the effect of university education on Czech citizens' trust in information published by alternative right-wing news media, we used the variable TRST. This variable categorizes respondents into three groups based on their exposure to and trust in these media: those who do not read or know about these media (DRED), those who read but do not trust them (RDOT), and those who read and trust them (RANT). The level of education was captured through the variable EDU, divided into four categories ranging from primary to university education. For RQ2, examining the influence of university education on the formation of a democracy-threatening combination, we used the variable AVOT to identify support for anti-system political parties (ANO, SPD, KSČM). Control variables such as AGE (age categories), SEX (gender), and FIDI (financial satisfaction) were included to explore the relationship between education and voting behavior. Finally, for RQ3, which analyzes how education influences the type and number of media sources used for political information, we utilized the variable NUMB, representing the number of political media sources, supplemented by SOME (social media use) and PUTV (use of public television for news). This detailed mapping of variables ensures that each research question is addressed with the appropriate data. The variables generated and the basic statistics are shown in Table 3.

Tab. 3 – List of variables including descriptive statistics. Source: own research

Variable	Comment	Frequency/Mean ± St. Dev.
TRST	Citizen's relationship to alternative right-wing news media.	Does not read/does not know (DRED): 573 Reads, does not trust (RDOT): 81 Reads, trusts (RANT): 153
SEX	The citizen is a woman.	Yes: 412; No: 597
EDU	Citizen's highest level of education.	Incomplete and primary education (EDU1): 119 Lower secondary education (EDU2): 296 Upper secondary education (EDU3): 281 University education (EDU4): 111
AGE	Citizen's age.	18–29 years: 127 30–49 years: 301 50–64 years: 188 65 years and over: 191
RELG	The citizen is religious.	Yes: 253; No: 554
MARR	The citizen is married.	Yes: 372; No: 435
CITY	The citizen lives in a city with 10,000–99,999 inhabitants.	Yes: 240; No: 567
FIDI	Citizen's satisfaction with their financial situation (0: very dissatisfied; 6: very satisfied).	3.216 ± 1.474
EMLS	A citizen receives and sends chain emails with political content.	Yes: 332; No: 475
SOME	A citizen follows political content on social media.	Yes: 258; No: 549
PUTV	A citizen watches the news on public television.	Yes: 303; No: 504
NUMB	The number of media sources on which a citizen watches political content (range 0–	1.834 ± 1.239

	4).	
AVOT	A citizen voted for an anti-system political party (ANO, SPD, KSČM) in Czech parliamentary elections.	Yes: 280; No: 527

We used multinomial logistic regression models to verify relationships between variables. This method is applied in situations where the dependent variable takes more than two values (categories). The method can be used to identify differences in characteristics between users of alternative media. This method is commonly used in socioeconomic surveys (Ramsey & Schafer, 2002).

4 RESULTS

4.1 The Relationship Between Education and Trust in Alternative Right-Wing Media

In the first part of the study, we examined whether citizens consume political information from alternative right-wing news media and the reasons that motivate them to consume it. The responses of citizens according to their level of education are shown in Figure 1.
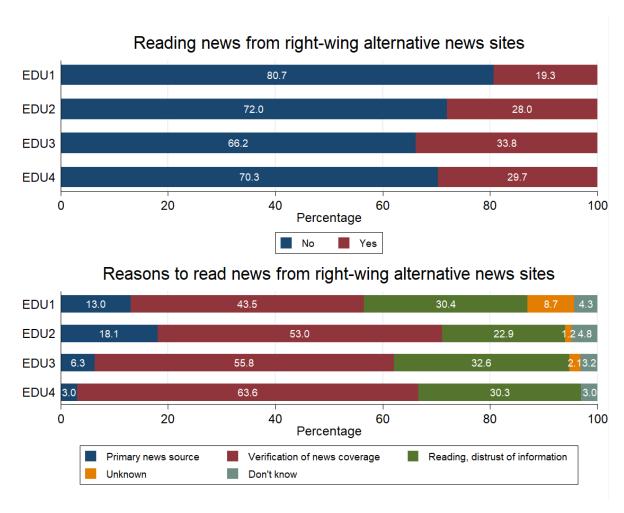

Fig. 1 – Consumers of political content published by alternative right-wing news media.
Source: own research

Obviously, the level of education influences the level of consumption of political content from alternative right-wing media. Citizens with primary education (EDU1) consume political

content from alternative media less than 20 % of the time. Most citizens (33.8 %) admitted to consuming news from alternative media in the EDU3 (upper secondary education) category. Citizens with higher education consume political content from alternative media 29.7 % of the time. Considering the results of previous studies, the results of our study are interesting because they indicate that people with higher levels of education consume political information from alternative right-wing news media more than citizens with lower levels of education.

The bottom part of Figure 1 graphically interprets the reasons that motivate citizens to consume information from alternative right-wing news media. These citizens are the same citizens who stated in the survey that they consume information from alternative right-wing media. It is clear from the responses that the most frequent reason (independent of the citizen's level of education) is to verify the information published by mainstream media. The second largest category is represented by citizens who use alternative media but do not trust the information they publish. However, the responses of citizens with lower secondary education (EDU2) are alarming. More than 18% of citizens in this category who consume alternative media content use alternative media as their primary source of political information.

In the next part of the analysis, we identified which key factors determine citizens' trust in information published in alternative media. We used a multinomial regression model in which the dependent variable is citizens' trust in published information (TRST). This variable takes three values:

- DRED: citizen does not consume information published by right-wing alternative news media (base category).

- RDOT: citizen consumes information published by right-wing alternative news media, but does not trust the published information.

- RANT: citizen consumes information published by right-wing alternative news media and trusts the published information (includes the responses "primary news source" and "verification of news coverage" from the previous analysis).

The independent variables are individual characteristics of citizens and media usage patterns. The selection of these variables was based on the theoretical research discussed in the theoretical background section. At least two advantages of the model used are evident. First, the model identifies significant factors that influence citizens' trust in information provided by alternative media. Secondly, the model shows how citizens from the previously noted categories (i.e., DRED, RDOT, RANT) differ from each other. The results of the regression analysis performed are presented in Table 4.

Tab. 4 – Users of alternative right-wing news sites. Source: own research

	(1A)	(1B)
	RDOT	RANT
SEX	-0.483	**-0.926***
	(0.272)	(0.233)
EDU2	-0.027	0.093
	(0.449)	(0.388)
EDU3	0.729	**0.920***
	(0.421)	(0.382)
EDU4	0.476	**1.039***
	(0.508)	(0.439)

AGE2	0.106 (0.409)	0.099 (0.378)
AGE3	-0.001 (0.477)	-0.003 (0.424)
AGE4	0.745 (0.480)	0.257 (0.428)
RELG	0.346 (0.263)	0.217 (0.221)
MARR	-0.044 (0.272)	0.093 (0.221)
CITY	0.423 (0.266)	**0.705**** (0.216)
FIDI	-0.024 (0.088)	-0.067 (0.072)
EMLS	0.195 (0.262)	**0.761***** (0.214)
SOME	**1.298***** (0.256)	**1.124***** (0.214)
PUTV	0.505 (0.266)	-0.159 (0.223)
NUMB	-0.111 (0.104)	0.118 (0.086)
AVOT	-0.003 (0.295)	**1.185***** (0.227)
Constant	**-3.003***** (0.583)	**-3.116***** (0.517)
BIC	1314.468	
Log likelihood	-543.448	
Chi-squared	186.800	
Pseudo R^2	0.147	
N	807	

Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The first part of the model (1A) identifies significant variables that determine whether citizens consume political information published by alternative media (compared to citizens who do not consume such information). However, this group of citizens does not trust the published information. The only variable that is significant in this model is the citizen's following of political content on social media (SOME). Based on this result, it can be assumed that citizens who come into contact with information from alternative media get a link to this information on social media. By following political content on social media, they differ from citizens who do not consume information published by alternative media at all. The regression analysis did not show any other differences between these two groups of citizens.

The second part of model (1B) presents interesting results by identifying the factors that determine citizen trust in information published by alternative media. Based on the results of the analysis, the most likely consumer of information from alternative media who trusts this information can be characterized as a male with upper secondary or university education who lives in a medium-sized city (10,000–99,999 inhabitants). These citizens are also recipients of chain emails with political content and follow political content on social media. In elections, these citizens demand extremist anti-system political parties. These results indicated that citizens who trust information published in alternative media are victims of conspiracy theories,

which they actively seek out on various media platforms (alternative media, social networks, chain emails).

4.2 The Relationship Between Alternative Media Consumption and Electoral Preferences

To investigate whether right-wing alternative news media pose a threat to the current liberal democratic system, we created another multinomial model. The dependent variable in this model represents a combination of citizens' attitudes to information published by alternative media and anti-system preferences. This dependent variable takes the following values:

- DRED_OTHR: citizen does not read alternative news media and does not vote for anti-system political parties (base category).

- RDOT_OTHR: citizen reads alternative news media, does not trust published information, and does not vote for anti-system political parties.

- RANT_OTHR: citizen reads alternative news media, trusts published information, and does not vote for anti-system political parties.

- DRED_AVOT: citizen does not read alternative news media and votes for anti-system political parties.

- RDOT_AVOT: citizen reads alternative news media, does not trust the information published, and votes for anti-system political parties.

- RANT_AVOT: citizen reads alternative news media, believes the published information, and votes for anti-system political parties.

The results of the multinomial regression are presented in Table 5.

Tab. 5 – Citizen categories based on trust in information published by alternative media and electoral preferences. Source: own research

	(2A)	(2B)	(2C)	(2D)	(2E)
	RDOT_OTHR	**RANT_OTHR**	**DRED_AVOT**	**RDOT_AVOT**	**RANT_AVOT**
SEX	**-0.679***[*]	**-0.674***[*]	-0.060	-0.242	**-1.242***[***]
	(0.323)	(0.322)	(0.223)	(0.476)	(0.314)
EDU2	0.235	-0.044	0.655	-0.015	0.787
	(0.551)	(0.549)	(0.351)	(0.727)	(0.515)
EDU3	**0.972***[*]	0.885	0.134	0.216	**1.069***[*]
	(0.494)	(0.506)	(0.367)	(0.754)	(0.520)
EDU4	0.726	1.078	-0.207	-0.388	0.583
	(0.582)	(0.564)	(0.453)	(0.998)	(0.634)
AGE2	-0.340	0.405	**1.225***[*]	15.479	0.457
	(0.449)	(0.470)	(0.483)	(868.825)	(0.567)
AGE3	-0.120	-0.096	**1.649***[***]	14.659	1.067
	(0.519)	(0.575)	(0.499)	(868.825)	(0.588)
AGE4	0.342	0.789	**2.634***[***]	17.328	**1.996***[***]
	(0.567)	(0.581)	(0.514)	(868.825)	(0.598)
RELG	0.430	0.201	-0.319	-0.190	-0.039
	(0.308)	(0.310)	(0.229)	(0.478)	(0.281)
MARR	0.315	-0.046	0.149	-0.497	0.247
	(0.333)	(0.317)	(0.214)	(0.457)	(0.280)

CITY	0.323 (0.319)	**0.669**[*] (0.308)	-0.182 (0.233)	0.398 (0.461)	**0.686**[*] (0.271)
FIDI	0.049 (0.107)	-0.097 (0.101)	**0.206**[**] (0.073)	0.004 (0.148)	0.165 (0.092)
EMLS	0.246 (0.317)	**1.260**[***] (0.310)	0.355 (0.209)	0.425 (0.459)	**0.643**[*] (0.274)
SOME	**1.218**[***] (0.308)	**1.223**[***] (0.302)	0.172 (0.242)	**1.600**[***] (0.450)	**1.237**[***] (0.277)
PUTV	**0.703**[*] (0.318)	0.151 (0.312)	0.165 (0.220)	0.209 (0.486)	-0.460 (0.291)
NUMB	-0.080 (0.126)	0.116 (0.123)	0.031 (0.085)	-0.129 (0.180)	0.114 (0.107)
Constant	**-3.359**[***] (0.674)	**-3.691**[***] (0.688)	**-3.630**[***] (0.588)	-18.860 (868.825)	**-4.387**[***] (0.730)
BIC	2455.349				
Log likelihood	-959.942				
Chi-squared	344.011				
Pseudo R^2	0.152				
N	807				

Standard errors in parentheses; [*] $p < 0.05$, [**] $p < 0.01$, [***] $p < 0.001$

To determine whether alternative media in the Czech Republic are a threat to liberal democracy (or who is threatening it), it is necessary to focus on the results presented in column 2E of Table 5. This column describes the likely characteristics of a citizens who trust information published by alternative media and vote for political parties that oppose the principles of liberal democracy. The results of the analysis indicate that these citizens are characterized as males with an upper secondary education who are older, live in a medium-sized city, receive chain emails with political themes, and also follow political content on social media. From this description, it can be concluded that these citizens are actively interested in politics, but the information they use to decide their activity in the elections represents conspiracy theories (hoaxes, fake news), which are unrestrictedly spread on various online platforms. A surprising result of this part of the analysis is the finding that university-educated people do not differ from people with primary and lower secondary education in their trust in alternative media combined with anti-system preferences.

Column 2B of Table 5 presents the likely characteristics of citizens who, like the previous described category of citizens, trust information from alternative media but do not vote for anti-system political parties in elections. Compared to those who vote for anti-system parties, age and education are not significant variables for these citizens. Therefore, it can be concluded that a citizen's higher age and higher secondary education are key factors in their decision to vote against liberal democracy in elections.

Interesting results can also be seen in column 2C of Table 5. The results in this column identify citizens who have anti-system preferences even though they do not consume political content from alternative media. These citizens are older and, surprisingly, show higher levels of satisfaction with their financial situation. It can be assumed that these citizens vote for anti-system political parties for other reasons, such as satisfaction with the implemented policies. Anti-system political parties with populist tendencies traditionally support pension increases.

We would also like to highlight the consequences of public television broadcasting. According to the results in column 2A of Table 5, viewers of the main news broadcast on public television

do not trust information published by alternative media and do not vote for anti-system political parties. This underscores the important role of the public media service.

4.3 Alternative News Sources and Education Level

In the last part of the study, we investigated how citizens, depending on their level of education, use other news sources through which unverified political information is disseminated (chain emails and social media). We examined which citizens rely on public television as the primary source of news coverage and also looked at the number of sources from which citizens consume political content. We suggest that consuming news from multiple sources (television, radio, internet, daily newspapers) is a tactic that can prevent becoming stuck in the "echo chamber." Citizens' responses are interpreted graphically in Figure 2.
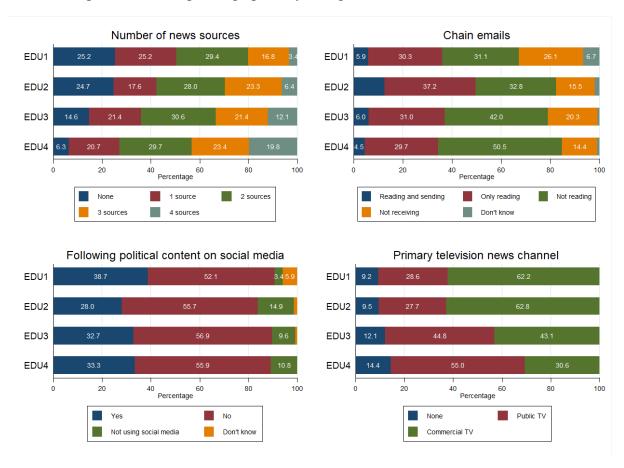

Fig. 2 – Influence of citizens' education in the choice of media information sources. Source: own research

Obviously, the level of education determines the choice and number of sources of political news. Most citizens consume news from two sources. As the level of education increases, the number of sources from which citizens consume news also increases. Almost 20% of university-educated citizens consume political news from four sources (television, radio, internet, daily newspapers). In contrast, more than 25% of citizens with a primary education consume information from only one source, and there is a risk of manipulation and an "echo chamber."

Higher education also influences the choice of media sources. Compared to other citizens, citizens with higher education do not read emails with political content and prefer public

television as a source of political information. When it comes to consuming political content from social media, these citizens do not differ significantly from other citizens.

5 DISCUSSION

This study investigated how education influences trust in alternative right-wing media, patterns of media consumption, and voting preferences, focusing on the Czech Republic as a case study. The findings provide nuanced insights into the complex role education plays in shaping citizens' engagement with media and their political behavior, especially within a context marked by competition between alternative and mainstream media.

One of the key findings is that education does not universally protect citizens from the influence of alternative right-wing media, which disseminate misinformation (RQ1). Although individuals with university educations tend to consume a more diverse range of media sources, many still place a degree of trust in alternative outlets, frequently employing them to corroborate information from mainstream sources. This reflects a broader dissatisfaction with traditional media, which alternative platforms exploit by presenting themselves as credible challengers to the mainstream. These results align with recent findings (De Coninck et al., 2021), which suggest that education alone cannot eliminate trust in misinformation. In the Czech context, platforms such as ParlamentniListy.cz have effectively leveraged public skepticism to position themselves as an alternative voice, even for educated audiences.

Of particular concern is the combination of trust in alternative media and anti-system voting preferences (RQ2). The study identified older men with upper secondary education as the group most susceptible to this combination. These individuals rely heavily on unverified sources, such as chain emails and social networks, which reinforce their political dissatisfaction and distrust of mainstream institutions. This finding highlights the influence of echo chambers and selective exposure (Bruns, 2019; Cinelli et al., 2021) in shaping anti-systemic behavior. While university education appears to mitigate some of these risks, the persistence of this combination among less educated citizens underscores the broader challenges facing democratic stability. The success of alternative media in appealing to certain demographic groups illustrates how dissatisfaction with mainstream institutions can fuel distrust and political polarization, contributing to a fragmented media environment in which misinformation thrives.

Diversity of media consumption emerged as a critical factor in mitigating the risks associated with misinformation (RQ3). University-educated citizens tend to have access to a wider range of media, including public service broadcasters and alternative sources, reducing their reliance on a single perspective. However, their inclusion of alternative media in their portfolios illustrates the competitive strategies these platforms use to appeal to different audiences. In contrast, older citizens with lower levels of education consume content primarily from alternative sources, which increases their vulnerability to misinformation and reinforces their anti-systemic tendencies. This finding supports previous research highlighting the relationship between education, political interest, and media diversity (Hillygus, 2005; Boulianne, 2011). At the same time, it challenges the notion that education alone is sufficient to prevent citizens from falling into information bubbles.

The findings highlight the competition between alternative and mainstream media in the Czech Republic. Platforms such as ParlamentniListy.cz have successfully exploited narratives of censorship and discontent that have weakened public trust in mainstream media. Alternative media have positioned themselves as credible challengers, appealing to citizens who feel underserved or misrepresented by traditional media. Despite these challenges, the relatively

stable role of public broadcasters in the Czech Republic provides a necessary counterbalance. Maintaining and strengthening trust in these institutions is essential to counter the influence of alternative media and to maintain democratic stability.

This study has certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. Data collection during the COVID-19 closure may have influenced respondents' media consumption habits and political attitudes, as limited access to information during this period may have influenced their reliance on certain sources. In addition, the analysis focuses exclusively on the Czech Republic, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. To address this, future research should include comparative studies across Central and Eastern Europe to better understand regional differences in media trust and political behavior.

Further research is also needed to examine the long-term effects of alternative media consumption on democratic stability. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how these patterns evolve over time and respond to broader socio-political changes. Exploring the socio-economic factors that influence trust in alternative media, such as income inequality and social well-being (Gariba & Prokop, 2024), could provide actionable insights for policymakers seeking to mitigate the risks associated with misinformation. By broadening the scope of research, future studies can build on these findings to develop more effective strategies for promoting media literacy and supporting democratic institutions.

5 CONCLUSION

This study contributes to understanding the role of education in shaping trust in alternative right-wing media, media consumption patterns, and voting behavior in the Czech Republic. By situating the analysis within the context of a competitive media landscape, the research sheds light on how alternative and mainstream outlets vie for public trust and influence political preferences, revealing important implications for democratic stability.

The findings challenge the assumption that education universally protects against misinformation. While university-educated citizens consume a diverse range of media sources, their trust in alternative outlets reflects the limitations of education in addressing dissatisfaction with mainstream media. Dissatisfaction remains a key driver that alternative platforms exploit to position themselves as credible competitors. At the same time, older men with lower levels of education emerged as the most at-risk group, combining trust in alternative media with anti-system voting preferences. This combination underscores the broader issue of selective exposure and information bubbles, which reinforce polarized political views and erode trust in democratic institutions.

These results emphasize the urgent need to strengthen media literacy programs tailored to diverse demographics, equipping citizens with the critical skills necessary to evaluate information sources effectively. Public broadcasters also have a pivotal role to play. To compete with alternative outlets and rebuild trust, they must enhance transparency, engage more proactively with audiences, and address public dissatisfaction with their content. Without such interventions, the competitive success of alternative media may further deepen societal polarization and undermine liberal democracy.

Future research should build on these findings by examining regional differences across Central and Eastern Europe and exploring the long-term implications of alternative media consumption. Comparative and longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how political and media landscapes interact to shape public trust and behavior. As media competition continues

to evolve, understanding these dynamics will be crucial for fostering informed and resilient societies.

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