

More Control Than Support: Populism, The Covid-19 Pandemic, and Media Policies in USA, Brazil, Serbia, and Poland

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The article examines the approach to media policy and regulation adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic in four countries that were led by populist leaders at the beginning of the pandemic: Brazil, the United States, Poland, and Serbia. We draw on an extensive analysis of legal, policy and related documents, as well as 63 interviews with key actors involved in pandemic communication, including government officials, health experts, and journalists. The study identifies the distinguishing features of populist policymaking as well as develops an original analytical framework for its analysis. We conclude that the media policies examined oscillated between control and support. On the one hand, several policies were aimed at controlling pandemic communications and limiting journalists' access to public information; on the other hand, efforts were also made to support the media. On the whole, the drive to control overshadowed the efforts to provide support, and even when support was provided, it was often distributed in an untransparent or unfair manner that benefitted progovernment outlets. Arguably, this dynamic of control over support reflects the characteristic features of populist policymaking, especially its tendency to mobilize media policy in a manner that benefits progovernment outlets while minimizing opportunities for criticism.

Keywords: media policy, pandemic communication, COVID-19, USA, Poland, Brazil, Serbia

Media play a key role in supporting crisis communication, and media policymakers have the capacity to implement measures that can facilitate their positive contributions. However, the rise of populist leaders and movements has created additional obstacles for crisis communication and for effective policymaking in a crisis.

This study examines the approach to media policy and regulation adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic in four countries that were led by populist leaders at the beginning of the pandemic: Brazil, the United States, Poland, and Serbia. Although all involve cases of right-wing populism, they encompass rather different approaches to the pandemic (Meyer, 2020; Ringe & Rennó, 2023) and differ on various other policy-relevant dimensions. This diversity enables us to draw reasonably robust conclusions about the nature of populist media policy responses.

Apart from making an empirical contribution to the understanding of media policy and regulatory responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the way they were shaped by populist politics, the study also advances the understanding of populism and media more generally. While populism has often been studied as a distinct communicative or discursive phenomenon (e.g., De Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018; Peri, 2004) we argue that a holistic understanding of the media-populism dynamics also requires a conceptualization of its relationship with media policy and regulation. The study identifies the distinguishing features of populist policymaking and develops an original framework for its analysis.

Populism and Media Policies

Populism has attracted significant scholarly interest. Many authors point to the elusive nature of populism, its multiple meanings (Peri, 2004), its paradoxical and ambiguous conceptualization (Mudde, 2021), considerable differences across countries (Greve, 2021), and close links with political ideologies such as nativism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). Despite considerable debate over the definition of populism, there is widespread agreement on at least one core feature—namely, its appeal to “the people,” which are seen as distinguished from and opposed to “the elites” that represent the established structure of power and values (Canovan, 1999; Müller, 2016; Peri, 2004).

Beyond that, several other features frequently mentioned in literature are likely to have consequences for media policymaking. First, populism builds on antipluralism; while claiming to be guided by “the general will of the people,” it sees “the people” as one, avoiding recognition of minority rights and privileging majoritarian solutions (Moffitt, 2020, pp. 25–28; Mudde, 2021, p. 578). Second, this exclusionary understanding of “the people” underpins the tendency to mobilize political antagonism between “the people” and its various “enemies,” including the media as a detached elite (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021), often in combination with the rhetoric of crisis, to justify radical measures (Moffitt, 2020). Third, by excluding its adversaries from “the people,” populism denies their legitimacy and suppresses criticism (Müller, 2016), a feature that is conducive to illiberal policies that favor supporters over opponents. Finally, populism portrays experts as politicized and associated with the elites rather than serving the interests of the people (Brubaker, 2020), a trait that may undermine the role of technocratic expertise in the policy process.

Studying the link between populism and the media, scholars have focused mostly on media coverage of populist discourses; on applying the concept of media populism to social media; on populism as a distinct communicative phenomenon, characterized by specific content, discourse or style; or showed how the media provided a forum for normalizing populist discourses (e.g., De Vreese et al., 2018; Esser, Stepinska, & Hopmann, 2016; Krämer, 2023; Mazzoleni, 2008; Peri, 2004; Schmidt, 2020). These accounts on “media populism” or “mediated populism” often missed a consideration of media systemic or policy-related factors, with a few notable exceptions. Freedman (2018) importantly pointed out that structural conditions and circumstances such as policy silence or policy failures have enabled right-wing and antidemocratic populism to grow. Jones (2021) identified structural communicative advantages that enable demagogues to exploit populist irruptions and traditions. Both Freedman (2018) and Jones (2021) refer to insufficient policies in the “liberal normalcy” that lead to the rise of populist communication. Finally, a recent overview (Bartha, Boda, & Szikra, 2020) identifies several characteristic features of populist policymaking, including excessive responsiveness to majoritarian preferences of the electorate and a tendency to adopt policies that harm minorities; a preference for fast and unpredictable policy changes that circumvent the role of technocratic expertise; and reliance on antagonistic and crisis frames to legitimize specific policy solutions. However, such contributions remain an exception, and on the whole, the body of research on populist policymaking rarely touches on the media. This study seeks to bridge this gap by focusing on the structural impact of populist media policies. Understandably, media policies reach deeper, structural levels of communication, affecting not only communication practices but potentially changing structural conditions in which the media (and thus also other communication actors) operate. They create

overall enabling or disruptive environments for the media, and as such, they form a fundamental aspect of the media-populism nexus.

Although scant, existing literature tackling populism from a media policy perspective offers some useful clues. Waisbord (2011) points out that populist leaders draw sharp lines between “our” media (supportive of the populist government) and “their” media (portrayed as the deceptive front for antipopulist, antigovernment agendas). Populist leaders also often exploit their access to supportive media outlets to discredit opposing media (Grzymala-Busse, 2019). Thus, populist media policies may range from allocating generous budgets to state-owned or sympathetic media outlets to advocating for legislation that strengthens the executive’s regulatory power over media content. Such policies are justified with reference to the notion that legislation is essential for promoting the media’s social responsibility (Waisbord, 2011) or the protection of national interests, as was the case in Poland under Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, 2019). In sum, populist media policies, much like populist policies more generally, are rooted in the distinguishing features of populism, including its antipluralist, exclusionary, and antagonistic nature. Taken together, they are designed to strengthen the ability of populist elites to use the media to their own benefit, be it through the unequal distribution of support, aimed at friendly media, or through various means of control, targeted at minimizing dissent. As we shall see, this combination of support and control was evident also in measures adopted by populist governments during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Media Policies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Research on populist responses to the pandemic indicates that these responses were not uniform but have little to say about media policies. On the one hand, studies claim that COVID-19 has not (always) exposed the alleged incompetence of populists in power (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020) and several populist governments have taken the COVID-19 crisis seriously (Meyer, 2020; Mudde, 2021). On the other hand, some scholars point out that populist governments were less likely to implement long-term and consistent policies (Bayerlein, Boese, Gates, Kamin, & Murshed, 2021; Kavakli, 2020). Others observe that some populist leaders sought an illiberal path toward concentrating power and limited freedom of speech (Meyer, 2020).

Research on media policies during the pandemic has advanced but has little to say specifically about populism. Nonetheless, this work brings some important insights on the limitations of prodemocratic functions of the media and gaps in policy responses. For example, some studies underline a growing information dissonance that resulted in confusion and uncertainty among citizens (Birmingham, 2020; Smith & Wanless, 2020). Increased economic hardship combined with lack of supportive policies (Bunyan & Maitland, 2020) led to growing platform dependency of both journalists and news media organizations. Some scholars also point to new limits on media freedom and access to information (Radcliffe, 2020), while others observe an increase in populist attacks and forms of control over established media, including public service broadcasters (Holtz-Bacha, 2021). These processes resonate with a generally observed phenomenon of democratic backsliding during the pandemic (Edgell, Lachapelle, Lührmann, & Maerz, 2021) as well as antidemocratic discourses or positive reactions to authoritarian responses to the pandemic (Sorsa & Kivikoski, 2023). It is important to note that these trends have not been limited only to countries led by

populist leaders. However, given the features of populist policymaking, it is feasible that the presence of populist leaders made the deterioration of democratic media functions during the pandemic more likely.

Given the lack of research on the topic, we opted for an exploratory, in-depth analysis of a few countries led by populist leaders at the time: the United States, Brazil, Serbia, and Poland. Although all involve cases of right-wing populism, they differ in several other dimensions. First, they embody both main types of populist responses to the pandemic identified in existing literature (Meyer, 2020; Ringe & Rennó, 2023). Brazil and the United States fall into the group of countries where populist leaders refused to treat the threat seriously or adopt serious mitigation measures (Béland, Rocco, Segatto, & Waddan, 2021; Roberts, 2022), whereas Poland and Serbia are examples of countries—along with Hungary, Israel, and Turkey—where populist leaders (initially) implemented strong mitigation measures but also often imposed them in a manner that undermined civil liberties (Flis & Kaminski, 2022; Vankovska, 2020). The countries also differ in the size of media markets, levels of cultural and ethnic diversity, structure of the political system, and sociohistorical context in which legal and policy rationales are formed. This all manifests in different types of media systems that cannot easily fall into one of three basic categories distinguished by Hallin and Mancini (2004) with the exception of the U.S. liberal model. With this background in mind, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What were the main similarities and differences in media policies adopted in the four countries?

RQ2: To what extent and how did populism manifest itself in these media policies?

Analytical Framework and Methods: Four Areas of Examination

Our analysis examines media policies adopted throughout the pandemic (2020–2023) and follows an original analytical framework encompassing four areas of analysis: fundamental rights, economic conditions, disinformation and digital platforms, and the role of the state and public service media (PSM). This framework, described in greater detail in the Appendix,² is informed by existing research that suggests these four areas are most vulnerable to populist policymaking. A set of questions was developed to examine populist governments' responses in these four specific media policy areas during the period of 2020–2022.

Data was collected using two methods: desk research focusing on relevant publicly available documents (legal and policy documents, NGO reports, self-regulatory documents, and others) and semi-structured interviews with a total of 63 key actors involved in pandemic communication, covering three main groups (government officials and politicians, health experts, and news media professionals and journalists). Data analysis was conducted for each of the four areas separately. The first step of the analysis included the completion of country reports by country teams, employing a qualitative content analysis following the sets of questions for each of the four areas of analysis, using either one or both sets of data, depending on the focus of the question. The analysis of interviews was typically used either to corroborate the findings emerging from the analysis of documents or offer insights into aspects of pandemic policymaking that were

² Link to the Appendix 1: Analytical framework, data sources and methods of data collection and analysis: https://tiny.pl/nb413_4v

not evident from publicly accessible documents (e.g., reasons for implementing or not implementing a particular policy, behind-the-scenes dynamics). Answering these questions entailed both identifying key policies and their relevant contexts. The analytical process focused on extracting policy outcomes and (where relevant or available) their justifications. In the second step, the country-specific findings were compared across the four countries. The comparative analysis focused principally on changes in media policies introduced during the pandemic (or lack of such changes), and similarities and differences between the countries.

Fundamental Rights

In the area of fundamental rights, the analysis examined constitutional protection of media freedom, infringement of media freedoms and attacks on journalists, limitations on journalists' access to information, and new regulatory restrictions on communication and access to information about the health crisis (Table 1).

Table 1. Existence of Policies or Cases Studied Under the Area of Fundamental Rights.

	USA	BRAZIL	SERBIA	POLAND
constitutional protection of media freedom	✓	✓	✓	✓
infringements on media freedoms or attacks on journalists	both	Both	both	mainly infringements
limitations of journalists' access to information	✓	✓	✓	✓
new restrictions on communication or access to information on the health crisis	✓	✓	✓	✓

Infringements on Media Freedoms, and Attacks on Journalists

Media freedom is constitutionally protected in all four countries, and there were no major changes to these provisions during the pandemic. Nonetheless, infringements on media freedoms increased, and in three of the four countries—the United States, Brazil, and Serbia—they were accompanied by attacks on media professionals.

In 2020, the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker reported an unprecedented number of assaults of journalists, 632, six times more than in 2021 and 12 times more than in 2019 and 2022 (Freedom of the Press Foundation, 2024). Journalists covering state responses to the pandemic also experienced a reduction of seating in briefing rooms, unreliable technology, and, in some cases, refusals to answer real-time questions (Jerreat, 2020; Sugars, 2020).

Likewise, several journalists in Brazil were exposed to assaults both face-to-face and online. According to a report produced by the National Federation of Journalists (FENAJ), "Bolsonaro was responsible" for 34.19% of the online and offline attacks on journalists in 2021 (FENAJ, 2022, p. 13).

In Serbia, violent protests that broke out in July 2020 contributed to an increase in attacks on journalists, with the police attacking both journalists and protesters objecting to the handling of the crisis

(Dragojlo, 2020). In one particularly extreme case, a journalist of the oppositional news portal Nova.rs was arrested after revealing that the medical staff in one of the major regional medical centers did not have sufficient personal protective equipment and worked in unsafe conditions (Mong, 2020). The journalist was charged with spreading panic but was released after a strong reaction from the journalists' associations and the public.

In Poland, attacks on journalists were less common, but COVID-19 rules were used repeatedly by public officials to punish critical journalists. Several journalists were detained by the police while covering antilockdown protests and women's protests against an antiabortion constitutional ruling in 2020. For example, two journalists from the oppositional daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* were detained, one on the grounds of breaching COVID social distancing rules and another for not wearing a mask (Council of Europe, 2020; European Federation of Journalists, 2020).

Restrictions of Access to Information and Communication About the Health Crisis

In the United States, two structural limitations affected journalists' access to information. First, the Trump administration introduced new guidelines to the HIPAA Privacy Rules (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office for Civil Rights, 2020), which provided media-specific interpretations of existing rules that made it difficult for journalists to photograph the crisis inside hospitals (Maass, 2020). Second, the federal administration placed restrictions on public comments and media appearances of key agencies and scientists/health officials. Although such restrictions did not begin with Trump, they did tighten in 2020. The press releases by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (hereafter CDC) had to be approved by the White House and rarely were (The Select Subcommittee, 2021, 2022; Union of Concerned Scientists, 2022). Trump also ordered hospitals to send COVID-19 data to the Department of Health and Human Services instead of the CDC, thus strengthening government control over official data (Weiland, 2020).

In Brazil, President Bolsonaro repeatedly refused to provide relevant information and frequently disrespected journalists (Abraji, 2020), and the Ministry of Health ceased to disclose new cases of infections and deaths in June 2020 for several days. However, this caused immediate criticism from lawmakers, health experts, and others (Freitas, Pompeu, & Carneiro, 2020), and media companies formed a consortium that collated data provided by states and municipalities, while the Supreme Federal Court-Supremo Tribunal Federal (STF) ordered the government to release the figures (STF, 2020). Furthermore, in March 2020, the federal government issued a transitory bill (Medida Provisória nº 928 de 2020 [Provisional Measure No. 928 of 2020]) that suspended deadlines for providing public information. However, the law was promptly challenged by the STF, as it violated the constitutional right to information (Freitas, Pompeu, & Carneiro, 2020).

In Serbia, three COVID-19-related regulations limited journalists' access to information. First, although journalists were able to apply for licenses that exempted them from the order on restriction and prohibition of movement of persons, particularly freelance journalists faced problems (Đurić, Filipović Stevanović, & Vasić-Nikolić, 2021). Second, in April 2020, the government implemented the decision on prohibition of the presence of journalists at Crisis Head Quarters (Crisis HQ) press conferences, which

forced journalists to submit the questions online (Đurić et al., 2021). Third, the government's conclusion on informing the population about the status and consequences of the infectious disease COVID-19 caused by the SARS virus enabled the government to centralize and control the dissemination of COVID-19 information. This was perceived as an attempt to silence local authorities and health institutions (Article19, 2021; Stojanovic, 2020). However, because of public pressure, the government eventually withdrew the act.

In Poland, limitations took the shape of both legal restraints and communication practices. First, a special COVID-19 Act, adopted in March 2020, introduced delays in providing public information. The problematic provisions were lifted a few months later after criticism from the commissioner for human rights (hereafter CHR), journalistic and legal circles, and court judgments revealing the lack of justifications for procedural changes (Trociuk, 2021). Second, the dissemination of information was centralized by the Information Center at the Chancellery of the Prime Minister and the Health Ministry. Third, online conferences and Twitter messaging by the Ministry of Health replaced face-to-face contacts. This, in view of some interviewees, led to an atmosphere of abuse of power, with officials engaging in selective treatment and silencing criticism.

Economic Conditions

In the area of economic conditions, the analysis examined policies addressing economic hardship through trends in media revenues, available support schemes, and the distribution of state advertising (Table 2).

Table 2. Trends and Policies Affecting the Economic Conditions of the Media.

	USA	BRAZIL	SERBIA	POLAND
Revenue trends	drop in TV and press revenues comparable with the global average	drop in TV and press revenues comparable with the global average	drop in TV and press revenues	drop in TV revenues comparable with the global average, drop in press revenues very significant
Support schemes	Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) for small businesses (2020) Build Back Better Act (2022)	employment compensation and tax reduction schemes	employment compensation and tax postponement schemes	employment compensation schemes under the Anti-Crisis Shield (2020)
Distributions of state advertising	not an issue	asymmetric distribution privileging pro-Bolsonaro media	not an issue	asymmetric distribution privileging progovernment media

Revenue Trends and Support Schemes

All four countries have seen a decline in media revenues during the pandemic, yet none adopted media-specific forms of support, although media could benefit from generic forms of support aimed at small businesses or industries in general. In the United States, news outlets qualifying as “small businesses” could use the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) in 2020 (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2022), while the Biden administration adopted the Build Back Better Act in 2022 (U.S. House Committee on Financial Services Democrats, 2022), which provided a tax credit subsidy for all industries. In Brazil, measures introduced for whole industries (e.g., Medida Provisória, nº 936 de 2020 [Provisional Measure No. 936 of 2020]) offered employment compensation schemes that were used by the media (KPMG International, 2020). In Poland, news media sought support under the Anti-Crisis Shield (Ustawa z dnia 31 marca 2020 r., 568/2020 [Act of March 31, 2020, 568/2020]) but had to reduce salaries by 20% to qualify. Similarly, media companies in Serbia benefitted from an employment compensation mechanism covering three monthly minimal wages and postponement of tax payments.

The Allocation of State Advertising

Apart from implementing new policies, the state can influence the economic conditions of the media also through the distribution of state funds for the media, including advertising. In Poland, Brazil, and Serbia, untransparent and unfair distribution of state advertising was an issue already before the pandemic. However, it intensified during the pandemic particularly in Poland and Brazil because of the choices made by populist leaders. In Poland, state advertising expenditure increased between 2020 and 2022, with progovernment media such as *Gazeta Polska*, *Sieci*, *Do Rzeczy*, *Nasz Dziennik*, and *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* among the main benefactors (Mikołajewska, 2021).

Likewise, in Brazil, the federal government spent the largest share of its 2020 TV advertising budget on Record TV, a pro-Bolsonaro broadcaster (Fagundes & Mali, 2021). Media also revealed a conflict of interest; the secretary in charge of the federal government’s communications department also acted as a business partner in a company that had business ties with pro-Bolsonaro broadcasters Record and Band, both of which received significant portions of state advertising (Fabrini & Camargo, 2020).

In Serbia, state advertising did not play an important role, partly because much of COVID-19 advertising was distributed by the media for free, which seemed to have had negative financial consequences for outlets (Interviewee Srb-06); it decreased slightly in 2020 compared to 2019, and its allocation has been viewed as untransparent (BIRN Srbija, 2022), but no explicit evidence of asymmetric distribution was reported. In the United States, state advertising has not been an issue either.

Disinformation and Digital Platforms

The third area examines the role of populist leaders, state policies, and digital platforms in combating health disinformation (Table 3).

Table 3. Antidisinformation Policies.

	US	Brazil	Serbia	Poland
Populist leaders spreading COVID-19 disinformation	Yes	Yes	No	No
Governments' antidisinformation policies	None during the first year of the pandemic under Trump's administration, several initiatives introduced under Biden	None at the federal level, but several strategies used at state level	Lack of any comprehensive policy	Various initiatives of the government, NGOs, and other organizations, but uncoordinated
Platform policies	COVID-19 content policies implemented by platforms, but politicians sometimes exempt	Global COVID-19 content moderation policies; initiatives supporting quality journalistic content	Limited scale of COVID-19 content moderation policies	EU COVID-19 content moderation policies implemented by platforms; platforms cooperate with the government

Antidisinformation Policies and the Role of Populist Leaders

All in the United States, Trump's administration has not tackled pandemic disinformation by any legal or other means, and Trump himself played a key role in spreading disinformation. Examples include mentioning hydroxychloroquine as a "miracle cure," describing masks as "a form of social control," and dismissal of COVID-19 as a "common cold" (The University of Connecticut Social Media Analytics Center, 2020). Antidisinformation policies were initiated only by the Biden administration: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Office of the U.S. Surgeon General launched an online advisory service on Health Misinformation (Murthy, 2021), and the Congress Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis conducted several investigations concerning pandemic disinformation (The Select Subcommittee, 2021).

Like in the United States, the president in Brazil was also a key source of COVID-19 disinformation. Several studies show that misleading content in Bolsonaro's speeches impaired vaccination and disease-control efforts (Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, & Da Mata, 2023; Figueira & Morendo-Louzada, 2021). Although the federal Ministry of Health offered little resistance, effective antidisinformation efforts emerged at state level, where state health secretaries adopted several strategies for providing fact-checked information to local media and platforms that could be further used by other public sectors (Interviewees Br-04, Br-05, & Br-13).

In contrast to Brazil and the United States, populist leaders in Poland did not openly question the health threat, but antidisinformation efforts were superficial and inconsistent. Government efforts were

initiated by isolated administration units and remained fragmented and poorly coordinated (Kupiecki, Bryjka, & Chłoń, 2022). At the same time, the scale of disinformation proved immense; an estimated 800+ portals were actively disseminating disinformation during the pandemic (Interviewee Pol-09). Furthermore, state-led antidisinformation efforts operated alongside several activities led by NGOs and researchers. These initiatives, however, remained largely disconnected, and their effectiveness was also hampered by asymmetric distribution of state support, akin to the one apparent in state advertising; initiatives led by progovernment media such as PAP, TVP, and PR benefited from significant funds, whereas NGO-based fact-checkers such as Panoptykon and Demagog had to rely on other funding sources.

Finally, in Serbia, as in Poland, the government—apart from a very brief period before the introduction of lockdowns in March 2020—did not question the seriousness of the pandemic. At the same time, no systematic disinformation policy was introduced, which reflected the view that the government is not responsible for countering disinformation (Interviewee Srb-12).

Platform Policies

In the United States, leading platforms and platform operators including Facebook, YouTube, Google, Microsoft, and Twitter responded to public concerns over COVID-19 misinformation with new content-moderation policies. From December 2020, Facebook removed vaccine-related misinformation from user-generated content (Allsop, 2020), and in January 2021, Trump's Facebook and Instagram accounts were suspended (Clegg, 2023). However, as evident from internal policies revealed by a whistleblower in October 2021, content posted by political leaders was usually exempt from fact-checking (*Wall Street Journal*, 2021). Twitter initially took action only against coordinated disinformation campaigns, but later started removing individual tweets that posed a "direct risk" to users' health (Singh & Bagchi, 2020).

Platforms in Brazil generally followed content-moderation policies introduced in the United States and the European Union. For instance, YouTube restricted content about COVID-19 that posed a serious risk of significant harm or disseminated incorrect medical information and questioned the guidelines of health authorities (YouTube, 2022), which led to removals of Bolsonaro's live streams (G1.globo.com, 2021; Viapiana, 2022). Some platforms supported quality journalism; Facebook invested in 14 Brazilian outlets in 2020 to produce fact-checked content about COVID-19, while Google created a fund supporting regional newspapers of different political leanings, from left-wing websites criticizing Bolsonaro, such as *Ponte Jornalismo*, to pro-Bolsonaro outlets, such as *O Tempo* (Gingras, 2020).

In Poland, platforms initially cooperated with the government (Interviewee Pol-02) and searched for and marked false information. Yet, there were also clashes between the platforms and the government over content policies. In January 2022, the far-right party *Konfederacja* was banned from Facebook because of "repeated violations" of community and content standards related to COVID-19 disinformation. The decision was criticized by various political actors, including Prime Minister Morawiecki, and seen as an attack on freedom of expression. In August 2022, YouTube suspended *wRealu24*, a Polish far-right online TV channel, on grounds of hate speech, Russian propaganda, and COVID-19 conspiracy theories, which likewise provoked protests from right-wing actors (Tilles, 2022).

In Serbia, platform actions seemed less frequent possibly because of the lack of capacity to monitor small languages. An exception was the closure of a large anti-immigration Facebook group that claimed the government introduced lockdown measures to settle migrants in Serbia (Freedom House, 2021).

The Role of PSM

The final layer of analysis examined policies concerning PSM—a key source of information in three of the four countries—and the way they shaped editorial independence and COVID-19 coverage (Table 4).

Table 4. PSM Policies and Performance.

	USA	BRAZIL	SERBIA	POLAND
Editorial independence	High	Low	low	low
COVID-19 coverage	moderate and oriented to expert sources, occasionally critical of Trump	progovernment, supporting official policies	progovernment, supporting official policies	largely progovernment, supporting official policies, but also occasionally questioning them
Monitoring and accountability of PSM performance	accountability linked to funding	lack of effective monitoring	no special monitoring of pandemic coverage	insufficient monitoring, but in one case leading to suspension of a controversial program

In the United States, PSM channels—comprising NPR (National Public Radio), CPB (Corporation of Public Broadcasting), and PBS (Public Broadcasting Service)—have traditionally played a minor role in the media system, but their role increased during the pandemic. Like several other populist leaders, President Trump repeatedly called for cutting PSM funding, and this pressure increased during the pandemic (Porter, 2020). Despite this, CPB received additional funding from the 2020 CARES Act Stimulus Package, which was to be used “to prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus” (Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, 2020, p. 19). NPR and PBS (2020) responded by introducing several new programs that proved rather successful: NPR launched a daily coronavirus podcast that became one of the 10 most popular in the United States, while the NPR news portal increased its traffic by 76% (Farhi, 2020). NPR and PBS were often critical of Trump’s pandemic response, as they tended to be oriented toward expert sources in covering health issues. Still, for the most part, they did not focus on the pandemic as a political story and offered relatively consensual coverage reflecting the views of health professionals (Edison Research & CPB, 2021; Jones, 2020; Roberts, 2022; Summers, 2020).

During his 2018 presidential campaign, Bolsonaro threatened to close or privatize the Brazilian public broadcaster EBC (Souza, 2018). Later, the president changed these plans, subjecting EBC to political control through funding and appointing its management. This was reflected in EBC’s stance on COVID-19, which was supportive of Bolsonaro, even at the expense of internal censorship and newsroom transfers of

disobedient journalists (Interviewees Br-16 and Br-17). EBC's news and current services also frequently spread COVID-19 disinformation (Bezerra & Pinheiro, 2021; Da Silva, Baccin, & Storch, 2021). Political interference in EBC editorial work increased to such an extent that it induced a special investigation from the Senate Committee (Barretto, 2021).

In Serbia, both PSM Boards and the appointing body, the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media, were under clear-cut political control from well before the pandemic (Milutinović, 2022). An analysis of media coverage conducted by OSCE between February and May 2020 observed that the public broadcaster RTS "provided room for a 'state' interpretation," even when reporting "on everyday life during the pandemic" (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2020, p. 27). RTS later became more open to dissenting views, but even then "not to the extent that some other have opened up" (Interviewee Srb-13).

In Poland, PSM was also under government control from before COVID-19, but control increased during the pandemic, arguably to ensure that pandemic coverage was in line with official policies. This is reflected in the increase of state funding between 2020 and 2022 (Mikołajewska, 2021), but also in COVID-19 coverage. On the one hand, and especially in the early stages, PSM supported government policies and its mitigation efforts. On the other hand, it also occasionally gave voice to COVID-19 skepticisms, downplaying the threat, questioning vaccination, and expressing people's fatigue with COVID-19. While user complaints received by the Polish regulator KRRiT did not lead to sanctions, concerns raised about the TVP's talk show *Worth Talking* (*Warto rozmawiać*), which questioned government measures, led to a prompt reaction from the National Media Council (RMN), resulting in the removal of the show.

Conclusions

Four key conclusions emerge from these results. First, the analysis revealed significant similarities but also some differences between the countries (Table 5). Second, cross-country differences were rarely aligned with differences in the general approach to the pandemic. Rather, they are linked to the relative levels of control exerted by populist leaders over the media. Third, media policies in all countries oscillated between attempts to control pandemic communication and limit journalists' access to public information, and forms of support for media. However, control generally took the upper hand, especially in countries where populist control over the media was more extensive. Fourth, the analysis identified several countervailing strategies that mitigated populists' abuses of media policies or compensated for the lack of policymaking.

Cross-country similarities were particularly striking in the area of fundamental rights. In all four countries, government actions against infringements of media freedoms or attacks on journalists were weak or nonexistent, sought to limit journalists' access to information, or introduced new restrictions on communication (Table 5).

Table 5. The Summary of Similarities and Differences in Trends and Media Policies Applied by Populist Governments in Four Studied Countries.

	DIFFERENCES	SIMILARITIES
FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *marked increase in attacks on journalists in Brazil and the United States, but less so in Poland and Serbia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *constitutional protection of media freedom (no fundamental change) *weak action or inaction in cases of infringements of media freedoms or threats to journalists *populist governments limiting access to information by journalists * new restrictions on communication and access to health information
ECONOMIC CONDITIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *asymmetric distribution of state advertising in Brazil and Poland, benefiting progovernment media *nontransparent economic support from the government in Poland and Serbia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *lack of media-specific support schemes during the pandemic in all countries; *media used support schemes designed for all industry sectors
DISINFORMATION AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *populist leaders playing a key role in spreading COVID-19 disinformation in the United States and Brazil *major platforms supporting quality journalism on COVID-19 mainly in the United States and Brazil *some platforms cooperated with the government in Poland on prioritizing verified information *COVID-19 content policies implemented by major platforms in the United States, Brazil, and Poland, and in Serbia with a limited scope 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *no comprehensive antidisinformation policies
THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *high PSM editorial independence in the United States, but low in Poland, Serbia, and Brazil * mostly consensual pandemic coverage in the United States, in line with scientific accounts; progovernment COVID-19 sceptical coverage in Brazil; progovernment COVID-19 coverage in Serbia and Poland 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *funding slightly increased, no major changes in sources of funding *no fundamental changes in modes of the PSM governance

With economic conditions, none of the countries implemented media-specific support schemes. Rather, media organizations had access to general support measures (e.g., employment compensation) aimed at all sectors. In the area of disinformation, none of the countries introduced regulations targeting COVID-19 disinformation, and comprehensive disinformation policies were missing. Finally, the position of PSM remained relatively stable in all countries, with no fundamental changes to its governance or sources of funding.

Differences were less pronounced than similarities and rarely aligned with differences in general approaches to the pandemic. Despite marked disparities in the strategies adopted by populist leaders, these differences had limited impact on media policy responses. Rather, policy differences appeared to reflect systemic disparities in levels of media freedom, size of media markets/languages, or impact of transnational legislation. For instance, both the presence of asymmetric allocation of state advertising (benefitting progovernment media) in Brazil, Serbia, and Poland, and progovernment COVID-19 coverage in the same countries can be linked to higher levels of government control over the media in those countries, compared to the United States. Furthermore, differences in the scope of antidisinformation policies implemented by digital platforms—more extensive in Brazil and United States, followed by Poland, but much more limited in Serbia—can be explained with reference to the size of media markets/languages (limited capacity of digital platforms servicing small languages/markets; e.g., Serbia) and impact of transnational legislation (European Union efforts shaping responses in Poland).

Taken together, all media policies examined here oscillated between control and support. On the one hand, several policies were aimed at controlling pandemic communication and limiting journalists' access to public information; on the other hand, efforts were also made to support the media and journalists through measures such as employment compensation and tax-reduction schemes, increases in funding for PSM, or (in some countries) antidisinformation initiatives. On the whole, the drive to control overshadowed the efforts to provide support, and even when support was provided, it was distributed in an untransparent or unfair manner that benefitted progovernment outlets—as evident in Brazil, Poland, and Serbia. Arguably, this dynamic of control over support reflects the characteristic features of populist policymaking, especially its tendency to mobilize media policy in a manner that benefits progovernment outlets while minimizing opportunities for criticism.

How far the governments went in the direction of either control or support depended on the counterbalancing power of other institutions, safeguards, and national context. We mentioned several instances where different actors—from journalists to courts, NGOs, digital platforms, and (in federal countries) state-level authorities—mounted successful campaigns against problematic policy measures or filled the void where the state remained inactive. From the collection of COVID-19 data organized by Brazilian media to the pressure of journalists and courts that led to the lifting of problematic provisions in Poland, such actions played a critical role in shifting the balance of policymaking back toward support rather than control.

Given that we examined only countries with populist leaders, our capacity to generalize is limited. Some of the problematic measures that restricted journalists' access to information were not implemented only by populist governments (cf. Council of Europe Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and

Safety of Journalists, 2021), and restrictions on the freedom of information during a health crisis have not started with COVID-19. However, the infringements seen in our countries appeared less justifiable, were rarely corrected quickly, and they mainly targeted critical journalists, while supportive measures—if they existed—were often distributed unfairly, especially where populist control over the media was more entrenched. Further comparative research, comprising a wider set of countries and covering both crisis and noncrisis periods, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the extent to which the policy patterns seen here are motivated by populist politics, as well as offer more systematic insights into the relative impact of other systemic factors, including differences between different types of media systems and different varieties of populism.

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