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## Threats to Political Information Environment and Democracy: Polish Politicians' Perceptions<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The current political information environment (PIE) is in flux undergoing a series of well documented changes. These changes may affect the conditions for a healthy democracy being oftentimes associated with a growing number of un-informed, selectively informed, or even misinformed citizens. While each of these specific changes has received a lot of individual attention, less is known about the perceptions held by political elites towards the threats and opportunities associated with the PIE. This qualitative study examines the main concerns, challenges, and threats that representatives of political elites perceive with regards to the current political information environment. The analyses are based on a series of in-depth interviews conducted with politicians in Poland. The investigation revealed some shared perceptions among politicians across ideological orientations on challenges related to the current developments in the media, as well as differences in perceptions on their causes and potential solutions.

**Key words:** political information, threats, democracy, perception, political actor, Poland

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### Introduction

The contemporary political information environment (PIE) is undergoing a significant flux, marked by a series of well-documented changes that have potential impact on conditions for a healthy democracy. This evolution frequently correlates with a growing number of un-informed, selectively informed, or even misinformed citizens (Aalberg et al., 2010; Esser et al., 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2017). While considerable

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attention has been devoted to understanding specific changes within the PIE (for overview see Van Aelst et al., 2017), a notable gap remains in our understanding of how political elites perceive threats and opportunities associated with the evolving landscape.

In this context, it is important to investigate these perceptions due to the influential roles that political elites play within society. Generally speaking, elites can function as “political” or “societal” entities (Scholte et al., 2021) that play a key role in the transition of societal concerns into issues worthy of parliamentary or governmental intervention. In particular, political elites occupy pre-eminent roles in setting agendas, producing knowledge, building institutions, taking and implementing strategic decisions, and assessing policy outcomes. Therefore, studies on their perceptions should extend beyond threats to encompass their causes, consequences, and workable solutions.

Based on the previous studies on threats to political information environment (Aalberg et al., 2010; Esser et al., 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2017) and Strömbäck’s (2005) conceptual work on the role of media in a democratic political system, this paper discusses politicians’ perceptions of media-related threats. In particular, the study addresses three research questions: (RQ1) Which concerns, challenges, threats, or opportunities related to the political information environment are relevant to Polish political actors representing different political parties? (RQ2) What attitudes and perceptions do Polish politicians hold towards such phenomena as: (a) news avoidance, (b) selective news exposure, and (c) disinformation? (RQ3) What are probable causes, consequences, and solutions to these challenges, according to Polish politicians?

## Theoretical background

As a theoretical background, we employ the concept of the ‘political information environment’, which includes both the supply and demand of political news and information. Supply refers to the quantity and quality of news and public affairs content disseminated through traditional and new media sources, while demand relates to the volume and type of news and information that the public seeks or is capable of consuming (Esser et al., 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Previous studies have revealed that the ongoing changes in supply and demand have a range of profound consequences. In particular, long-

standing concerns regarding a declining supply and quality of the news have persisted for years (Van Aelst et al., 2017). More recently, however, the spread of mis- and disinformation on social media has become a focal point of the scholarly discourse and public debate (Lazer et al., 2018; Scheufele, Krause, 2019; Bin Naeem, Boulos, 2021). Furthermore, there have been concerns about declining trust in legacy media and journalists across many countries (Edelman, 2019; Müller, 2013), exacerbating the challenge of rectifying misperceptions (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). At the same time, media use becomes increasingly selective, leading to knowledge gaps between the informed and the ignorant or disinformed, thus deepening polarization (Hopmann et al., 2016; Müller et al., 2017).

In this study, we also rely on Strömbäck's (2005) conceptual framework, which outlines normative implications for journalists and citizens in four models of democracy (procedural, competitive, participatory, and deliberative). Depending on the type of democracy, citizens are expected to either respect democratic procedure, possess clear opinions on societal issues and knowledge about politics, and/or demonstrate political interest and engagement in public affairs. In order to gain such knowledge and formulate opinions, they need to consume political news.

Following the normative approach, behaviors such as news avoidance, selective news consumption, and the spread of mis/disinformation are seen as detrimental to the well-functioning democracy (McKay, Tenove, 2021; Stier et al., 2020). Specifically, while exposure to news increases political knowledge and engagement (Aalberg et al., 2012), news avoidance may contribute to further fragmentation of the society, impede equal access to information (e.g., along educational lines – Karlsen et al., 2020) and significantly limit the foundation for a shared deliberation and opinion formation, essential for the effective functioning of democracy (Habermas, 2006). Reasons behind intentional news avoidance are equally troubling. Individuals may consciously decide to “tune out” of news due to factors such as pessimistic news coverage, which can adversely affect their mood (Boukes & Vliegthart, 2017), a lack of trust in media (Zerba, 2011), or a sense of information overload, fatigue from receiving, selecting, processing, and evaluating (relevant) information (Crook et al. 2016).

Similar reasons may lead to selective news consumption. In recent decades, amid an increasing supply of news, control over selection of news, as well as the algorithmic curation of content based on past online behavior (Thorson et al., 2019), tendency among individuals to select

news that support their pre-existing beliefs has garnered significant attention (Sunstein, 2017; Barberá, 2015). Indeed, individuals who selectively expose themselves to news can be thought of inhabiting “echo chambers” where their beliefs and interests are reflected (Sunstein, 2017; Barberá, 2015). This might polarize and threaten the existence of a shared space for information seeking, debating, and formulating opinions (Müller et al., 2017; Terren, Borge, 2021).

Alongside concerns about uninformed and selectively informed citizens, there has been a growing fear that individuals might become increasingly misinformed and form their opinions on false or misleading information. Whether it is *misinformation*, spread without clear intent to mislead (Wardle, 2017; Vraga, Bode, 2020), or *disinformation*, spread with deliberate bad intent (Tucker et al., 2018; Freelon, Wells, 2020; Hancock, Bailenson, 2021), this phenomenon poses a critical challenge to democratic society. This phenomenon is believed to contribute to political polarization, alter citizens’ perceptions of political actors and issues, and erode trust in essential democratic institutions, as well as in legacy media and journalists (Allcott, Gentzkow, 2017; Ciampaglia et al., 2018; Edelman, 2019). These consequences can perpetuate a vicious circle of declining trust in politics and the media, as fake or misleading beliefs become increasingly challenging to rectify (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

### Data and methods

In order to provide answers to research questions, we conducted in-depth interviews with four politicians representing main political parties of different political orientations. The qualitative study was the first stage of the international project “THREATPIE: The Threats and Potentials of a Changing Political Information Environment.”

The aim of this project phase was twofold. Firstly, it aimed to collect opinions and ideas from four categories of participants: politicians, journalists, educators, and citizens. During in-depth interviews, researchers and participants had the freedom to explore additional topics and change the direction of the conversation as necessary. By posing open-ended questions and taking an exploratory, inductive approach in data analysis, qualitative methods can unveil new perspectives that may have not been foreseen by the researcher.

Secondly, the project was divided into four stages, each building upon results of the preceding stage. Hence, a qualitative study was designed to shape instruments employed in forthcoming quantitative inquiries (surveys, web-tracking, and experiments). With such a research model, we were able to integrate data from all stages of the research project.

While recruiting politicians, we used a political stance/ideology as a criterion for selecting participants. Our objective was to interview representatives of political parties from the right and the left-leaning political parties who preferably declared their interest in education, media/communication, or culture and held positions within relevant parliamentary committees. We were able to conduct interviews with Members of Parliament (MP) representing leading factions of four main political parties across the political spectrum, ranging from right-wing parties to left-wing parties. Three of the participants were members of the lower chamber (Sejm), while one represented the higher chamber (Senat). Furthermore, we strived for and achieved a gender balance among participants. Three out of four interviews were conducted online using MS TEAMS, while one was a face-to-face interview. For more detailed information on participants of the study, dates, platforms, and duration of the interviews, refer to Table 1.

Prior to the data collection, a data management plan was developed. Each participant received an official invitation and a file with information about the project. Before the interviews started, respondents provided their consent through a printed and signed form or orally (recorded separately). Interviews were recorded, and full transcripts were prepared based on the recordings. While preparing transcripts, all personal data was removed from the document, ensuring full anonymization of transcripts.

Table 1

### Participants of the study

Participant ID	Political orientation	Gender	Date of interview	Platform	Duration of interview (minutes)
PLP01	Centrist/liberal party	Male	25/05/2021	MS TEAMS	30
PLP02	Left-wing/liberal party	Female	27/05/2021	MS TEAMS	25
PLP03	Centrist/liberal party	Female	21/06/2021	Face-to-face	43
PLP04	Right-wing party	Male	01/07/2021	MS TEAMS	49

Source: Author.

For the purpose of this study, we developed an interview script. Each interview had the same structure comprising three main parts. The interviews started with a discussion on participants' news media habits and their main sources of political information (examining of societal trends, generational differences, or audience preferences). This was followed by a discussion on the ingredients of a 'healthy media diet' (part one). In the second part, we asked a general (open-ended) question about main negative and positive aspects related to contemporary media landscape and political information environment. In this part of the interview, we elicited their perspectives on threats, issues, concerns, challenges, or opportunities they perceive in political communication, allowing them to articulate their views.

Once a threat, concern, or opportunity was spontaneously mentioned by participants, we encouraged them to discuss causes, consequences, and workable solutions to these threats, as well as their expectations regarding who and how should address them. In the third part, we addressed questions concerning three phenomena, such as: (a) political information avoidance, (b) selective information exposure, and (c) exposure to disinformation and the perceived ubiquity. These issues were discussed in part three only if they were not mentioned spontaneously by the participants in the first or second part of the interview. In this paper, we present data collected in the second and third parts of the interviews. First, we report on various phenomena discussed by politicians. Then, we present politicians' opinions on causes and consequences of news avoidance, selective news exposure, and disinformation.

## **Results**

### Perceptions of threats to PIE and democracy

In the first part of the interview, we asked politicians to identify the main threats to the political information environment and democracy they have observed recently. All participants initially referred to negative consequences of the ease of access to technology, which facilitates spreading messages.

Specifically, they mentioned information noise stemming from unlimited opportunities to disseminate (dis)information and opinions. Since

there are no filters, barriers, and gatekeepers in the process of political communication, anyone can now operate as a journalist, and politicians have the liberty to express any statement they want, subsequently sharing it directly with citizens. Messages can be used as political weapons in a hybrid war, especially when state institutions engage in the production and dissemination of false information. As stated by one politician (PLP01): “It is a cheap and straightforward for countries to assert influence in international politics. This tactic has been used for years. Historical figures like Goebbels also used propaganda, but today, it is easier because you do not need to start a radio station or buy a PR company. Instead, establishing a troll factory suffices. Propaganda is a tool of the political struggle and an element of hybrid warfare.”

While discussing the threat of spreading false information, politicians representing left and centrist political orientations (opposition parties in 2021), raised concerns about the manipulation and propaganda used by the public media. Additionally, they recalled experience from the communist regime, claiming that people who have encountered communist propaganda can recognize and resist any attempt of manipulation. Some people have difficulties in selecting and verifying messages they receive, primarily due to the surge in the volume of information. A left-wing politician (PLP02) argued that: “Traditional media carry the stigma of propaganda. Having been born in the 1970s, I have firsthand experience and understand how discourses are shaped. Despite a significant shift after 1989, technically it remains the same. Manipulation persists in both public and private media. Some consumers are aware of the reality, while, unfortunately, others are not.” Similar opinion was expressed by another politician representing a liberal (centrist) party: “I will be honest, when I seek to get upset, I turn on TVP1. I witness a lot of lies and shallow propaganda there” (PLP03).

Considering threats to political information environment, politicians further discussed the instrumentalization of the media by political actors. Politicians seem to know the media logics well, and they use the media in favor of their own public images. As admitted by one politician (PLP02): “As an MP, I have learned how to make a story [...]. Sometimes I get stories from people I am helping. In such situations, I add a comment and then send it to reporters. The media report that I expressed interest in the subject, and that I was the one who initiated the intervention. That is how I influence the media. Politicians do not dance to somebody’s tune. We know how to manipulate. These worlds are interconnected.”

While considering citizens' perspective, politicians acknowledged several challenges and threats. One of these is the tendency among people to consume news uncritically and passively: "Media messages are considered as absolute truths. Even when alternative sources are available, we rarely verify the content we consume. That is just human nature: we tend to simplify the world." (PLP04). This tendency is perceived as a result of another threat: overstimulation. According to one politician (PLP04), a sense of being overwhelmed with the volume of information, primarily presented in visual formats, could potentially lead to a decrease in intellectual abilities. Combating this tendency, according to the same politician, requires individuals to adjust their media consumption habits.

The same right-wing politician (PLP04) criticized the media for instrumentalizing people in the mass communication process: "Media entities should provide media products. However, in the world of social media, the roles are reversed. Namely, consumers create content for the media, who profit from advertising. Individuals thus become part of the product. That is the problem. Social media become a tool of dehumanization. We are supposed to read information because this will generate profit. Clickbaits might be prime examples. People are reduced to mere tools or numbers."

Two politicians representing two distinct political orientations (PLP03 from centrist and PLP04 from right-wing political parties) addressed psychological and social implications of media use, highlighting concerns such as atomization of the society and shrinking interpersonal relations. They expressed a shared perception that citizens across age groups face these threats in their personal lives, with broader ramifications for the society as a whole.

While considering solutions to the aforementioned challenges and threats, all politicians across ideological stances emphasized the importance of education, including media education. "Education is everything! Without education, nothing can be changed. Regardless the tools we use, we will not win this battle without education" (PLP01). At the same time, they were rather critical about the quality of education in schools and called for the introduction of media literacy courses, as well as courses tailored for elder media users. One of the politicians (PLP02) claimed that "Children should take classes on self-defense against manipulation", while the other (PLP04) admitted: "Maybe it is worth teaching parents how to use sources effectively. A lot of people lack relevant knowledge and we must provide guidance."



They also discussed the role of authorities, including people who can offer explanations and interpretations, as well as serve as role models. This could be either parents, teachers, or classmates, who encourage others to read books, use diverse sources of information, or learn more about particular topics: “School isn’t everything. It is also about exposure to pop culture and interaction with peers” (PLP04).

In the final part of interviews, questions focused on three phenomena: political information avoidance, selective information exposure, and disinformation. In particular, participants were asked about their opinions on the causes, consequences, and viable solutions to these threats.

### News avoidance and selective news exposure

It is worth mentioning that politicians paid a significant attention to selective exposure and disinformation, while showing less concern about news avoidance. Explored that issue and when asked about causes of news avoidance, Polish politicians argued that people do not seek political news for various reasons. First, some citizens are not interested in public affairs, including politics. Second, some individuals avoid news they cannot agree with, finding such news annoying. As one politician (PLP01) noted: “There are two sources of news avoidance. Firstly, an aversion to politics: ‘I am not interested in politics. I have my own life.’ Secondly, some people are interested in politics, but they do not want to be exposed to information from outside their filter bubble.”

Third, politicians suggest that some people avoid political news because of their low quality, characterized by a conflict-oriented frame and hostile, offensive tone. “The quality of information is important. I do not want to read barbed or pungent articles about myself. Furthermore, if I were John Smith, I wouldn’t want to read biased articles on topics that matter to me.” (PLP04).

Furthermore, politicians argued that some people are disappointed with a low level of media objectivity and journalistic professionalism: “The manner of presentation is crucial. I do not read media messages that are overly cloying. There are so many examples of unreliable information. Reliability and attempts to present information objectively have a significant impact in each case. It is also a matter of journalistic skills. Do journalists possess these skills?” (PLP04).

Finally, some people might share a sense of helplessness, perceiving themselves as unable to do anything about issues presented in the media and as having no impact on public life and politics: “In the case of traditional media, we are constantly subjected to psychological pressure to which we can hardly respond. This breeds feelings of helplessness and fear.” (PLP02).

In the opinion of politicians, news avoidance is caused by political alienation, and it strengthens this alienation. Such an attitude was illustrated by one politician (PLP02) through a statement that could be attributed to a citizen: “I am getting information, but I can hardly influence others or do anything about it. This leads to alienation: I disengage from politics and public life.”

According to politicians, it is primarily young people who tend to avoid news because they feel powerless and lack the skills to assess the information they receive. One politician (PLP03) claimed: “No one is telling them how to make an impact. Our only advice to them is to vote! Young people, however, think and act with a different perspective: ‘I don’t want to watch it because it angers me.’ Who should they ask for help? To whom should they talk? Parents will say it makes them angry, too. Teachers? ‘Do not overthink, do not watch.’ If I know about a crime, what should I do? Call the police? How will they respond? To whom can a young, inexperienced person turn for help?”

Interestingly, while discussing selective news exposure, participants in the study highlighted both advantages and disadvantage of the phenomenon. On the one hand, people launch interest groups on Facebook and share information that is relevant and interesting to them. Consequently, they are able to collaborate in a real world. On the other hand, individuals who stay in their bubbles limit their perception of more complex issues. According to politicians, a selective news exposure (alongside news avoidance) may deepen social and political polarization: “It exacerbates polarization. I know people who do not want to talk, because they think differently.” (PLP01).

While discussing potential solutions to news avoidance and selective news exposure, Polish politicians focused mostly on the roles of family, education system, and the media. They claimed that media education should focus on raising awareness among media users and promoting healthy media diet, including diverse sources of information. Additionally, they expected journalists to adopt a broad perspective while covering political events and adhere to ethical standards.

## Disinformation

As previously mentioned, all four politicians participating in this study placed significant attention to sources of false information and consequences of spreading such messages. It is noteworthy that all politicians focused on disinformation, which they defined as intentionally harmful or deceptive information resulting from deliberate acts of doctoring, manipulation, or fabrication.

In their opinion, one of the main reasons behind spreading false information is to serve someone's political or economic interests. According to the politicians, the main goal of disinformation is to cause harm by weakening another country's economy, damaging someone's reputation, or manipulating society. In their view, disinformation is a multi-faceted phenomenon; it can manifest itself in spreading false information, using understatement, or concealing true information. The most dangerous form of disinformation is the intentional manipulation and subjugation of certain social groups to gain political and economic power. As one politician (PLP 03) argued, "What are the goals of disinformation? They are always the same: to gain money and power."

Politicians identified several sources of disinformation, including states (e.g. Russian government), politicians, interest groups, and business companies. They also discussed the negative consequences of disinformation at a societal level, including a strong polarization, fragmentation, and disintegration of the society: "What are the consequences? For example, the collapse of society. We may have to deal with a strong polarization that will challenge a smooth functioning of the state. Unfortunately, Poland is on the road to that. [...] It is a serious threat to our society as defragmentation can be seen at various levels" (PLP01).

They also recognized negative consequences of disinformation at an individual level. Specifically, they argued that people, especially older generations who tend to believe whatever is presented in the media, are vulnerable to manipulation. Additionally, they criticized online media for disseminating dangerous content. Their main concern was that some people are not aware that not all the content is verified. In their opinion the younger generation is more aware that some information is fake and that one should be careful when consuming news online. However, we are all facing new challenges due to a constant technological development. "Nonetheless, in the age of spreading deepfakes, verification will become

even more difficult. Eventually, it will become increasingly harder to select reliable information” (PLP02).

Politicians mentioned several solutions that should be implemented. One of them is reforming the education system to provide knowledge and skills that would enable people to protect themselves, including the incorporation of media literacy courses into the school curriculum. Additionally, one politician (PLP03) highlighted the importance of educating politicians on how to use the media responsibly.

The second idea, which was discussed by most of the participants in the study, was state intervention. However, politicians differed in their perceptions on this matter. Some of them expected state institutions to take actions. For example, one politician (PLP03) claimed that “There is a need to establish a state institute that will trace and delete false political information. Whoever spreads fake news should be punished.” The other politician (PLP01) shared a similar opinion: “If publishers spread fake news, they should be punished. I am not saying that someone has to be sentenced to detention. In Poland, sanctions are envisaged for disseminating unlawful content (for example, publication of an opinion poll during election silence). Nobody does that because everyone is afraid of a financial penalty.”

On the other hand, when referring to activities of the state, all politicians participating in the study seemed to be aware of how sensitive the topic of freedom of speech is. Therefore, while discussing this issue, they highlighted rather general ideas than precise solutions. For example, they discussed “well-functioning state services that can react to evident attempts to influence, misinform, and polarize the society” (PLP01), “a clear policy on the online disinformation” (PLP02), or “a state institute that will verify media messages” (PLP04). One politician (PLP02) even claimed that “politicians cannot solve this problem alone” and suggested an open public debate over a challenge of disinformation.

## Discussion and conclusions

Findings of the study revealed some common perceptions of challenges related to the current developments in the media. First, they all discussed technological changes in the media resulting in an increasing scope and dynamics of the information and disinformation flow. They

claimed that despite benefits from a number and diversity of news, one may feel overwhelmed with the excessive quantity of messages. This clash of needs, expectations, and capabilities is indeed one of the main challenges for media users (Crook et al. 2016).

Second, regardless their ideological stances, participants of the study addressed selective news exposure and disinformation as major threats, while they paid less attention to news avoidance. They also expressed similar views on causes and consequences of these phenomena. Once the causes were considered, they focused on both internal (individual psychological and ideological preferences) and external (media performance) factors related to news avoidance and selective news use. While addressing potential consequences, they all mentioned political polarization and alienation. Their observations were consistent with findings of the studies on news media consumption (see Hopmann et al., 2016; Müller et al., 2017).

Third, they all considered spreading false information as *disinformation*, which is intentionally harmful or deceptive information based on deliberate acts of manipulation (Freelon, Wells, 2020; Hancock, Bailenson, 2021), rather than *misinformation*, which is any form of information that is unintentionally false or not based on relevant expert knowledge or empirical evidence (Wardle, 2017; Vraga, Bode, 2020).

Nevertheless, they differed in their views on political actors' responsibility for these threats. While discussing politicization and polarization of the media, as well as disinformation, politicians representing left-wing and centrist parties blamed the governmental parties for taking control over the public media, leading to instrumentalization of these media and spreading propaganda.

The analysis of politicians' statements regarding potential solutions leads to two main conclusions. First, despite shared concerns about citizens' limited knowledge and skills on how to protect themselves against the negative consequences of the threats, none of the MPs participating in the study overtly suggested that media literacy should be introduced to the school curriculum. One might expect representatives of the leading four political parties to offer clear ideas on how media literacy programs could be introduced to the Polish education system. Surprisingly, none of politicians admitted that their political parties included such an initiative into their agendas. Moreover, none of the politicians mentioned any specific activities their political parties intend to undertake in that matter.

Second, although Polish politicians seemed to be reluctant towards the idea of state regulation of online media content, some of the participants expressed their expectations towards state agencies to control online media and punish those which spread disinformation. Interestingly, these perceptions and attitudes were manifested by politicians across all political orientations.

Despite a limited number of participants in the study, in-depth interviews allowed us to achieve our research goals. Specifically, we were able to recognize which aspects of political news supply and demand are important to selected politicians representing political parties from a broad political spectrum, ranging from right-wing to left-wing parties. Since we invited MPs representing main four political parties in the Polish Parliament in 2021, we may consider their opinions as an important contribution to the study on threats to the political information environment and democracy.

Additionally, through a qualitative study, we examined ways in which politicians conceptualize and articulate these issues, gathering their opinions expressed in their own words. Analyzing their statements provides insights into how politicians address challenges related to media and political communication, shedding light on the extent perceptions of political elites align with recent developments in political information flow and their consequences for the society.

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Autor oświadczył, że nie istnieje konflikt interesów.

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## Zagrożenia dla środowiska informacji politycznej z perspektywy polskich polityków

### Streszczenie

Środowisko informacji politycznej podlega wielu zmianom, które mogą mieć wpływ na demokrację. W szczególności zmiany te mogą prowadzić do zwiększenia liczby niepoinformowanych, posiadających jednostronny obraz rzeczywistości społecznej lub wprowadzonych w błąd obywateli. O ile każdemu z tych problemów poświęca się obecnie dużo uwagi, o tyle niewiele jest badań ukazujących, jak te wyzwania (ale także szanse) postrzegają aktorzy polityczni. Celem artykułu jest prezentacja wyników badania z wykorzystaniem metody indywidualnego wywiadu pogłębionego przeprowadzonego z udziałem polskich polityków. Wyniki badania ukazały podobieństwa w zakresie tego, co politycy z różnych partii postrzegają jako zagrożenia. Główne różnice ujawniły się w zakresie przypisywanych tym zagrożeniom przyczyn oraz sugerowanych rozwiązań.

**Słowa kluczowe:** informacja polityczna, zagrożenia, demokracja, percepcja, aktor polityczny, Polska

