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Summary of the doctoral dissertation entitled: „Disinformation in social media and creating the image of a political leader - an analysis of selected cases”

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The doctoral dissertation addresses one of the most significant challenges of the digital era – the impact of disinformation disseminated through social media on the image and legitimacy of political leaders. The rapid technological development and the algorithmic logic of platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), TikTok and Instagram have transformed the media environment into a crucial arena of political competition. Within this environment, true and false content spreads with equal intensity, shaping public attitudes and electoral decisions. Disinformation, understood as the deliberate distribution of false or manipulated content, has thus become a strategic instrument of political influence.

The research problem concerns the mechanism of the influence of disinformation in social media on the creation of the image of political leadership. The adopted time frame (2016–2020) covers the period of the U.S. presidential campaign, Russia’s intensified use of information warfare, Ukraine’s exposure to hybrid aggression, and the growing political polarization in Poland. The comparative selection of these four countries, representing different political systems and media environments, enables the identification of both common and context-specific mechanisms of disinformation.

The review of the literature revealed that, despite growing scholarly interest, there is still a lack of in-depth comparative analyses exploring the relationship between disinformation and the image of political leaders. This dissertation fills this gap by integrating perspectives from political science, media studies, sociology of communication and information security. Its theoretical framework draws on concepts of political leadership, mediatization, information disorder and network society, supplemented by empirical studies on fake news and deepfakes.

Methodologically, the dissertation applies a comparative approach and the case study method, combining theoretical reflection with the analysis of practical consequences. Special attention is paid to the dual role of social media – as tools of political mobilization and as instruments of destabilization. The empirical analysis of cases allows for the identification of broader explanatory mechanisms and the formulation of conclusions with both theoretical and practical implications.

The originality of the dissertation lies not only in capturing the multidimensional nature of disinformation but also in formulating recommendations for strengthening societal resilience to manipulative campaigns. Particular emphasis is placed on media literacy, public policy instruments and the role of civil society in safeguarding democratic communication processes. The dissertation is structured into six main chapters. The first addresses the conceptualization of political leadership, the second examines the role of social media in politics, the third explores the image of political leadership in social media, the fourth focuses on disinformation in social media, the fifth analyzes the organization of electoral campaigns in social media, and the sixth presents the use of disinformation in electoral campaigns – selected case studies. The work concludes with a Final Chapter, which provides a summary and the most important findings.

Keywords: disinformation, social media, political leadership, fake news, deepfakes, democracy

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