



RESILIENCE:
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

**IN MEDIA WE (DIS)TRUST:
Mapping citizens' concerns
over media in Kosovo**

Jeton Mehmeti

KOSOVO

RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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IN MEDIA WE (DIS)TRUST: Mapping citizens' concerns over media in Kosovo

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1. INTRODUCTION

While media outlets worldwide were forced to downsize their staff due to the financial crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, new media outlets continued to emerge in Kosovo. Last year, the number of private television channels increased even further when K10 and ATV entered the media market. This adds to the diverse media environment that Kosovo has, particularly in broadcast and digital media. Currently, there are 100 television channels licensed by the Independent Media Commission that broadcast through cable and another 19 that are licensed on terrestrial frequencies.¹

Despite the rapid increase in the number of television channels and online media outlets, the quality of information remains low, particularly among online media. The majority of online media outlets are inadequately versed in creating ethical, evidence-based and coherent content. As a result, major violations of ethical standards abound in media organizations. Apart from warnings and occasional fines issued by the Independent Media Commission (IMC), media members face no professional ramifications for producing content that does not meet these standards. The IMC, a public body that licenses and oversees broadcast media, and the Kosovo Press Council, a self-regulatory body for print and online media, have addressed numerous cases of violations of reporting standards. Out of 68 complaints received throughout 2020, the Press Council found violations in 41 of them.² On the other hand, the IMC also issued several warnings to its licensed broadcasters for violating different aspects of its code. Such violation of journalism standards plays a crucial role in people's trust in the media.

¹ Independent Media Commission, <https://www.kpm-ks.org/telicencuarit/306/llojet-e-licencave/306>.

² Kosovo Press Council, Decisions 2020, <https://presscouncil-ks.org/vendimet/>.

This research aims to analyze the main factors related to media trust and media-gender issues in Kosovo. This is the third research study in the Resilience project series.³ The first study covered hate and propaganda media models⁴, and the second examined hate narratives in the media and communication in Kosovo.⁵ The research is based on both quantitative and qualitative data. Initially, a public opinion poll was organized by the company IPSOS Strategic Marketing, commissioned by the Resilience project. The field research was conducted between 23 February to 6 March 2021. The sample universe was the Kosovo population aged 18+, representing a target group category of 1,205,788 citizens. The sample size used for this research was 1,045, reached through telephone. The sample type was a two-stage random representative stratified sample with a quota selection of respondents (by gender and age). All ethnic communities in Kosovo were represented in the research, and a gender balance of 50% participation of women was respected. Similar public opinion polls were conducted in all six countries of the Western Balkans covered by the Resilience project. In addition to the survey data, a series of interviews with media experts, journalists and editors in Kosovo followed to discuss the findings of the opinion poll. The views expressed by the interviewees are used anonymously throughout this report. Other sources of information such as reports, statistical data and official documents were also used.

The report fills a research gap on media trust and media-gender issues in Kosovo. Overall, the research shows that Kosovo citizens have a very high level of trust in the media. Experts interviewed for this research warn that people should be more critical of what they consume from the media. They suggest media literacy programmes and training as a means to increase citizens' awareness of how the media operates. The findings show that television is by far the most used and the most trusted source of information over radio, print and online media. This eventually explains the rapid increase in the number of television channels over the years. For the interviewed media experts, this is good and bad news. The good news is that television is the most regulated medium in Kosovo in terms of licensing and editorial and ownership transparency. Still, massive consumption of it is not good as it makes people passive consumers.⁶

3 *"Resilience: civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in Western Balkans and Turkey" is an EU-funded project implemented by nine media development organizations.*

4 Hoxha, A., (2020), "Media Landscape in Kosovo: Hate and propaganda influences", SEENPM, <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Resilience-research-publication-1-KOS-ENG.pdf>

5 Hoxha, A. & Syla, M., (2020), "Hate narratives in online media and communication in Kosovo", SEENPM, <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Resilience-research-publication-2-Kosovo-English.pdf>

6 Audience response theory suggests that a passive audience is more likely to accept the message encoded in a media text without challenge and are therefore more likely to be directly affected by the messages. See <https://bbc.in/3tlqq0W>.

However, the IPSOS research also shows that citizens' dependency on social networks to get news and information is catching up with television. For the interviewed media experts, the fact that social networks are used more than online media is an issue of concern because it hinders people's access to the diversity of news and information due to algorithms used by social networks. Lastly, the IPSOS poll shows that Kosovo citizens acknowledge the dangers women journalists face in their profession and support the statement that public authorities should offer them more support. However, the experts interviewed for this research warn that women journalists face immense pressure to do their job, and not all the dangers come from outside the walls—office harassment is evident, but most of it goes unreported.

The report is structured in the following sections: the first section looks at citizens' media usage and preferences; the second section is about trust and distrust of news sources; and section three analyses citizens' attitudes to the media, including media-gender issues. The report ends with a conclusion and a set of policy recommendations.

2. MEDIA USE AND MEDIA TRUST

Overall, the results of the opinion poll show that citizens of Kosovo are not only heavy consumers of media but also place a lot of trust in the media. Despite a rapid increase in online media, television stands out as the main source of information for most people. Television is the dominant information channel in the country, with 82% of respondents claiming to use it on a daily basis to get information about political and social events. Social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube) are in second place as a source of news and information (65%), followed by online media such as news web portals, news magazines and news blogs (45%), personal contacts (44%), radio (9%) and print newspapers/magazines (5%). As far as public trust in the media is concerned, the overall level of trust in the media in Kosovo, such as newspapers, TV, radio or online media, is higher (64%) than distrust (35%). Of all the media types in Kosovo, television appears to be the most trusted.

2.1. Television and social networks as the main source of information

According to the IPSOS research,⁷ television stands out as the most commonly used source of information in Kosovo, while other “traditional” media, such as radio and print newspapers/magazines, are far behind.

Social networks are the second most frequently used source of news, through which two-thirds of the population over the age of 18 are informed on a daily basis (65%). News web portals and personal contacts follow, with almost half of the citizens being informed through them every day (45% and 44%, respectively).

The results indicate the significant differences in the use of information sources according to demographic characteristics, especially age.

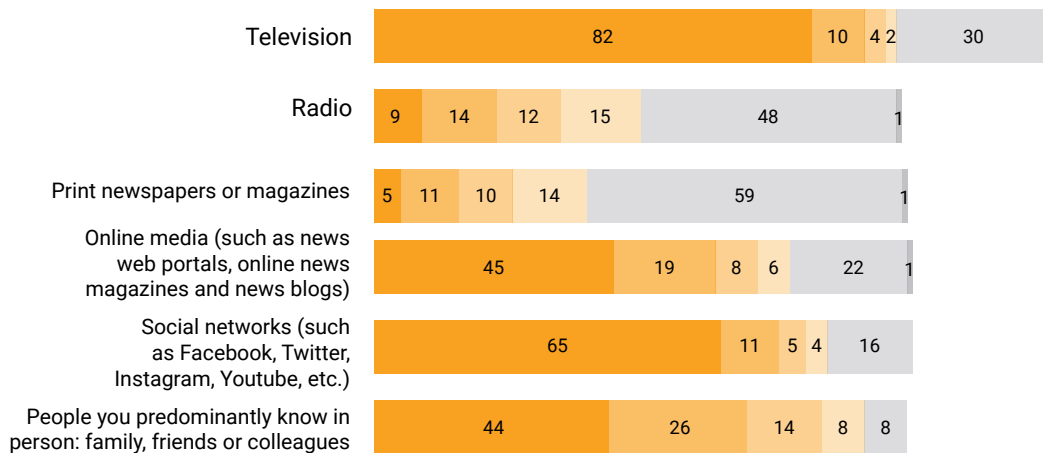
- People aged 45 or older more often report watching TV daily (92%), while television is watched less often by those aged 18 to 29 (68% daily).
- Radio also tends to be more popular among older people. For example, among those aged 60 and older, 16% listen to the radio every day to get

⁷ Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021

informed, compared with 7% of 18–29-year-olds. Radio is also more often a source of daily information for highly educated, ethnic Serbs, residents of the northern part of the country, as well as those with higher household incomes (more than EUR 650/month).

• On the other hand, the youngest, aged 18–29, prefer getting information through online media – news web portals, online news magazines/blogs (53% use them daily) and social networks (86% use them daily). Furthermore, these sources also show higher usage among those in the 30–44 age category, highly educated, employed and ethnic Serbs. In addition, news web portals and personal contacts are more often used as a source of news by men.

Graph 1. *The frequency of using the following sources to get news about political and social events*



Source: IPSOS, 2021.

Media community representatives interviewed for this research interpret the polling results somewhat differently. The massive use of television daily is explained from different angles. To some of them, it is not surprising to see such high daily use of television. What surprises them, though, is that social networks are more frequently used than online media. This shows that citizens do not use online news web portals directly, but they use social networks such as Facebook to go to them. For the interviewed media professionals, this is concerning because of the algorithms used by social networks and the tendency to filter out content. According to one of our interviewees with much experience working for online media, *“they give you only what you might be interested in (based on your previous clicks) and not the two*

sides of the story."⁸ This is a challenge for the diversity of news and opinions that citizens should be exposed to. It is also a challenge for online media since the majority of their audience comes from social networks rather than directly.

According to another interviewed media professional, another reason for the high use of television has to do with the timing of the survey being close to the parliamentary elections held on 14 February 2021. During the ten-day election campaign, citizens were exposed to a lot of television debates. *"The last election campaign showed the massive use of TV in Kosovo, as some of the most viewed TV shows reached record viewing figures"*, said a media expert interviewed for this research.⁹ Television is a traditional medium for Kosovo, but it is watched online too, and the community of media professionals see it as a positive achievement that traditional television channels have managed to embrace technological changes and broadcast over Facebook and YouTube, too.¹⁰

On the other hand, the interviewed media professionals see it as a positive sign that television is used so frequently because broadcast media are still better regulated than online media. The Independent Media Commission imposes its Code of Ethics on all licensed media and issues warnings and fines when such journalism standards are violated, as opposed to the online media, most of which lack ownership and editorial transparency and only a handful are members of the Kosovo Press Council—a self-regulatory body for print and online media. Nevertheless, one of the interviewed experts points to the fact that even television was used as a tool to spread disinformation and hate speech during the election: *"The IMC failed to monitor political debates during the elections, and these debates are no different from fake news circulating on social networks."*¹¹

The public opinion poll results show that many respondents get their news and information from people they know, like family and friends. The interviewed media community called this the "Balkan way", the tendency to receive news from friends without any verification and circulate it further. With a high level of fake news circulating over social networks, the risk for misinformation increases.

When it comes to the main source of information, the IPSOS research findings are broadly similar: for three out of five citizens, the primary

8 Interviewee 1.

9 Interviewee 3.

10 Interviewee 5.

11 Interviewee 4.

source of news is television (61%). Social networks are the main source of information for a quarter of citizens (24%); one in ten citizens relies mainly on the news they read on web portals (10%), while other sources of information are far behind, at a single-digit level.

Due to the financial hardship caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of print newspapers has declined in Kosovo. Some, like *Koha Ditore*, go to print once a week only, while for the rest of the week, it is only published online. Financial constraints led *Koha* to introduce a paid subscription for its online content starting from 2021, after a year of trialling unpaid subscription. The lack of print newspapers and magazines explains the findings of the opinion poll.

For media experts interviewed in this research, the high level of dependency over television as the main source of information is particularly true for the older generation. The poll results also justify this, whereby among respondents aged over 60, 90% use television as the main source of information.¹² At the other end, the majority of young people (age 18–29) use social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube (44%) as the main source of information. The media professionals interviewed for this research believe Facebook is used as a bridge to the online web news portals, especially for the older generations.

2.2. Media trust

2.2.1. Is it blind trust or a lack of media literacy?

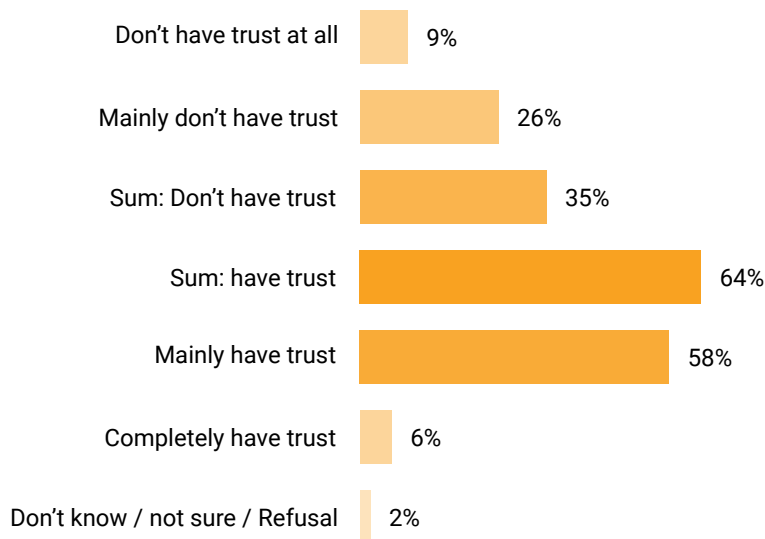
The IPSOS research shows that the majority of citizens in Kosovo, almost two thirds, trust the media (64%), while about a third do not trust the media (35%). More specifically, 58% of citizens maintain that they mostly trust the media, while 6% say they trust the media completely.

On the other hand, one out of four mainly does not have trust (26%), with an additional 9% who do not believe the media at all. Generally, levels of distrust are higher among the youngest (18–29 years), ethnic Serbs, and those who prefer getting their information through online media and personal contacts.¹³

¹² Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021

¹³ The Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021.

Graph 2. *In general, how much trust do you have in the media – such as newspapers, TV, radio or online news sources – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly in Kosovo?*



Source: IPSOS, 2021.

As Graph 2 shows, the level of trust in the media is higher than the level of distrust. According to the media professionals interviewed for this research, one explanation for the results is that people could give this answer by associating the media they consume with trust. *“Overall, criticism of media trust should be higher. More media literacy is needed”*, one of them adds.¹⁴ They also acknowledge the fact that there are reliable and professional media outlets in Kosovo. However, as frequent news consumers, people should be aware of the media they use. *“Overall, criticism of media trust should be higher. More media literacy is needed”*, said one of the interviewed experts, referring to the high number of television channels that broadcast over cable providers and online news web portals that claim to be news media.¹⁵

The high level of trust in media is also surprising in some ways, considering the negative public perception of media and journalists expressed on social networks. *“I hear a lot of criticism of the media, a lot of negative feedback for online media outlets. I had the feeling that there is no more trust in the media, but the results show otherwise”* said one of the interviewed media experts.¹⁶ One explanation given

¹⁴ Interviewee 1.

¹⁵ Interviewee 2.

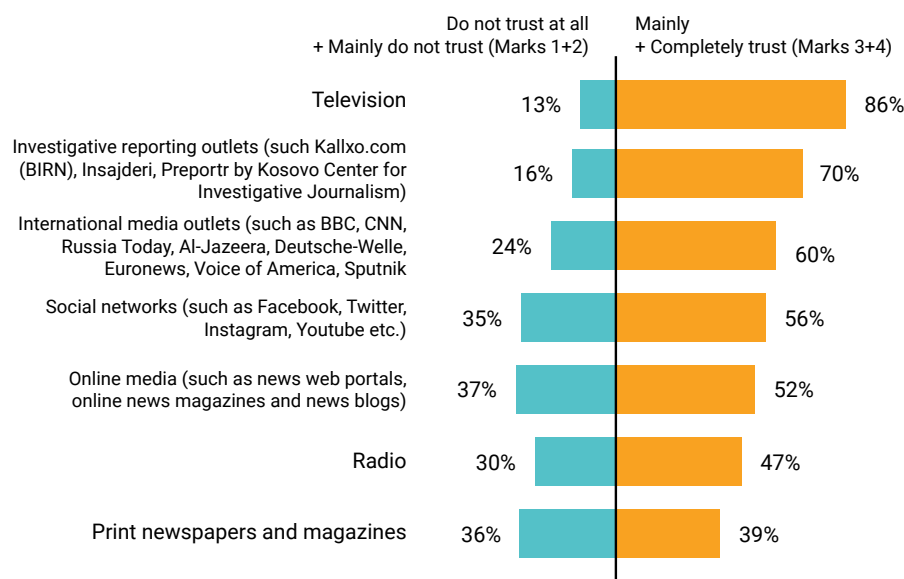
¹⁶ Interviewee 3.

by the community of interviewed media professionals is that due to decreasing trust in political elites and public institutions, as well as corruption and misuse of power, the media has emerged as a critical voice. This has created a positive perception among the respondents.

When it comes to different types of media, citizens have the most confidence in the information they receive through television, as more than four fifths claim they mainly or completely trust television to be a reliable source of information (86%). Right behind are investigative media that enjoy the trust of one in seven citizens in Kosovo (70%). Furthermore, for more than half of citizens, international media, social networks and online media (such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs) are trustworthy sources of information (60%, 56% and 52%, respectively). In comparison, slightly less than half believe the information they hear on the radio (47%). Finally, citizens are divided in terms of trust in the press – while close to two fifths state that newspapers and magazines are a reliable source of news and information (39%), nearly as many share the opposite opinion (36%).¹⁷

As expected, citizens who do not trust the media in general are more inclined to distrust all the different media types than the total target population are. Moreover, the youngest (18–29), who more often follow online sources, are more likely to trust social networks and more likely to distrust the radio and the press.

Graph 3. *To what extent do you trust each of the following media is a reliable source of news and information?*



Source: IPSOS, 2021.

17 Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021

Similar findings were obtained when citizens were asked to rank the mentioned types of media from the one they trust the most to the one they trust the least. Namely, television is the source that two thirds of the population trust the most (66%), while nearly nine in ten include it in the top three most trusted sources (87%). Except for printed newspapers and magazines, all other media types are ranked in the top three most trustworthy by an approximately equal share of citizens – between 30% and 40% of them.¹⁸

The community of media professionals interviewed for this research are surprised to see the high level of trust citizens have for television, due to the fact that a lot of television coverage is produced live, and the chances of mistakes are high, compared to print media which have more time to verify the news. On the other hand, one of the interviewed experts considers the level of trust the people have in investigative reporting a very good result. *“This is also due to the support from international donors, who have provided a lot of funds to strengthen media organizations that produce investigative stories”*, said the expert who has long experience in working with international donors, too.¹⁹ However, the question was disputed by one of the interviewees, in the part where, for investigative media outlets, Insajderi was given as an example beside BIRN and Preportr, due to the significant number of violations of the Press Code of Kosovo, which the Kosovo Press Council oversees. Trust in the international media is also high, and interviewed experts say this could be because some of them broadcast daily through local radio and television channels, especially the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

The high level of trust in television shows how much power television has in Kosovo and why their number is increasing every year.

“It seems most people are not looking for high-quality information, and they are stuck with the news and entertainment they (television channels) provide. Take the case of political debates during election campaigns – it has turned into infotainment that attracts people. People criticize it a lot on the social networks, but they still watch it”, said one of the media professionals interviewed for this research.²⁰

There is also a tendency for citizens who prefer certain types of media as their main source of information to trust these types of media more.

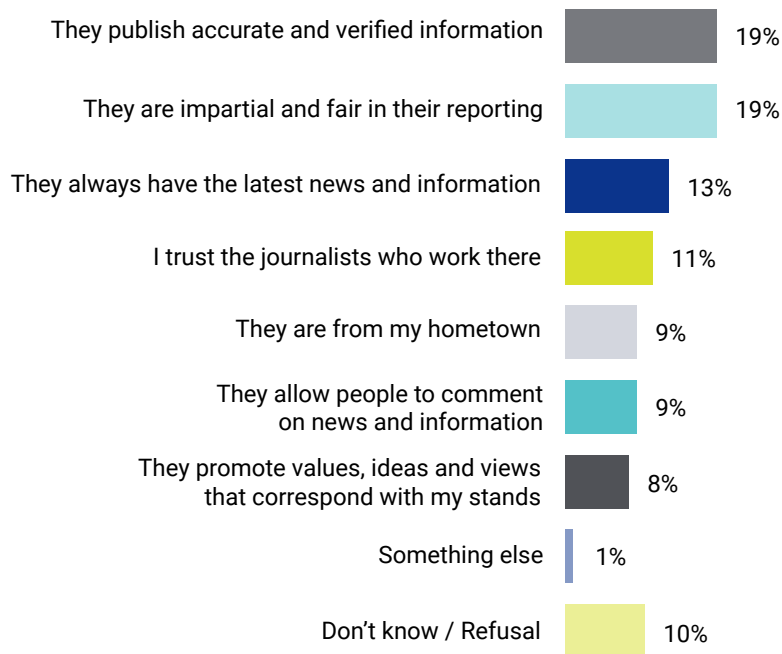
¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Interviewee 6.*

²⁰ *Interviewee 2.*

Thus, those who prefer modern media more often trust online media and social networks the most. Looking at all three answers, publishing accurate and verified information, being impartial and fair in reporting and having the latest news are the main reason why citizens trust certain media outlets (48%, 45% and 41%, respectively).

Graph 4. *Main reasons for trusting certain media*



Source: IPSOS, 2021.

The media experts interviewed for this research raise specific issues related to the trust people have in the journalists who work there. But who is a journalist? *“We have so many people who claim to be journalists, although they do not practice it in the field. There is no agreement on who is a journalist today in Kosovo,”* said one of the experts.²¹ *“Over the years, journalists have become commentators and analysts, and now TV shows are trying to brand their reporters as analysts to attract more viewers,”* said another expert interviewed for our research.²² And the third expert added: *“There is a link between the audience and particular journalists within the media organizations. This shows that journalists should be more careful, not to break people’s trust, because they associate the entire outlet with him or her”*.²³

²¹ Interviewee 2.

²² Interviewee 1.

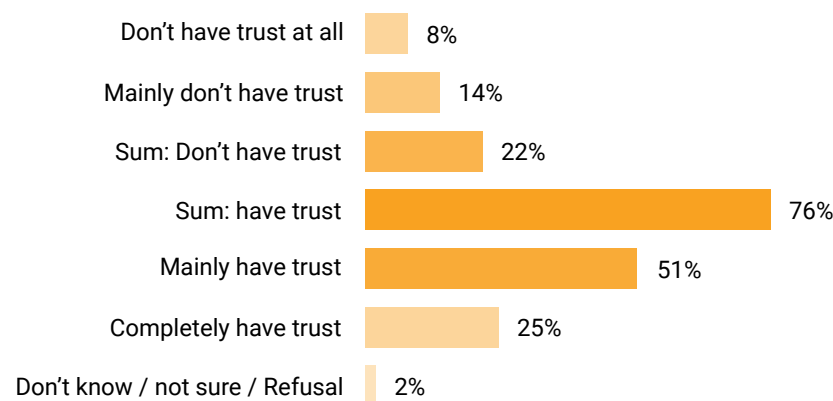
²³ Interviewee 3.

2.2.2. The public broadcaster predisposed to political pressure and influence

The public broadcaster in Kosovo, Radio and Television of Kosovo (RTK), began its first broadcast in 1999 with two hours of programming. RTK has since gone through a long development process, financial stabilization and transfer of management from international to local people. Initially, RTK was managed by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) in line with a memorandum of understanding signed between OSCE and EBU, which envisaged the establishment of a sustainable and independent public broadcaster. In time, RTK programming increased from two hours to four, and then to 15 hours of programming a day, until finally, on 22 December 2003, RTK began broadcasting 24 hours a day. Programme diversity has increased steadily with the launching of new shows in Albanian and minority community languages. However, the financing of it has always been an issue.²⁴ The European Commission report on Kosovo concludes that the public broadcaster (RTK) is vulnerable to political pressure and influence.

“In 2019, on two separate occasions, whistle-blowers publicly denounced political influence on the public broadcaster. RTK’s shortcomings...include non-merit-based recruitment, non-transparent remunerations, insufficient sustainability of programmes in non-majority languages and poor online presence. To date, the broadcaster remains directly state-funded, with its budget determined annually by the Assembly. This undermines its independence, weakens its long-term sustainability and leaves it prone to political influence.”²⁵

Graph 5. Citizens' trust in public service media



Source: IPSOS, 2021.

²⁴ GAP Institute, (2011) "RTK's financial sustainability: finding alternatives to public broadcaster financing", https://www.institutigap.org/documents/78229_RTK-English.pdf

²⁵ European Commission, Kosovo 2020 Report, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/kosovo_report_2020.pdf

The community of media professionals interviewed for this research have a different opinion on this matter. To them, the audience is just accustomed to watching the main news programme on the public television channel. *"The news programme at 19:30 is stuck in the memory of people. Most citizens are not media literate enough to see the political bias in their reporting"*, said one of the interviewed media experts.²⁶ Kosovo has seen an increase in donor support for independent media and journalism in recent years, largely as a response to the need for increased media literacy. Still, such programmes have not reached enough audiences.²⁷ *"It is important to include media literacy in the school curriculum. You have to teach kids what it means to be in the media"*, said another interviewed media expert.²⁸ One of the media experts relates citizens' trust in the public broadcaster to a campaign run by the public television broadcaster when the Ipsos opinion poll was organized. The campaign called "Liria ka emer" (translated as "Freedom Has a Name") showed the profiles of former leaders of the Kosovo Liberation Army who are detained in The Hague as they await trial for alleged war crimes. *"This campaign influenced people – it was seen as a patriotic act, a campaign to boost people's sensitivity"*, said the media expert interviewed for this research.

2.2.3. Propaganda, disinformation and hate speech all over the media

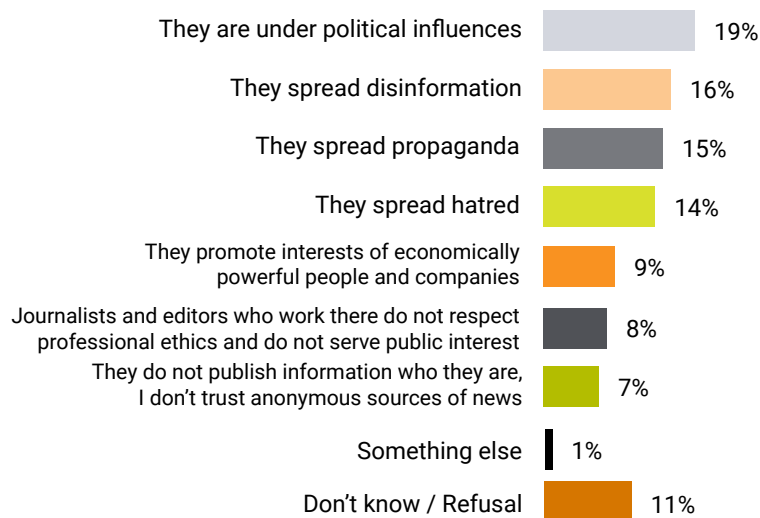
The IPSOS research shows that the main reasons why citizens do not trust certain media are related to spreading disinformation and propaganda and the political influence they are under (47%, 40% and 42%, respectively). In addition, more than a third of citizens do not trust certain media outlets due to the spreading of hatred (37%).

²⁶ Interviewee 4.

²⁷ IREX, *Media Sustainability Index (2019), Kosovo Report*, <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-urasia-2019-kosovo.pdf>

²⁸ Interviewee 1.

Graph 6. *Main reasons for not trusting certain media*



IPSOS, 2021

The election campaign has revealed that some media outlets are no longer trying to hide their political leaning. Yet political influence is very hard to define, even for the media professional we interviewed for this research.

“If I was asked, I would put numbers 5 and 6 at the top (promoting the interests of economically powerful people and the lack of respect for professional standards). Today, it is hard to control private media politically because there are a lot of media outlets. Media are no longer in that situation where you call them and tell them what to do and how to report. If a politician calls a business to withdraw ads from a certain media outlet, they won't do it anymore because business people are smart these days, they work with all the media,” said one of the media experts we interviewed.²⁹

The media professionals that were interviewed also believe that an EU report published last year might have played a role in influencing citizens to believe that the media spreads disinformation. The report, published by the European Parliament, concludes that fake news and disinformation led to the fall of Albin Kurti's government last year. “The key disinformation channels in Kosovo fall broadly into two categories. These are mainstream media outlets and politicians”, reads the report.³⁰

²⁹ Interviewee 3.

³⁰ European Parliament, (2020), “Mapping fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkans

The interviewed media professionals share the opinion expressed by citizens on political and economic influence. Still, they think that there is a link between political influence and economically powerful people in some media. *"It is more the economic interest than the political interest that influences the media,"* said one of the interviewed media experts.³¹ Here, they refer to the financial aid provided by the public companies to a select number of media outlets.

2.3. Citizens' attitudes and experience with the media

2.3.1. Media and democracy – are the media serving the public interest?

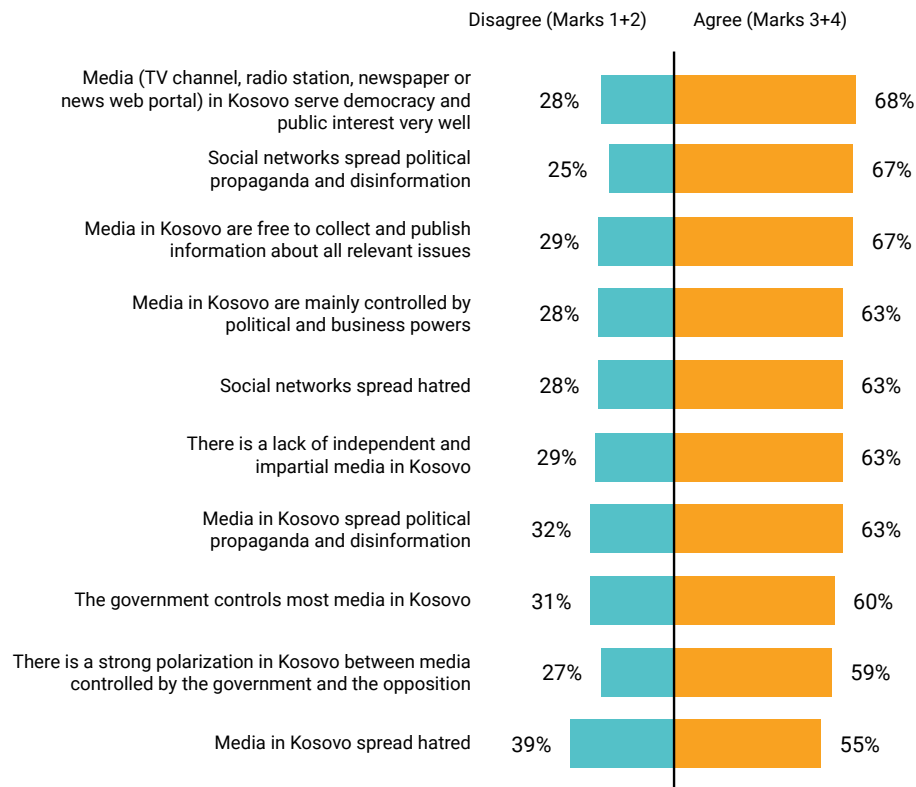
According to the IPSOS research results, more than two thirds of citizens believe that media outlets in Kosovo serve democracy and the public interest very well and are free to collect and publish information about all relevant issues (68% and 67%, respectively). However, nearly as many also perceive the Kosovo media as controlled and dependent. More specifically, almost two thirds of citizens claim that the media in Kosovo is mainly controlled by political and business powers, that there is a lack of independent and impartial media outlets in Kosovo and that media outlets in Kosovo spread political propaganda and disinformation (63% each). Furthermore, nearly three in five citizens agree that the government controls most of the media in Kosovo (60%), that there is a strong polarization between media outlets controlled by the government (59%) and the opposition, and that media outlets in Kosovo spread hatred (55%).

The situation on social networks is perceived similarly: about two thirds think that social networks spread political propaganda and disinformation as well as hatred (67% and 63%, respectively).

and identifying ways to effectively counter them", [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

31 Interviewee 4.

Graph 7. How much do you agree with the following statements?



Source: IPSOS, 2021.

The interviewed media professionals also believe that, overall, the media in Kosovo serve democracy and the public interest well. The constitution firmly guarantees freedom of information, and the Parliament has adopted laws to protect freedom of the press, such as the Law on Access to Public Documents, the Law on the Protection of Journalism Sources, and the Law on Protection of Whistleblowers. Investigative reporting has often pushed government officials to undertake specific management and policy changes.

The opinion poll shows that 67% of respondents believe that social networks spread political propaganda and disinformation. The media experts interviewed for this research point out that some media outlets publish or broadcast information that is sourced inadequately or does not fairly cover the position of all sides. Media outlets have also grown accustomed to quoting widespread social media posts, often from public officials or political figures, in their haste to publish time-sensitive or exclusive information. These posts are often unreliable or used in a different context than the actual topic on which the person commented. For example, if a politician attacks an opponent in a Facebook post, media close to the politician would publish the post without asking the person under attack for a comment. The interviewed

media professionals agreed that older people are more susceptible to disinformation because they are less able to distinguish professional media from those that are unprofessional and involved in spreading disinformation.

Media professionals also believe that, overall, media outlets have the right to access and share information. In addition to the Constitution, Kosovo has a number of laws that aim to protect freedom of speech and press freedom. They acknowledged that laws are up to date in content but pointed out that some laws lack proper implementation. The Law on Access to Official Documents is one example: The government and municipal institutions in general are reluctant to provide information on issues related to budget spending, even though that information is public under the law. During the past year, access to public documents and information has been particularly fragile in the context of the pandemic, as well as in the context of political turmoil, which saw a government fall amidst heightened political tensions in March 2020. All of this created an environment where government and other institutional representatives found it easier to not respond to requests for information, including straightforward requests for interviews or comments.

The interviewed media experts do not agree that there is a lack of independent and impartial media in Kosovo. The number of fact-checking organizations is increasing; however, only kallxo.com (krypometri) is certified by the International Fact-Checking Network. According to the opinion poll conducted by Ipsos for the Resilience project, half the citizens are not aware of platforms that deal with checking the accuracy of news and information in Kosovo, while nearly as many have heard about fact-checkers. However, only a fifth of them follow the contents of such platforms.³² One media expert interviewed believes this is a positive trend since this is a new service, which also shows that fact-checking organizations have to do more to reach the wider public.

“We do not have many organizations in Kosovo that do fact-checking. There is a need for more organizations to do it and to have more visibility. Organizations that do it on a daily basis,” said the interviewed expert.³³

The media professionals interviewed to reflect on the opinion poll findings also do not agree that the government controls most of the media in Kosovo.

³² The Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021.

³³ Interviewee 5.

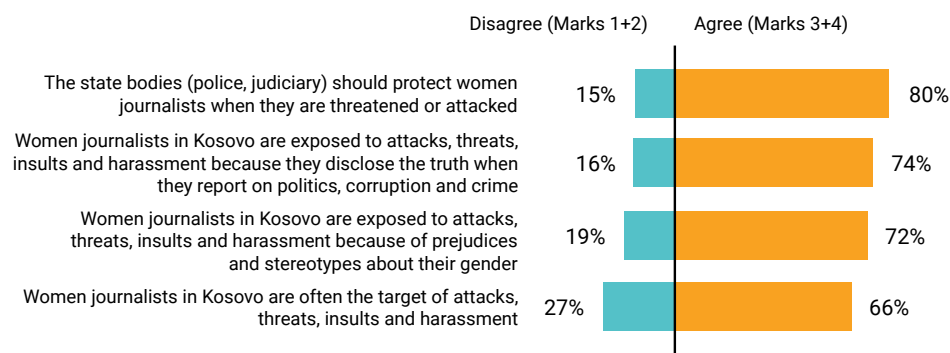
“The government does not control the media in Kosovo. When I say government, I also think of the people linked to the financial sources that come from public companies distributed for the media, such as Kosovo Telecom, but not the government being a direct controller or censor over the media”, said the same expert.³⁴

The situation may be different when it comes to the public broadcaster. The tendency for influence and control over the public broadcaster is high due to the financial dependency on the state budget. The public broadcaster is financed directly from the state budget, which jeopardizes its editorial and institutional independence.

2.3.2. Women journalists deserve more protection in an unsafe working environment

According to the Ipsos opinion poll results, the majority of citizens perceive the position of women journalists in Kosovo as unfavourable. More precisely, two-thirds of them believe that women journalists in Kosovo are often the target of attacks, threats, insults, and harassment (66%). Furthermore, three quarters of those agree that that the attacks are the result of revealing the truth while reporting on politics, corruption and crime (74%), as well as stemming from gender prejudices and stereotypes (72%). Finally, there is a strong consensus among citizens that state authorities (police, judiciary) should protect women journalists when they are threatened or attacked (80%).³⁵

Graph 8. *The position of women journalists in Kosovo. How much do you agree with each statement?*



Source: IPSOS, 2021.

³⁴ Interviewee 5.

³⁵ Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021

The media professionals interviewed to reflect the opinion poll findings agree that state bodies (police, judiciary) should protect women journalists when they are threatened or attacked and that women journalists are exposed to attacks, threats, insults and harassment. *"All journalists are threatened here, but women journalists deal with double the risk due to social norms,"* said one of the interviewed experts.³⁶

"Women journalists do not report much when they are insulted or harassed in their workplace. A workplace can be the field or a national disaster, as well as where your desk is. Editorial policies should have clear rules to protect women journalists" said the same expert.

Social prejudices and stereotypes about their gender are also a prevalent factor for women journalists to be the target of attacks. *"When in the field, women journalists are advised to wear a wedding ring, just to give them more security,"* continued the same interviewee.³⁸ Another interviewed media professional believes that there are fewer women in the Kosovo media to attack, compared to men. *"Women journalists deal with stereotypes in the field, that's why it is recommended that a male colleague is always with her in the field, otherwise you wouldn't feel that safe,"* explained a media expert in the interview for our research³⁹ Women journalists are most often the winners of awards for the best stories, including anti-corruption. But when it comes to protection from the authorities, there should not be a gender difference, says another interviewed media professional. *"The difference should be on who does the better job,"* concluded one of the experts we interviewed.⁴⁰

Another issue brought forward by the media professionals interviewed for this research is the challenge of maintaining a healthy work-family relationship. In most cases, maternity leave is cut short, either due to pressure from the media outlet or internal pressure to go back to work as soon as possible in order not to lose touch. *"The pressure was immense. I had to make a career change,"* said a female journalist interviewed for this research.⁴¹

The Association of Kosovo Journalists is now headed by a woman, and the number of projects related to the well-being of women journalists has increased. *"That is not enough. People do not understand how*

36 Interviewee 2.

37 Interviewee 2.

38 Interviewee 2.

39 Interviewee 1.

40 Interviewee 5.

41 Interviewee 1.

difficult it is for a woman journalist to do the job. The public space is male-dominated. Maternity leave makes a lot of women give up their profession”, said another interviewed gender and media expert.⁴²

The interviewed media professionals are glad to see that the public supports women in journalism, as shown by the IPSOS opinion poll. *“It was them who covered most of the stories related to COVID-19 pandemic, so people acknowledge it”,* said one of the interviewed media professionals. Another interviewed expert also raised the issue of censorship against women in the media. One of them mentioned the case of a female analyst who was critical of the television channel she was invited to, and she was never invited again. *“They wouldn’t do that to a male panellist”,* said an interviewed media expert⁴³. The media are trying to create gender balance in terms of commentators and analysts invited to discuss daily issues. However, according to one of the media professionals interviewed for this research, *“it is counterproductive to push women to be involved in debating any issues just for the sake of gender balance.”⁴⁴*

⁴² Interviewee 2.

⁴³ Interviewee 3.

⁴⁴ Interviewee 4.

3. CONCLUSION

This research shows that, overall, Kosovo citizens rely on the media to get informed. The media professionals interviewed for this research are very critical of the quality of programmes and information provided by the media. The public broadcaster, in particular, is criticized for lack of reporting objectivity and institutional transparency. The public opinion poll conducted by IPSOS in March 2021, commissioned by the Resilience project, provides new insights into the level of trust Kosovo citizens have in the media. The results show that television is by far the most used source of information in Kosovo, with eight out of ten citizens following political and social events on TV every day. The only other source of information used daily for the same purpose by more than half of the population in Kosovo is social networks. The frequency of online media usage for the same purpose is lower, followed by personal contacts as a means to share news and information.

The opinion poll results show that Kosovo citizens are not only frequent users of the media, but they place a lot of trust in them, too. However, factors related to trust in the media are different. Publishing accurate and verified information is the main reason why Kosovo citizens trust certain media outlets while being impartial and fair in reporting and having the latest news come second or third. Trusting the journalists who work there is another factor explaining why a significant number of citizens trust certain media. On the other hand, the main reasons for distrust are the perception that certain media are under political influence and that they are spreading disinformation. Spreading propaganda comes third. The interviewed media experts mention political debates in particular as a source of hate speech and disinformation, especially during election times.

However, the majority of citizens in Kosovo believe that the media serves democracy and the public interest very well. Similarly, the impression that the media is free to collect and publish information on all relevant issues is pervasive in Kosovo. Investigative reports with information from whistleblowers have often caused political and policy changes. Pressure from the media and public reaction on social networks has often pushed the political elites to undertake immediate actions on human rights issues. However, the vast majority of citizens believe that the media are mainly controlled by political and business powers, something media experts disagree on. The latter suggest that it is primarily financial rather than political interests that make certain media apply self-censorship in their reporting.

On the other hand, the percentage of Kosovo citizens who perceive that the country's media outlets are spreading disinformation is also quite high. Two thirds of citizens also believe that social networks spread hatred. The media professionals believe that the amount of fake news and hate speech in online media is very high. This makes media literacy programmes and training necessary.

Lastly, the opinion poll results show that the public acknowledges the work of women journalists and sympathizes with their work-related challenges. Just over two thirds of citizens believe that women journalists in the country are often the target of attacks, threats, insults, and harassment. The majority of them believe that this is a consequence of the fact that they (women journalists) disclose the truth when they report on politics, corruption and crime. However, as the opinion poll results show, attacks on women journalists also stem from prejudices and stereotypes about their gender. The media experts we interviewed share the same concerns, adding that the danger for women journalists does not always come from outside the office, suggesting more robust editorial policies to protect the well-being of women journalists. This and a number of other policy recommendations listed below should be taken into account to improve the media system in Kosovo.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The fight against fake news, misinformation and hate speech should be embraced collectively by all professional content producers. The regulatory bodies such as the Independent Media Commission and the Press Council should act more vigorously when the Code of Ethics is violated.
- Media literacy programmes and training should increase and also target citizens, i.e. ordinary media users, instead of media professionals only. Universities and research centres should provide more media literacy training, especially for students in secondary schools. The Ministry of Education should consider adding media literacy to the curriculum at the level of primary education.
- Crimes against journalists should be prosecuted more vigorously. The legislators and law enforcement bodies should consider the option advocated by the journalists' organizations to give priority and introduce stronger sanctions when prosecuting attacks on journalists. The media and the state authorities should offer women journalists special protection as they are more prone to threats and attacks due to prejudices and stereotypes.
- The Kosovo Parliament should amend the legislation on public broadcasting to ensure that the public broadcaster is not dependent on the state budget for funding. State funding is affecting its editorial and institutional independence. A new mechanism based on a licence fee paid by citizens (or households) should replace direct state funding.
- Access to public information should improve. Government bodies should provide more and timely data on their websites.
- More research and independent studies on the media are necessary from the research community and civil society organizations, especially on the public broadcaster.
- Constant market research is needed regarding media trust and audiences' needs.

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LIST OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS:

Interviewee 1: a female journalist/editor of an online Serbian-language local media news outlet.

Interviewee 2: a female investigative freelance reporter and gender expert publishing locally and regionally.

Interviewee 3: a female media lawyer and expert.

Interviewee 4: a female media expert in broadcast journalism.

Interviewee 5: a male journalist and representative of a media association.

Interviewee 6: a male TV investigative reporter and editor of a local online media news outlet.

About the author

Jeton Mehmeti is a media professional, consultant and research expert with more than a decade of experience in supporting media business, innovative media ideas, and media capacity assessment. He has worked with numerous media organizations in Kosovo and the Western Balkans region, supporting them in strategic planning, management transformation and community building.

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