



## **RESILIENCE:**

For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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# **MEDIA TRUST IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: TOGETHER APART**

ALBANIA / BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA / KOSOVO  
MONTENEGRO / NORTH MACEDONIA / SERBIA

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

The regional project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey' is implemented with the financial support of the European Union by partner organizations [SEENPM](#), the [Albanian Media Institute](#), [Mediacentar Sarajevo](#), [Kosovo 2.0](#), the [Montenegro Media Institute](#), the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#), the [Novi Sad School of Journalism](#), the [Peace Institute](#) and [bianet](#).

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## HATE NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

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## REGIONAL OVERVIEW

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# MEDIA TRUST IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: TOGETHER APART

*Sandra B. Hrvatin, Brankica Petković and Sanela Hodžić*



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# MEDIA TRUST IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: TOGETHER APART

*Sandra B. Hrvatin, Brankica Petković and Sanela Hodžić*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE COMPLEXITY OF MEDIA TRUST ANALYSIS

The relationship between media and their public can only be grasped by first understanding the way the entire media ecosystem functions: starting from specific media outlets and the opinion-makers that weave a complex net of communication flows and connections; unfolding the structure of this net (answering the who, when, where, how and why of influence); the flow of information (media content) through various networks and finishing with the attitudes that people have towards the content that is transmitted to them. Reflecting on the media landscape as a complex ecosystem calls predominantly for identifying it as a network of intertwined lines of force; within this network, each element (regardless of the intensity of their influence or power) affects the functioning of the entire system. The legal framework, public interest, ownership structure, financial flows, journalists' professional accountability and people's trust comprise the tightly woven network of influences on citizens' understanding of the media and media content. The failure of any of these elements to work properly influences how the ecosystem as a whole operates.

This kind of analysis of the media system represents a key shift in the frame of reference that goes beyond the dominant symmetrical perspective introducing the division between right-wing and left-wing media, pro-government and anti-government media, and professional and unprofessional media. It is precisely the idea that the media system is divided into two equally influential poles that hinders the analysis of the public's trust in the media and journalism. Within this kind of system, everyone trusts "their own" media and vice versa, and everyone believes that the media of the opposite pole is responsible for the crisis of trust.

Let us try to replace this symmetry by imagining an asymmetrical media ecosystem as defined by Benkler, Faris and Roberts in their book *Network Propaganda* (2018). If we attempt to imagine something that could be called a centre within this system (the centre not as a central viewpoint for left and right mirroring images but as a central point of the entire system), we observe the following: the more we shift towards the left pole, the more the attention

and trust is dispersed, while shifting from the centre towards the right pole shows the condensation of attention and trust around one individual media outlet surrounded by media satellites strengthening the influence of the prominent media outlet. Determining the public attention, the influence of the media and the subsequent trust in specific media outlets within this kind of system is not an easy task.

The attention differs within symmetrical and asymmetrical media ecosystems by its content. We begin by explaining the connection between the attention of the public and trust. The media are attention merchants, as Tim Wu says. The media reaps the public's attention on the readers' market and then sells it on the advertising market. The better the harvesting on the first (readers') market, the more profit the media can make through advertising. Attention is not equivalent to trust. People can give attention to a particular media outlet but do not have a high level of trust in it (and vice versa). Media content creators believe that trust is the basic "currency" for determining the value of journalists' labour. The more credibility and representation of public interest there is present in the work of a specific media outlet, the more the public is supposed to trust its content. The reality shows, however, that trust in the media is not as homogeneous a category as it may seem at first glance. Some trust a certain media outlet because they believe that it is transmitting credible information; in contrast, others base their trust on the fact that the media outlet offers exactly the kind of information (and interpretation) that goes with their pre-existing beliefs. Using the concept of trust in both of these cases is simply wrong.

We will demonstrate that within the asymmetrical system, the attention given to the media and the trust in their work differ significantly in regards to which end of the spectrum the individual media outlet is located. The fundamental characteristic of the asymmetrical media ecosystem is that the centre and the left end of the spectrum have no pivotal hub (a dominant source of information or media outlet that attracts and condenses all the attention of the public) in contrast with the right and extreme right end of the spectrum where the attention is distinctly condensed around a small number of media outlets. In short, there is no such a thing as division between left- and right-wing media, and **there is no symmetrical model of the media ecosystem; instead, the asymmetrical model is enforced and with it, the division between the right-wing media and all the rest.**

Stemming from a symmetrical media system, each media outlet located on the left-right spectrum has its own precisely identifiable public that only trusts those media that can be easily placed within this (left-right) division. The context we are dealing with is much more complex. The public of the media that can be placed on the spectrum left or right from the centre uses (reads, shares and comments) different media. For this public (at least principally), the issue is not the primordial distrust towards the functioning of the media itself but rather the public attempts to establish control over the sense of the information by verifying it at different sources.



The public of the media right or far right of the centre operates on the principle that nothing exists outside of the reach of their media world. They are highly suspicious about informational cascades, perceive rumours as truths, and find reasonable explanations in conspiracy theories. The media on the right end of the spectrum comfort their public by presenting any news coming from the gravitational area outside of their world as misleading and fake. It is precisely for this reason that the public of the right end of the spectrum is fertile for breeding propaganda (domestic and foreign). The idea that this public can have their “eyes opened” by transmitting the truth for each of the lies (*fact-checking*) is not only inefficient but politically naive.

## 2. TIGHTENING OF THE PROPAGANDA FEEDBACK LOOP

The propaganda feedback loop is a very useful concept for understanding these processes. It is a

*“network dynamic in which media outlets, political elites, activists, and publics form and break connections based on the contents of statements, and that progressively lowers the costs of telling lies that are consistent with a shared political narrative and increases the costs of resisting that shared narrative in the name of truth. A network caught within such a feedback loop makes it difficult for a media outlet or politician to adopt a consistently truth-focused strategy without being expelled from the network and losing influence in the relevant segment of the public.” (Benkler, Roberts, Haris, 2018:33).*

The tightening of the loop does not affect only the public’s perception of what the media is communicating to them but also the choices of the voters of the right-wing political spectrum. A politician who attempts to maintain standpoints closer to the centre will not only lose the attention of the media of the right end of the spectrum but will also become a target for coordinated attacks coming from all the media of the right end of the spectrum. The result of the effects of the feedback loop is a radicalization within the media ecosystem, which in turn produces the radicalization of its corresponding politics.

We use the term radicalization to describe a situation of the presence of dominating extreme world views. We must be cautious at this point. It is not the media system that radicalizes the politics, rather the opposite. Politics are normalizing, trivializing extreme world views. This kind of media system creates a public that is exceedingly resilient to any kind of arguments originating outside of their media orbit. The end result is to be expected. The interpretations of the world reasoned by the public of the right end of the spectrum are moving more and more towards extreme interpretations: from the right to the extreme right. In contrast, the part of the media ecosystem that follows the principle of fact-checking must be immensely careful not to publish information that is unconfirmed and unreliable. Attention dispersed among different media outlets gives the public of precisely these media the ability to quickly discover untruth and deception. This way of verifying of information with different media outlets is the basis of what we call trust. A media outlet becomes trustworthy when its public knows (by fact-checking and dispersed attention) that the facts and viewpoints published are credible. Should there be a mistake, the media outlet will apologize and publish a correction transparently.

### 3. WHEN EVERYONE SINGS FROM THE SAME HYMN SHEET

The issue of trusting the media needs to be reflected on by analyzing the radicalization of their own *echo chamber*, a concept developed by Cass Sunstein (2017). People usually get into discussions with those who think alike and avoid discussions with those whose opinions differ. In the long run, this leads their standpoints to exposure to radicalization to the point where communication with anyone outside their echo chamber becomes impossible. The advent of social networks and the formation of a public that informs itself about the world using platforms led to the belief that a “variety in voices” would bring about the dispersion of attention or an increase in the diversity of content available in the media system. However, this did not happen.

The present situation has in no way been caused (merely) by online media or the changes in the habits of media content consumption. Should the internet, online media and social networks be responsible for the polarization of opinions in society, we could also expect the same kind of polarization within the media ecosystem itself. An overview of the entire media ecosystem, including online media, clearly demonstrates an asymmetrical structure. This means that there is an echo chamber on the right end of the spectrum and, opposite to that, a plethora of dispersed media sources trying to earn their public’s trust on the other end. The architecture of the traditional media system in comparison to the architecture of the present system is one that creates differences in the ways we are resilient to propaganda. The historical development of the media system (all of its parts – from the legal framework to financing, media ownership structure and composition of a public) was what led to an asymmetrical media system, not the technological advancements or the use of certain informational or communication channels.

To be able to understand the way the ecosystem works, we must see it holistically and avoid fooling ourselves into thinking that the replacement of a particular element – legislation, ownership, journalist, editor, level of trust or media habits – can influence the changes within the ecosystem. Nor is it an issue of digital technologies destroying the common space for sharing experience. The structure of the media ecosystem is what influences the positioning of the media within it in relation to their public, its attention and trust. It is becoming more and more evident that the media, politicians and voters of the right end of the spectrum have come to be prisoners of a single junction of creating, sharing and interpreting the reality. The absence of a wish to exit the echo chamber, a wish for understanding what those outside your media world think, increases the probability of radicalizing political beliefs as well as media content.

## 4. PERCEPTION GAP

The specific ways in which certain groups of society evaluate the reality and the very social group they belong to is what we call a perception gap. On an individual level, this gap demonstrates how the current system of giving attention to the media and trusting them operates. Later in our discussion, we refer to the study *Hidden Tribes of America Project* by More in Common that analyzes the processes of political pluralization and tribalism in the USA (More in Common, 2019). The study findings are unexpected for all the existing public policies in the area of the media. Public discourse is dominated by the belief that the media world of fragmented supply and demand is limiting people to their filter bubbles and making them trust less and less in those who do not think “like us” while at the same time failing to understand how is it possible that there are people with opinions and beliefs that differ so much from their own. Even more surprising is the situation of encountering individuals and social groups that believe things that are at odds with conclusive facts or that support various conspiracy theories. The perception of themselves and those outside of their filter bubble, usually deemed as having extreme standpoints, characterizes the perception gap.

The More in Common research demonstrated something different. The beliefs of the majority of Americans do not differ substantially from your own. How did they come to this conclusion? They divided people into seven political “tribes” based on their fundamental political beliefs about issues meant to produce the perception gap – Progressive Activists, Traditional Liberals, Passive Liberals, Politically Disengaged, Moderates, Traditional Conservatives, Devoted Conservatives. The research showed that only the “tribes of the extreme edges” (Progressive Activists and Devoted Conservatives) had the most distorted ideas about the opinions of the opposite side. Members of the “central” group (Politically Disengaged) are *“fully three times more accurate in their estimates of political opponents than members of either of these Wing groups”*. (More in Common, 2019) It is important to point out the conclusion that neither a higher level of education nor increased consumption of the media contributes to the reduction of the perception gap. *“More than three quarters of Americans believe our differences are not so great that we cannot come together. Yet some scrolling through social media news feed or switching on cable TV or talk radio could be convinced that we’re a country heading towards civil war.”* (More in Common, 2019). Even though there are things each of us can do to overcome the perception gap, it is not and it should not be an individualized matter. To bring forth real transformation, radical changes need to be implemented when it comes to the media and society as a whole. The so-called balkanization of the political space (the fragmentation of the political system into smaller parts that are usually incapable of cooperating with each other) supposes the balkanization of the media landscape. Individual political decency cannot replace political indecency on a social level. Nevertheless, it is a start. Democracy was never founded in consensus but the confronting of different opinions.

The issue of trusting the media needs to be dealt with very carefully. When it comes to answers to their questions, people refer to the media outlets operating within the ecosystem to which they themselves belong. The architecture of the system gravitates towards misunderstandings, divisions and closing into like-minded filter bubbles. Trusting the media within this system does not necessarily mean that we are dealing with a media that is generally trustworthy. The public of the right-wing end of the media spectrum has been systematically disconnected from potential sources of information that could put their pre-existing beliefs into question. The only kind of contact with media outlets outside of the right-wing end of the spectrum came to be exclusively by attacking their seemingly unacceptable standpoints.

The dissonance between the information received from within their end of the media spectrum and that obtained from outside consequentially created a profoundly asymmetrical structure of trust, according to which all the information that corroborates the pre-existing viewpoints is perceived as credible information. In contrast, all the information that puts the existing beliefs into question is deemed fake news or propaganda. The public of the media of the right end of the spectrum does not have specific personality traits. Their behaviour is a direct result of the architecture of the media system. Moreover, the latter does not work in favour of democratizing society.

Discussing the media really means considering the media content produced by the journalists. The current situation demands careful consideration of journalism, what it is, whose interest it works in and what kind of values it represents. Benkler, Faris and Roberts developed the idea of transparent and accountable journalism.

*“Practically, this means that professional journalism needs to recalibrate its commitment to objective reporting further toward transparent, accountable verifiability and away from demonstrative neutrality. (...) Instead of engaging in this kind of public performance of neutrality, what we might call demonstrative neutrality, objectivity needs to be performed by emphasizing the transparency and accountability of journalists’ sources and practices, what we might call accountable verifiability.” (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018: 357)*

The question we asked ourselves throughout the Resilience project refers to uncovering the source that made possible the creation of propagandist media models that produce hate speech and simultaneously the source that allowed for the formation of mechanisms used to overcome those very models. Focusing only on changing the predominant journalism practices is insufficient. For there to be accountability and transparency in journalism, a decisive intervention in the heart of the media ecosystem – its political and economic structure – is necessary. The crisis of the current system is not (merely) a crisis of journalism or a crisis of trust. We are dealing with a crisis of democracy, a crisis in which the media in its present condition played a key role.

## 5. RESEARCH ON TRUST IN THE MEDIA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Within the Resilience project, implemented in the countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey, we have developed a series of research activities to better understand the range, political economy, operational modalities and content of hate and propaganda media and communication in these countries. Our goal has also been to examine the level of trust in the media and citizens' perception of media freedom and the media's role in spreading hate and propaganda.

First, in spring 2020, we analyzed how media systems in these seven countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey) integrate hate and propaganda media models, what kind of ownership and funding patterns make them possible and what the examples of such media and communication are.<sup>1</sup> The next research, in autumn 2020, examined the content of hate narratives in media and communication in the same countries, focusing particularly on hate narratives targeting migrants, political opposition and journalists.<sup>2</sup> In both studies, we also checked whether there is a legal or institutional framework developed and used to challenge, expose, restrict and counter hate and propaganda media operations and content.

In the last research in the Resilience series, conducted in early 2021, we carried out an opinion poll on trust in the media and discussed the results in focus group discussions and interviews with media professionals and media experts. The opinion poll was realized in cooperation with Ipsos Strategic Marketing. The third research study covered the Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Turkey was not included in the third stage of the research.

We tackled the gender dimension in all three research activities; in the opinion poll specifically, we examined how citizens perceive attacks on women journalists.

The questionnaire used in the opinion poll was drafted by the Resilience research team and finalized in cooperation with the Ipsos research team. It included three groups of questions – on the use of media (as a source of news and information about political and social issues), on trust in the media and on attitudes and experiences with the media.

In the group of questions on trust in the media, we started with a question on general trust in the media (television, radio, print media, online media) when

<sup>1</sup> See the first collection of Resilience research reports "Hate and Propaganda Models of Media and Communication in the Western Balkans and Turkey" at: <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/E-book-Resilience-research-1-Final.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See the second collection of Resilience research reports "Hate Narratives in the Western Balkans and Turkey" at: <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Resilience-E-book-research-2-all-reports-with-CIP-April-2021.pdf>.

it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly. Later, asking about trust in different media types, we provided the following options: television, radio, print newspapers and magazines, online media, social networks, investigative reporting outlets and international media outlets. For some of the media types, short explanations or country-specific examples were provided. The question on trust in public service broadcasting was asked separately. We also included an open question about the most trusted specific media outlets in each country, but applying careful interpretation and use of the poll results for such an open question. We included two questions on the reasons for trust and distrust in the media, offering possible reasons and also leaving the possibility for the respondent's own answer. The possible reasons for trust in media outlets included: they publish accurate and verified information, they are impartial and fair in their reporting, they promote values, ideas and views that correspond with my stands, they always have the latest news and information, they allow people to comment on news and information, they are from my hometown, I trust the journalists who work there. In contrast, the possible reasons for distrust in the media comprised: they are under political influence, they promote the interests of economically powerful people and companies, they spread disinformation, they spread propaganda, they spread hatred, the journalists and editors who work there do not respect professional ethics and do not serve the public interest, they do not publish information on who they are, I don't trust anonymous news sources.

In the group of questions on attitudes towards the media, with the main question, we asked citizens to express their level of agreement or disagreement with ten statements on the media: media in the country serve democracy and public interest very well, media in the country are free to collect and publish information about all relevant issues, media in the country are mainly controlled by political and business powers, the government controls most media outlets in the country, there is strong polarization in the country between media controlled by the government and the opposition, there is a lack of independent and impartial media in the country, media in the country spread political propaganda and disinformation, media in the country spread hatred, social networks spread political propaganda and disinformation, social networks spread hatred.

We also asked citizens if they have heard about fact-checking platforms and if they have followed them.

At the end, we asked citizens to express their level of agreement or disagreement with statements related to women journalists: whether they agree that women journalists are often the targets of attacks, threats, insults and harassment. And if they agree, do they think that women journalists are targeted because they disclose the truth when they report on politics, corruption and crime or because of prejudices and stereotypes about their gender. Finally, we asked whether citizens agree that state bodies (police, judiciary) should protect women journalists when they are threatened or attacked.



In the section on demographics, we asked about age, gender, education, employment status, urban or rural type of settlement, region, household income and ethnicity.

Table 1. *Opinion poll dates, samples and methods*

	Field research	Sample universe	Target population size	Sample size	Method of data collection
Bosnia and Herzegovina	10 March to 30 March 2021	Population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 18+	2,841,840	1003	Face-to-face
Albania	22 February to 26 February 2021	Population of Albania, 18+	2,234,646	1010	Mixed mode (telephone and online)
Serbia	24 February to 28 February 2021	Population of Serbia, 18+	5,801,993	1004	Mixed mode (telephone and online)
Kosovo	23 February to 6 March 2021	Population of Kosovo, 18+	1,205,788	1045	Telephone survey
Montenegro	3 March to 7 March 2021	Population of Montenegro, 18+	484,949	1018	Mixed mode (telephone and online)
North Macedonia	1 March to 15 March 2021	Population of North Macedonia, 18+	1,650,890	1002	Mixed mode (telephone and online)

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The opinion poll results were presented by the Ipsos research team separately for each country and also in a comparative perspective. They were further analyzed by the Resilience researchers and discussed in focus groups or in individual interviews with media professionals and media experts in six countries.

Table 2. *Focus groups and interviews in six countries*

	Number of media professionals and media experts participating in focus group or number of interviews
Albania	6 participants in the focus group
Bosnia and Herzegovina	7 participants in the focus group
Kosovo	6 interviews
Montenegro	7 participants in the focus group
North Macedonia	9 participants in the focus group
Serbia	6 participants in the focus group

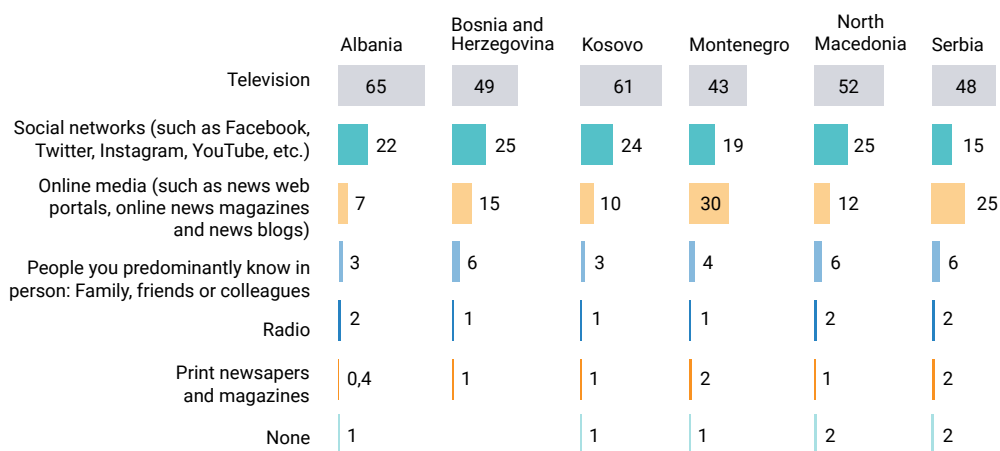


## 6. MEDIA USE: DOMINANCE OF TELEVISION

Against the background of a worrying presence of hate, misinformation and propaganda in content disseminated on social networks, and to some extent through media outlets in the region (identified in our previous research), in this research, we explored **media use, trust in the media and citizens' attitudes towards the media.**

The opinion poll, conducted by Ipsos for the Resilience project, confirms that **television dominates** as the main and most frequently used source of information across the region.<sup>3</sup> Television is the main source of news for half or more of the citizens in the region, followed by social networks (for around a quarter of citizens) and online media (a tenth or more of citizens), while other sources are mentioned far less as the primary source of news (Graph 1). Some possible reasons for such power of television are its long tradition, i.e. the “cult of television” (participant of the focus group in Serbia), particularly among older age groups, but also appealing formats, including infotainment which includes not easily discerned political and propaganda messages (a participant of the focus group in Serbia). Citizens use television for information mostly daily, by between 83% (in Albania) and 71% (in BiH). On the one side, this popularity of television is good news because television is more regulated than other media sectors, which means that hate narratives and propaganda are less extreme or at least more penalized. On the other side, it is bad news because television outlets remain strongly influenced by political elites. One of the experts from Kosovo interviewed for our research even believes that the political debates on television stations during the elections in Kosovo were: “no different from fake news circulating in social networks” (see the report by Jeton Mehmeti).

Graph 1. *Main source of information (What is your main source of information?)*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Compared to other countries, television is particularly used as a main source of information in Albania and Kosovo (by 65% and 61% of citizens, respectively); social networks are used as the main source of news the most in BiH and North Macedonia (for 25% of citizens in each). Finally, citizens of Serbia and Montenegro rely more often on information from web portals than citizens of other countries (25% and 30% of citizens list them as their primary source of information, respectively).

The only other source of information used daily by around half of the population is **social networks**. Between 49% (in Serbia) and 65% (in Kosovo) of citizens use social networks daily. This is a worrying indicator as the content-filtering algorithms are likely to limit the diversity of content and standpoints the citizens are exposed to. However, some of the media professionals and media experts who participated in the focus group discussions in this research point out that citizens largely fail to distinguish between professional media outlets and other subjects that share content on social networks (see reports on North Macedonia and BiH), and that are dominantly inadvertently exposed to information that “pops up” on social networks (report on BiH). Such lack of purposeful search for information and filtering of content online is likely to maintain the echo chambers in which other perspectives and views are left out.

**Online media outlets** (news websites, online news magazines and news blogs) are the next most used source of information, utilized by between 33% (BiH) and as many as 57% of citizens (in Montenegro) daily. Daily access to information through **personal contacts** is the highest in Albania and Montenegro (50% and 47% respectively) and the lowest in North Macedonia and Serbia (29% and 37% respectively). The majority of the population are never informed through **radio and print media**.<sup>4</sup>

The use of traditional media, including television, radio and press, among **young people** (18–29 years old) is much lower than among older people. For instance, in Albania 96% of people aged 60 or older report watching TV daily, compared to 67% of young people. On the other hand, 54% of young people in Albania use online media, and 84% use social networks daily.<sup>5</sup>

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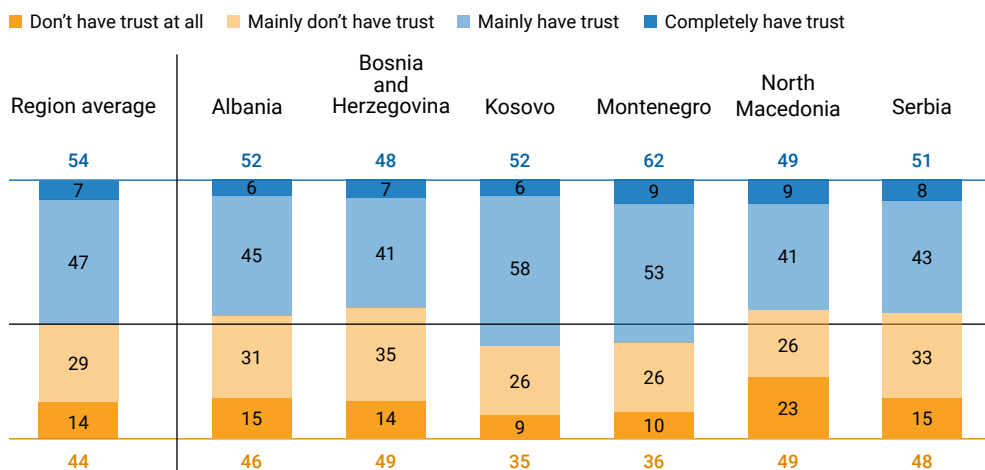
<sup>4</sup> Only 9% of citizens in Kosovo use radio as a daily source of information and up to one fifth of citizens in Serbia, BiH and Montenegro (24%, 21% and 21%, respectively). Among the countries of the region, the press is most used in Montenegro, where less than one out of five citizens read it daily, and the least used in BiH, Kosovo and North Macedonia (with 5%, 5% and 7% of the population reading print media daily).

<sup>5</sup> Some other demographic differences are also detected. For instance, in Albania, online media and social networks are more used among those in the 30–44 age category, highly educated, and employed, as well as those from upper-income households (above 48,000 lek).

## 7. TRUST IN THE MEDIA: DIVIDED TRUST, OPPOSING PREFERENCES

Trust in the media varies across the region, with citizens in BiH, Serbia and North Macedonia divided in around half of those that trust and half of those that distrust the media, and a higher number of citizens in Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania having trust in the media (Graph 2). The highest trust is expressed by citizens in Kosovo (64% of citizens trust and 35% distrust the media) and the lowest in BiH (48% of citizens that trust, compared to 49% that distrust the media).

Graph 2. Public's trust in the media (In general, how much trust do you have in the media – newspapers, TV, radio or online news sources – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?)



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

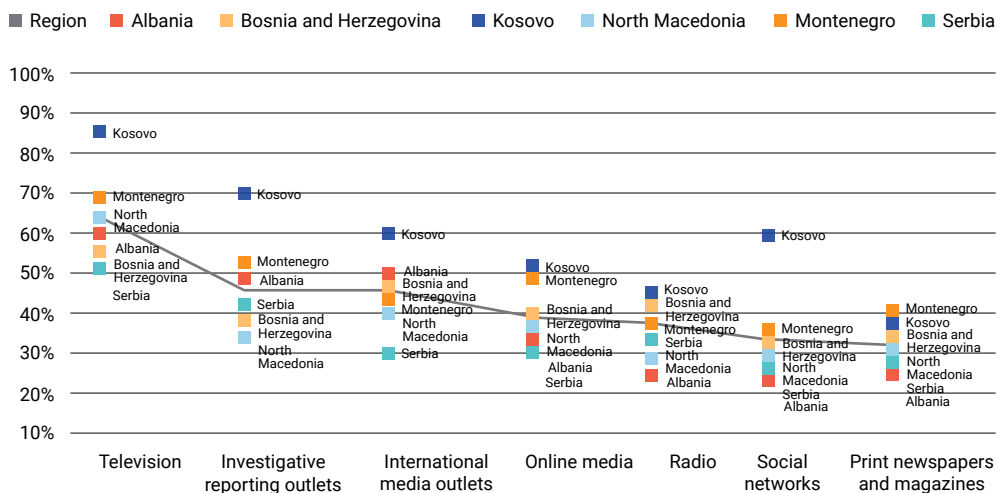
Similarly, trust in the **public service broadcaster** varies across the region, being the highest in Kosovo (76%) and the lowest in BiH and Montenegro (in BiH between 32% for RTRS and 43% for RTVFBiH, and 48% in Montenegro). In some countries of the region, there is a clear division of trust-distrust in the public service broadcaster indicative of an ethnic and/or political divide. In BiH, Bosniaks are significantly more likely to trust BHRT and RTVFBiH, and to distrust RTRS. The opposite is true for ethnic Serbs, who have significantly more trust in RTRS and distrust towards the other two public broadcasters. In Montenegro, ethnic Montenegrins and Bosniaks are more likely to trust the public service broadcaster RTCG. The Montenegrin public is divided between those who the public service broadcaster RTCG (48% of citizens) and those who distrust it (48%).

Furthermore, RTCG is named both as the media outlet that they distrust the most (25% of citizens) as well as the media outlet that they trust the most

(18%). The polarized opinions about this public service broadcaster are likely reflecting the political leanings of the public, given that RTCG has long been, and to an extent still is, considered closely affiliated with the previous ruling party, the Democratic Party of Socialists. In Serbia, over 56% of citizens trust the public service broadcaster, while 40% distrust it. Some observations of the media professionals and experts with whom we discussed the opinion poll results suggest that the use and trust in the public service broadcasters stems from a tradition of watching their news programmes and lack of insight into their political bias (see the opinions of the interviewed experts in the report by Jeton Mehmeti).

Trust towards **television** as the preferred source of information is the highest compared to other types of sources, with around 65% of the population in the region who mainly or completely trust that television stations are reporting fully, fairly and accurately (and 33% of those who mainly do not or do not trust them at all) (Graph 3).<sup>6</sup>

Graph 3. Trust in news sources (To what extent do you trust each of the following media types is a reliable source of news and information?)



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Television is also listed by citizens, respondents in our opinion poll, as the most trusted media source in all countries in the region, particularly in Albania and Kosovo (58% and 66%, respectively; Graph 4). However, among the six countries, distrust towards television is the strongest in Serbia and BiH (45 and 40%, respectively).<sup>7</sup>

6 Overall, the highest is the trust in television in Kosovo (87%) and the lowest for radio, print and social networks in Albania (27%, 26%, 27%, respectively).

7 Distrust towards radio is particularly high in BiH (40%); distrust towards print media is the highest in Serbia and Albania (49 and 47%, respectively); towards online media, it is the highest in BiH and Albania (48 and 46%, respectively) similarly as towards social networks (in Albania 54 and in BiH 51%). Distrust is overall the highest for social networks in Albania and BiH (54% and 51%, respectively), for print media in Serbia (49%) and for online media in BiH (48%).

**Investigative reporting outlets** are the second most trusted source of information on the level of the region, although there are large differences between countries with only 36% of citizens in North Macedonia and as many as 70% of citizens (in Kosovo) regarding them as reliable sources of information.<sup>8</sup> Investigative reporting outlets are selected as the first choice significantly more often in Serbia (16%) compared to the region. Such relatively high trust can be seen as a positive indicator, especially against the background of systematic efforts by the Serbian Government to discredit them and to undermine their credibility (see the research report by Jovović and Valić Nedeljković).

Furthermore, between two fifths and three- fifths of citizens in the region say they mainly or completely trust the **international media** (such as *BBC, CNN, Russia Today, Al-Jazeera, Deutsche-Welle, Euronews, Voice of America, Sputnik*), with the level of trust in the international media being the highest in Kosovo (60%) and the lowest in Serbia (29%, see Graph 3). Compared to the regional average, international media outlets are more often positioned as the source that citizens trust the most in Albania, BiH and Montenegro (11%, 12% and 12%, respectively).

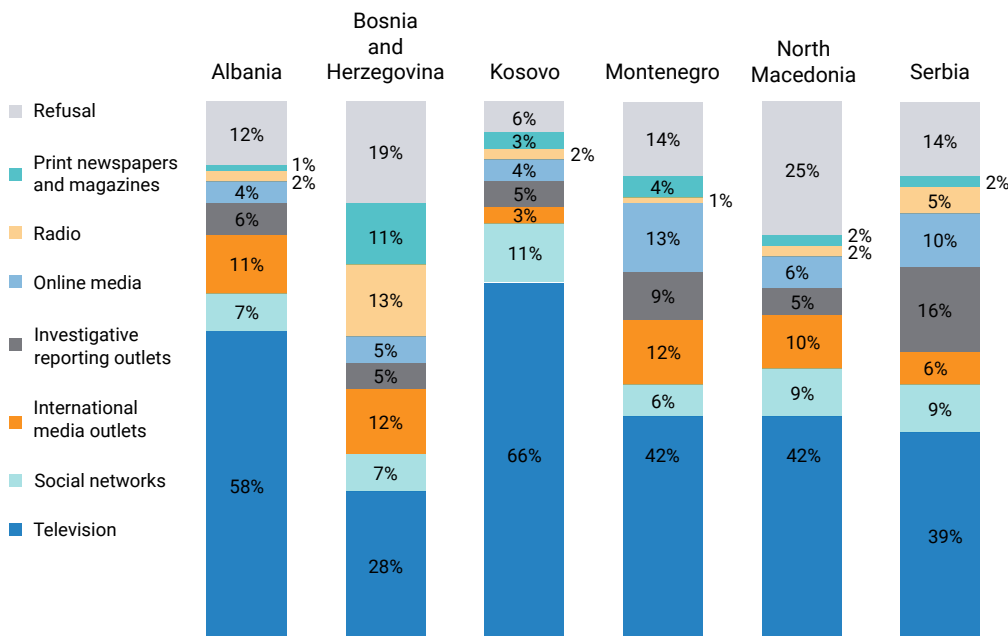
Other types of sources of news and information are less trusted. The next most trusted are **online media** (10% in Serbia and 13% in Montenegro), while in BiH, compared to the other countries of the region, **radio and the press** are the most trusted (13% and 11%, respectively, see Graph 4). The findings from BiH also show higher trust among citizens who follow traditional, offline media, compared to those who follow the online platforms, and that the use of social networks is more prevalent among those citizens who express distrust towards traditional media outlets. This suggests that younger age groups (who are using online platforms more than the older generations) possibly distrust media institutions in general and are more knowledgeable about disinformation than older age groups (see the report by Anida Sokol).

Citizens in the region express the least trust for **print media, social networks and radio**. As our researchers Jovović and Valić-Nedeljković note, part of the reason for the declining trust in print media in Serbia is the fact that their most loyal audience – older citizens – reduced their consumption of newspapers due to constrained movement during the COVID-19 pandemic and that the quality of reporting during the pandemic of many print media declined (see the report on Serbia). However, the participants in focus group in Albania noted that the higher trust towards social networks, compared to the radio and print media, is an indicator of the lack of media literacy among Albanian citizens.

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<sup>8</sup> Overall, in Montenegro, 52% of citizens trust them, in Kosovo 70%, in Albania 49%, in North Macedonia 36% and 39% in both Serbia and BiH.

Graph 4. *The most trusted source of news and information (Please rank the following sources from the one you trust the most to the one you trust the least when it comes to the news and information.)*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

When comparing the expressed **trust and distrust**, we can conclude that in Kosovo and Montenegro, trust is greater than distrust for most types of media sources. On the other hand, distrust towards most types of media prevails in Albania, BiH, Macedonia and Serbia. The proportion of citizens who trust the information they receive through **television** is higher than the proportion of those who do not trust such information. At the same time, there is an almost equal share of trust vs distrust towards **online media, print and radio**.<sup>9</sup> In all countries except Kosovo, citizens express more distrust than trust towards **social networks**.

The expressed trust in sources of news and information (and particularly in television) is the highest in Kosovo and to an extent (for television, press, online media, and investigative journalism platforms) in Montenegro. Our researcher, Milica Bogdanović, sees this as a positive indicator as disinformation and hate is rarely propagated by professional media outlets in Montenegro (see the research report on Montenegro).

When asked about the **reasons for trust** in the media, citizens in the region most often indicate accuracy, impartiality and fair reporting. Among the **main reasons for distrust**, there are perceived political influence and spreading disinformation and propaganda. Interestingly, one of the reasons frequently selected by the respondents was publishing the latest news and information (mostly third-ranked but in BiH the first-ranked reason). Other reasons involve

<sup>9</sup> 40% of citizens trust online media and 41% do not, 37% of citizens trust radio and 32% do not, and 33% of citizens trust print media and 40% do not.



the opportunity for user comments, promotion of values, ideas and views that correspond to their stands, etc.

However, the fact that there is poor consensus on the most trustworthy and least trustworthy media outlets in the region suggest that the reasons for trust/distrust are far more complex. The survey results suggest that sources are trusted and used based on the fact that they reinforce their attitudes and present their social group in a positive light (see the inputs of focus groups participants in the reports by Anida Sokol and Ilda Londo). The lack of consensus among citizens on the **most trusted and distrusted media outlets** in the region primarily indicates political and ethnic polarization. In Kosovo and Albania, the consensus is higher,<sup>10</sup> while much lower in BiH,<sup>11</sup> Montenegro,<sup>12</sup> and Serbia. For illustration, in **Serbia**, we found opposing views on media outlets, with public service broadcaster RTS being the most trusted outlet (mentioned by 35% of citizens) and the third least trusted (14%), and Pink TV being the second most trusted (23%) and the first most distrusted media outlet (31%).<sup>13</sup>

A significant proportion of citizens in the region (besides Kosovo) did not list the media that they trust, either answering with “I do not know” or refusing to answer,<sup>14</sup> or noting they do not trust any media outlet.<sup>15</sup> The proportion of people who did not list media outlets they distrust (noting they do not trust any or just not answering) is even higher, from 36% in Serbia to 84% in Albania.<sup>16</sup> Such results might indicate the lack of reflection on these issues among citizens and the lack of media literacy that would enable them to identify trustworthy media and those that disseminate unreliable information.

In all countries except Kosovo, the vast majority of citizens have not heard of a **media outlet or organization** in their country that deals with **checking the accuracy of news**. The citizens of Albania and North Macedonia are the least aware of the presence of fact-checkers in their country (10% and 15% of citizens, respectively). In Montenegro, that awareness is slightly higher (26%) and in Serbia and BiH significantly higher (34 and 34%, respectively). Even in Kosovo, where awareness is the highest (47%), half of the citizens have not heard of such platforms (48%).

<sup>10</sup> In Kosovo, RTK and KTV are identified as the most trusted media outlets by around half of citizens (51% and 49%, respectively). Klan Kosova and RTV 21 are mentioned by more than a third of citizens (38% and 35%, respectively), while more than a quarter named Tv Dukagjini as the media outlet they trust the most (27%). There is much less consensus concerning the least trusted media, with citizens mentioning various media outlets (most of all Gazeta Express and RTK). In Albania, around a quarter of citizens mention TV Klan and Top Channel as the media outlets they trust the most.

<sup>11</sup> BN TV was mentioned as the most trustworthy by around 15% of citizens, and FTV equally mentioned as an outlet they trust and distrust (cca. 10% of citizens). The public service broadcaster RTRS was mentioned by around 19% as the least trustworthy, but also by 10% as the most trustworthy.

<sup>12</sup> The public service broadcaster RTCG is the first most distrusted (25% of citizens) and the second most trusted media outlet (18%). In addition, Vijesti is singled out clearly as the most trusted media outlet (by 58% of citizens), while a significant number of citizens (13%) also mention it as the least trusted.

<sup>13</sup> N1 is also listed among the most trusted (16%) and the most distrusted media outlets (15%).

<sup>14</sup> 16% in Albania, 10% in BiH, 7% in Kosovo, 8% in Montenegro, 14% in North Macedonia, 7% in Serbia.

<sup>15</sup> 37% of citizens in Albania, 19% in BiH, 2% in Kosovo, 12% in Montenegro, 19% in North Macedonia, 16% in Serbia.

<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, 51% of citizens in BiH, 46% in Kosovo, 41% in Montenegro, and 62% in North Macedonia failed to answer or they stated they do not trust any media.

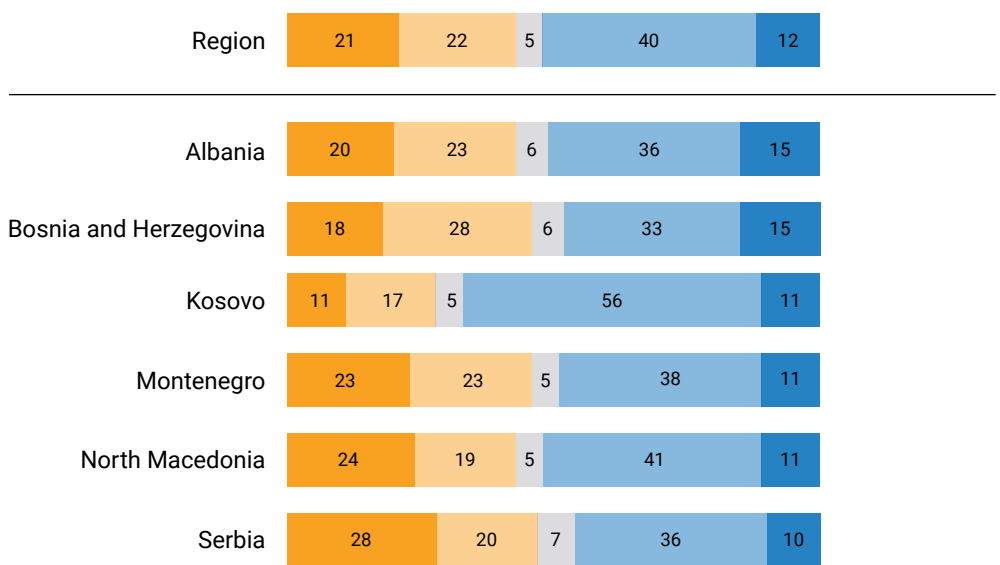
## 8. CITIZENS' ATTITUDES: MEDIA CONSIDERED BOTH FREE AND CONTROLLED BY POLITICAL AND BUSINESS POWERS

About half of the citizens in all countries agree that the media in their country (TV channels, radio stations, newspapers or news web portals) serve democracy and the public interest very well (Graph 5).<sup>17</sup> Slightly more than half of the citizens in most countries of the region believe that media in the country can freely do their job and report on important topics.<sup>18</sup>

Graph 5. *Media in the country serve democracy and the public interest very well*

*On a scale from 1 to 4, assess how much you agree with the following statements.*

Strongly disagree   Somewhat disagree   Don't know / Refusal   Somewhat agree   Strongly agree



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> This share rises to two thirds in Kosovo, while in Serbia, it falls significantly below the regional average (46%).

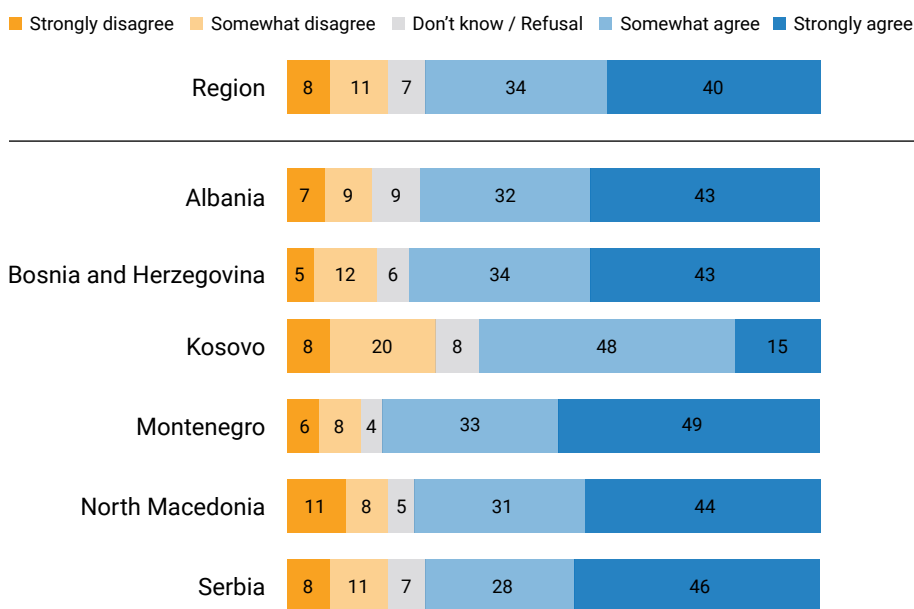
<sup>18</sup> The impression that the media is free to collect and publish information on all relevant issues is particularly widespread in Kosovo (67%), while the citizens of Serbia share this attitude significantly less often (49%).



However, at the same time, the vast majority agree that the media is mainly controlled by political and business powers (Graph 6),<sup>19</sup> that the government controls most of the media in the country,<sup>20</sup> that there is a lack of independent and impartial media,<sup>21</sup> and that there is a strong polarization between media outlets controlled by the government and by the opposition.<sup>22</sup> Some of the participants in focus groups – journalists and media experts – also recognize the political bias, polarization and economic influences on the media. A focus group participant in Albania even believes that not-for-profit media outlets are the only ones that are not influenced by the political and economic affiliates.

Graph 6. *Media in the country are mainly controlled by political and business powers*

On a scale from 1 to 4, assess how much you agree with the following statements.



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

19 This belief is particularly widespread in Montenegro (82%) and least present in Kosovo (63%). In other countries, about three quarters of citizens share this view.

20 This opinion is significantly more often held in Bosnia and Herzegovina – three out of four citizens somewhat or strongly agree with this statement (75%). The general population in Montenegro and Kosovo are least assured, with half of the former (54%) and three fifths of the latter (60%) holding the same opinion.

21 In Montenegro, this belief is the most widespread (82%), and in Kosovo, the percentage of people sharing this view is significantly lower than the regional average (63%). In other countries of the region, three out of four people agree with this.

22 In most of the countries, around two thirds of citizens strongly or somewhat agree with this statement. However, citizens of Montenegro significantly more often perceive that the media in their country is polarized (73%), while in Kosovo this belief is far less prevalent (59%).

The opinion of the majority of citizens in Montenegro (82%) that there are no independent and balanced media outlets in their country and that they are under the control of political and economic centres of power (81%) was strongly opposed by the journalists and editors from Montenegro participating in the focus group (see the report by Milica Bogdanović).

The majority of people in the region, i.e. around seven out of ten, also believe that the media outlets in their country spread political propaganda and disinformation, with the highest share of citizens holding this view being in Montenegro (above 70%). Around half of the citizens in most countries of the region believe that the media spread hatred, but this share grows to almost two thirds in BiH (62%) and Montenegro (63%). Most citizens, i.e. at least six out of ten, believe that social networks spread political propaganda and misinformation. This opinion is particularly widespread in Montenegro as it is shared by 71% of citizens. The journalists who participated in focus group in Albania believe that the (lack of) trust in the media results partly from the negative political discourse on media and journalists. However, some of them also point out that the lack of trust is justified because of the strong political and economic pressures that nurture misinformation and propaganda in media reports.

Similarly prevalent is the opinion that social networks spread hatred. As many as 65% of citizens in Montenegro, 64% in Kosovo and 63% in North Macedonia hold this view, while in the other countries, the proportion is closer to 50%.<sup>23</sup>

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23 49% in Albania, 52% in Serbia and 54% in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

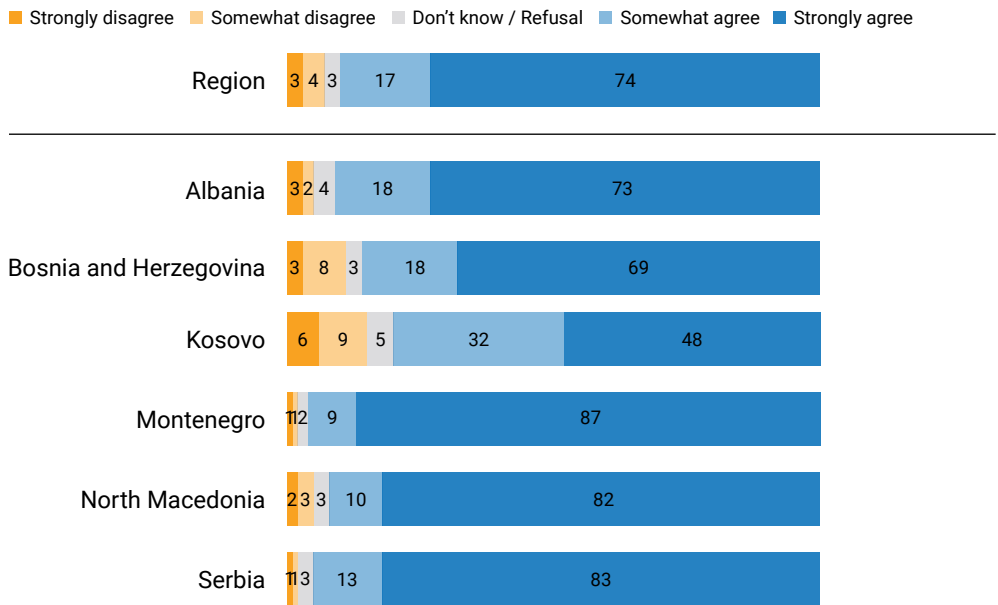
## 9. GENDER ISSUES: HIGH AWARENESS OF THE POSITION OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS

There is a high awareness among citizens in the region that women journalists are exposed to specific, additional pressures because they are women and that they need more support from the state institutions.

The majority of citizens, i.e. at least two thirds in each country of the region, believe that women journalists are often the targets of attacks, threats, insults and harassment.<sup>24</sup> The majority of the region’s population also believe that women journalists are attacked because they expose the truth about politics, corruption, and crime (around 80% of citizens share this view) and because of gender prejudices and stereotypes (around 70% of citizens).

Most of the citizens in the Western Balkans (i.e. 93%) strongly or somewhat agree that state authorities should protect women journalists when they are threatened or attacked, with around half of the population in each country strongly agreeing with this statement (Graph 7).

Graph 7. *The state bodies (police, judiciary) should protect women journalists when they are threatened or attacked*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Compared to the regional average, the ratio of citizens in Montenegro and Serbia who share this view is particularly high (81% each). In Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, this share is 69%, 66% and 68%, respectively, and in BiH even higher, i.e. 78%.

## 10. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the key characteristics of the propaganda media system's modus operandi is the constant production of distrust in the media itself as well as in the institutions of the rule of law. It is extremely difficult to establish mechanisms for preserving democratic standards within a system where the lack of trust in any of the branches of the government is widespread and where the media are considered manufacturers of lies and enemies of the people. The propagandist media system incessantly produces enemies. The media messages created that legitimize hate speech, normalize verbally attacking critical individuals and institutions and demonize differences are deeply rooted in the political sphere. It was the political elite that normalized hate speech and turned it into acceptable discourse. Fighting (or resisting) hate and destruction of the democratic state became simultaneously a fight for autonomous, independent media serving the public interest. Although the opinion poll we conducted within the Resilience project shows that more than half of those interviewed in the six countries of the Western Balkans do not trust the media, it is pertinent to analyze the ways in which those who did not lose trust in the media defend freedom of the press. Attacks on the public media and investigative journalists demonstrate an important link between democracy and the media and the need to strengthen that link. Defence against disinformation and resistance against hate requires critical and independent media, but it also calls for a critical and independent public.

When the propaganda media system uses (political) hostile takeovers, cronyism embedded in legislation, state sponsorship and shutting down of critical voices in the public space to shrink the last remaining spaces of communication resistance, new spaces emerge with the idea of professional journalism being an important tool for defending democracy. At this point, we introduced into our analysis the concept of an asymmetrical media system to help us explain the imbalance in media power relations, differing from what we usually think. The propaganda media system is heaping up seemingly "independent" media into a conglomerate of like-minded transmitters of propaganda messages whose only goal is to enclose their public into an echo chamber, turning a deaf ear to any kind of criticism. The propaganda media system radicalizes its public up to the point of becoming completely non-receptive and disinterested in any other worldviews. There is no centralized system of media power opposing this. On the contrary, this part of the system is forged by numerous media outlets forced by their public to defend professional journalism and ensure factual and verifiable information. The public of these media outlets is dispersed, difficult to trace in terms of the classical market-oriented readings of ratings. However, its strength and ability to spread good quality journalism stories through communication platforms is not negligible.

Next, we take into account the main findings of the opinion poll and focus group discussions conducted within this third stage of research of the Resilience project to present some key recommendations that can be of help

to media reform advocates in the media community, in the political sphere and in civil society to develop media systems beyond propaganda, hate and disinformation.

The results of the opinion poll carried out in six countries of the Western Balkans indicate strong polarization of the public concerning the information sources they use and trust. This means that citizens' preferences are hardly a corrective mechanism against hate and propaganda narratives in the region. The half-trust in the media among the citizens of the region (with around half in BiH, Serbia and North Macedonia, or more than half in Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania of citizens who trust news and information sources) is justified in the circumstances where financial and political interference, as well as lack of media resources, mar the trustworthiness and quality of media reporting. However, the opinion poll results also show that citizens' preferences and trust are steered by a variety of factors, including the existing political and ethnic affiliations of citizens, used by the ruling class as a currency of power. Rational judgement about the quality and trustworthiness of information seems to be falling behind.

For illustration, **television** is the most used and most trusted source of news and information in the region, but at the same time, many of the most-watched television channels in the region are full of political bias and propaganda. On a positive note, the hate narratives and disinformation are generally less extreme and open on television than those found on other, less regulated platforms. The fact that **social networks**, where hate narratives are the most present, are the second most used source of information is troubling and calls for better policies to promote legitimate sources and filter illegal and harmful content. However, the survey results simultaneously show high distrust in the information shared on social networks. It means that most citizens believe that social networks spread political propaganda and disinformation and hatred. So why is it that social networks are highly used despite the distrust? It is clear that other reasons, such as the need for belonging, entertainment and networking,<sup>25</sup> prevail. These reasons should be addressed in future media development interventions, inter alia through **improving the interaction between media outlets and their audiences by building stronger communities around highly professional and quality media outlets.**

**Media literacy education** is identified by researchers in all six countries in the Western Balkan region as one of the pivotal steps in empowering citizens for competent participation in media and communication. Media literacy education should be integrated into formal education curricula. However, the use of the acquired media literacy skills will continue to depend on the ability of citizens to step out of their "echo chambers" (Sunstein 2007) and to expose themselves, with an open mind, to "other" perspectives and ideas. For this to happen, we need an education system and institutions that subvert

<sup>25</sup> See for instance on the news among young people in Haunstrup Christensen and Rommes 2019, and the reasons behind believing in conspiracy theories in Douglas et al. 2017.

dominant nationalistic ideologies and promote the values of pluralism and critical thinking. Media literacy and other education programmes managed by civil society can bridge some of these gaps, and they merit the long-term support of international donors.

**Investigative journalism** centres are the second most trusted type of information source in the region, and as they are the leaders in disclosing corruption and publishing relevant stories, they deserve to be supported and further capacitated for quality reporting. Co-production and exchange of content with the leading mainstream media outlets can help to improve their reach.

The opinion poll results also suggest that **international media** are a powerful player in the region, as they are the third most trusted type of media. While they bring more diversity, some of these media outlets also involve political propaganda in the interest of the leading world powers. Therefore, media literacy education programmes should touch upon those interests and their implications.

The discrepancies in the results of the survey on media trust in the region also point to **deep political divisions** among media users. In some countries, citizens are sharply divided – based on ethnic origin and/or political preferences. These divisions are very much reflected in the level of trust and distrust in public service broadcasters, for instance. The existing polarization and opposite views on media outlets are continuously steered by the political class through political interference in the editorial policies of the media outlets, as well as through statements of political officials favouring or bashing certain media outlets. For instance, in Montenegro, RTCG has been often (particularly prior to the end of 2020 when the new government was formed) referred to as either the “propaganda tool of Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS)” or as a “highly professional media outlet” (see the report by Milica Bogdanović).

Another worrying indicator is the rejection or inability of a large portion of respondents to identify specific media outlets that they trust and those that they distrust, which may point to the **lack of the reflection and skills needed to assess the trustworthiness of media outlets, but also to an overtly generalized distrust towards the media**, where each media outlet and every piece of information is regarded as specious. The media professionals and media experts participating in the focus groups in Montenegro and North Macedonia, for instance, recognize such generalized distrust towards the media.

It is also worrying that in all countries the vast majority of citizens **have not heard of a media outlet or organization in their country that deals with checking the accuracy of news**. In the circumstances where they are exposed to a huge amount of content and sources, fact-checking platforms can help citizens distinguish between reliable and unreliable news, and their work

should be further promoted. **Fact-checking initiatives** (including education on fact-checking, strengthening the capacities and know-how for fact-checking in media production, and the work of fact-checking platforms that check the reliability of media content) should be strengthened and supported (by international donors and by the public sector), as they contribute to awareness of media manipulations and unreliable sources.

The **attitudes of citizens about the media are somewhat incongruent**, with, for instance, around half of the citizens believing that the media outlets in their country serve democracy and the public interest and that they can freely report on important topics. At the same time, the majority of citizens agree that the media system is mainly controlled by political and business powers and that there is a lack of independent and impartial media outlets. The majority of citizens believe that the media spread political propaganda and disinformation, and around half of citizens believe that they spread hatred.

The fact that **Kosovo** stands out as the part of the region where citizens express the most trust in the media implies both more vulnerability to manipulated communication and some more opportunities for well-designed and supported quality media production to have a meaningful impact on public opinion and democratization. This peculiarity of Kosovo is possibly associated with the fact that Kosovo, as the newest state, is less marked with political fatigue and failures in media democratization processes than the rest of the region.

The preferences in the use of media and trust in the media are also closely related to the **capacities of the media for quality and independent media production**, and media policies should be actively promoting those capacities. On the level of regulation, the state authorities should limit the political influence on media outlets, enforce (and in some countries adopt) the laws on **media concentration**, promote alternative models of ownership (including non-profit media) and limit the reach and influence of groups that spread hate, disinformation and propaganda. In parallel, the transparency of media ownership and funding needs to be improved for such influences to be detectable and thus possible to regulate and condemn. **Government funding** for the media, while it is in principle welcomed as a tool for supporting quality journalism, must be governed by the criteria of public interest and, at the same time, safeguards established against misuse of government funding to influence editorial policies.

In addition, more efforts need to be made to **improve the capacities and independence of self-regulation and regulation, as well as of the judiciary**, in order to reduce and prosecute the dissemination of problematic media content. While self-regulation is in place in most of the countries of the region (although with limited reach and capacities), the disunited media community in Montenegro still does not show readiness to establish a joint self-regulating body. The guaranties of the independence of the media regulators, including independent appointments of their management and governing bodies and



independent funding sufficient for substantial media monitoring, need to be provided. The same goes for **public service broadcasters**, many of which are under the strong grip of the ruling parties and need better guaranties of independence. Only when independence is assured can the public service broadcasters begin to restore greater public trust. Raising citizens' awareness of on the crucial role of public service broadcasting and the need to put them in the service of the public is one step towards that end.

**The international donor community** should pursue the strengthening of the capacities of the media for quality and independent media production through a) supporting media reforms aimed at improving independence, pluralism and prospects for the financial sustainability of media outlets b) donor support for media production and building capacities within media outlets and c) support for co-production, exchange of content and exchange of resources and know-how within the media community.

Media outlets need to step up to the challenge and improve their **moderation of user content and verification of information** before publishing. Media outlets dedicated to the public interest need to provide professional and educational content on public interest issues and promote awareness of disinformation and propaganda. Many media outlets will need to strengthen their resources in order to minimize the transmission of disinformation, hate and propaganda. **The media should also aim to build stronger communities and interact with citizens**, promoting and providing a space for expressing solidarity, for engagement on public interest issues and for wider political participation.

While there is a high awareness among citizens about the **pressures and attacks on women journalists**, input from focus groups and interviews with journalists, editors and communication experts points to the need for a more consistent problematization of these issues and better support. Media outlets themselves can and should play an important part in more consistent actualization of these topics, the state institutions should consistently penalise these attacks and the educational and other institutions and the academic community should discuss the social and political factors that contribute to gender-based violence and the ways to subvert them.

We also need to nurture and rely on the mechanism of **public condemnation** and public mobilization against media control, corrupt media, and misuse of the media for spreading propaganda, disinformation and hatred. For such condemnation to be strong, we need a larger united front of public figures and influencers, civil society organizations, universities and academics to provide consistent critique and disclose hate and propaganda narratives.

Only with holistic changes in the media ecosystems can we hope to see citizens well equipped to actively participate in the public communication, to see media that offers quality content, and to see various actors empowered to consistently identify, publicly condemn and (where necessary) penalize dissemination of disinformation, hate and propaganda.



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**ALBANIA**

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**MEDIA POLARIZATION AND  
MEDIA (DIS)TRUST IN ALBANIA**

*Ilda Londo*

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

The regional project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey' is implemented with the financial support of the European Union by partner organizations [SEENPM](#), the [Albanian Media Institute](#), [Mediacentar Sarajevo](#), [Kosovo 2.0](#), the [Montenegro Media Institute](#), the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#), the [Novi Sad School of Journalism](#), the [Peace Institute](#) and [Bianet](#).

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## MEDIA POLARIZATION AND MEDIA (DIS)TRUST IN ALBANIA

### ALBANIA

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# MEDIA POLARIZATION AND MEDIA (DIS)TRUST IN ALBANIA

*Ilda Londo*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The media scene in Albania is vibrant, but complex. The situation with professionalism and ethics is often described negatively, pointing at a lack of independence, overdependence on politics, inability, violations of privacy, and other misdoings. These criticisms frequently pervade the public debate, usually neglecting to explain and analyze causes that lead to professional problems, such as economic issues, the situation in labour relations and investment in human resources, and undue interference from multiple actors. In recent years, public communication narratives in the country against the media have tended to intensify, leading to increased public criticism in this respect.

Previous research conducted in 2020 analyzed the models of spreading hate and disinformation on the one hand, and the hate narratives present in the media, on the other. While the media often are not the main sources of hate speech, they certainly can serve as a vehicle for it, especially in the comments sections of websites. In addition, attempts to misinform and spread propaganda are a constant trend in the Albanian media, a trend driven by different reasons and factors, including but not limited to low professionalism and poor self-regulation. The analysis of hate narratives in the media revealed that the greatest producers of hate narratives, division, disinformation, and polarization remain the political actors, partly because of their pervasive presence in the media and their use of social media. The lack of proper mechanisms to counter hate narratives in the media is another debilitating factor that facilitates the spread of these narratives.

The current research aims to provide a glimpse of the public perception of the media and the trust issues existing, as well as an explanation by media professionals and their own view on the relationship between the public and professionalism, against the background of hate narratives. Journalists were indicated as one of the groups that are often targeted by hate narratives in public communication. This research is an opportunity to see what the public really thinks of media conduct and also gather the feedback and reaction of journalists and editors on the matter, analyzing the roots of the problem of hate narratives and discussing ways to improve the situation. For this purpose, a poll was conducted by IPSOS Strategic Marketing during February 2021 with the public, and a focus group with media professionals followed in May 2021 to discuss the results of the poll and their own viewpoint on the

problems in the field. The following sections will provide an overview of the main poll results in terms of media use, media trust, and attitudes regarding media trust and hate narratives. In addition, the outcome of focus group discussion with journalists and editors will attempt to provide a broader picture and some recommendations on potential courses of action.

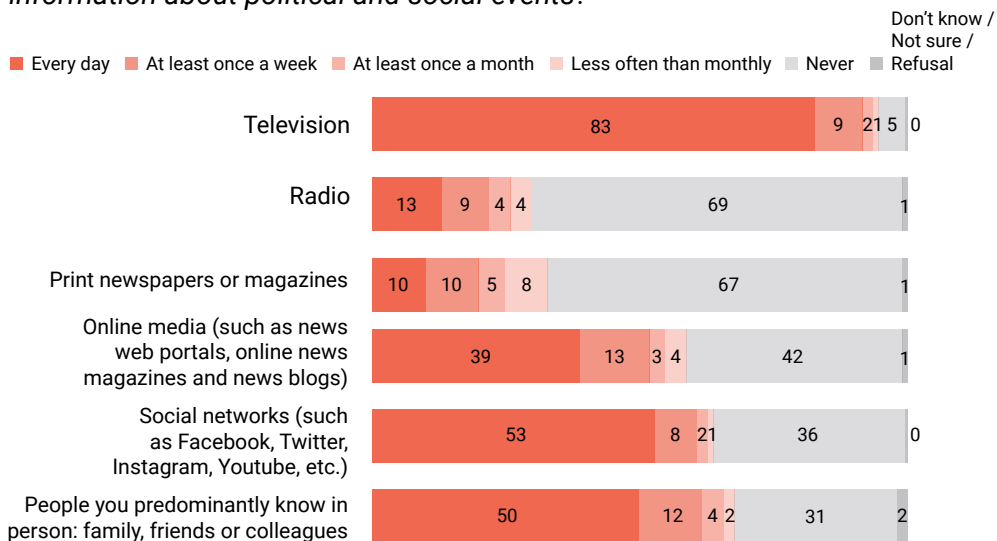
## 2. MEDIA TRUST – OPINION POLL AND FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION RESULTS

The opinion poll was conducted on February 2021 with a sample of 1010 adult respondents, through a mixed method (telephone and online). The poll questions were related to media consumption habits, the main tendencies regarding citizens’ trust in media, and also the attitude vis-a-vis hate narratives and the role of media and journalists in the spread of disinformation and hate speech. A focus group of six journalists and editors from various media outlets was convened on 12 May 2021 to discuss the findings of the poll and share their opinions and experiences in this regard. The following sections describe and analyze the reaction of both citizens and professionals in terms of media trust.

### 2.1. Media use

During the poll citizens were asked about their media consumption habits. Television stands out as the most commonly used source for gathering information in Albania, as more than four fifths of citizens claim to be using it on a daily basis (83%). Other traditional media, such as print newspapers/magazines and radio, are far behind, both followed daily by about one in ten citizens (10% and 13%, respectively).

Graph 1. How often do you use the following sources to get news, i.e. information about political and social events?

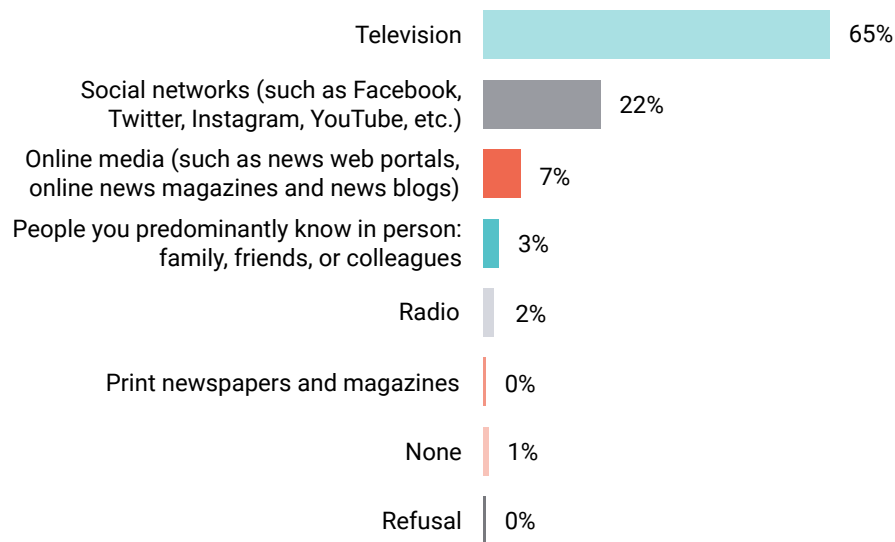


Source: Ipsos, 2021.



Social networks are the second most commonly consumed news source, through which more than half of the population aged over 18 is informed on a daily basis (53%). Similar numbers are present in the case of personal contacts such as family, friends and colleagues (50%), while news web portals, online news magazines and blogs are being used by two fifths of citizens every day (39%). This poll confirms that television continues to be the main authority in terms of frequency of information, even though social networks and online media have risen steadily compared to previous polls conducted a few years ago.

Graph 2. *What is your main source of information?*



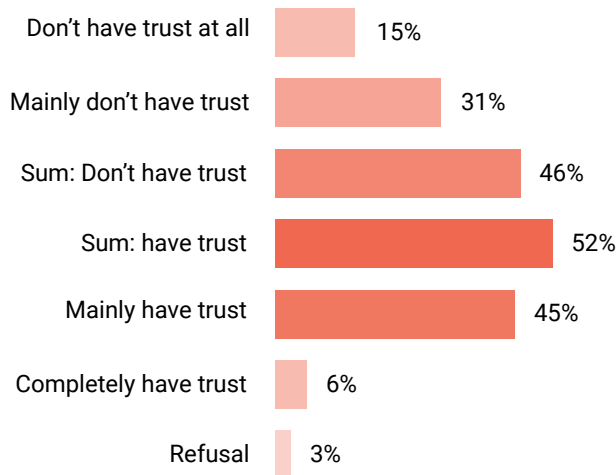
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

When asked about the main source of information, rather than the frequency, the trend remains similar: television prevails (65%), followed by social networks (22%), and the others to a lesser extent. Again, the importance of television both in terms of frequency of use and as a source of information is solid, indicating the great effect it should have on the audience. However, the poll showed a difference in age groups and information channels. Online sources such as social networks and web portals are more often main source of news for young people (18–29 years old), those with higher education and with the highest household income. On the other hand, television is far more often the primary source for citizens over the age of 45 and those with primary or no education.

## 2.1. Media trust

During the poll citizens were asked a series of questions in order to determine the level of public trust and identify problems in this aspect and factors that might affect lack of trust of citizens in the media. The poll also looked at trust across different types of media, the ranking of particular media according to reliability, reasons for distrust and trust, and the overall level of trust on public service media.

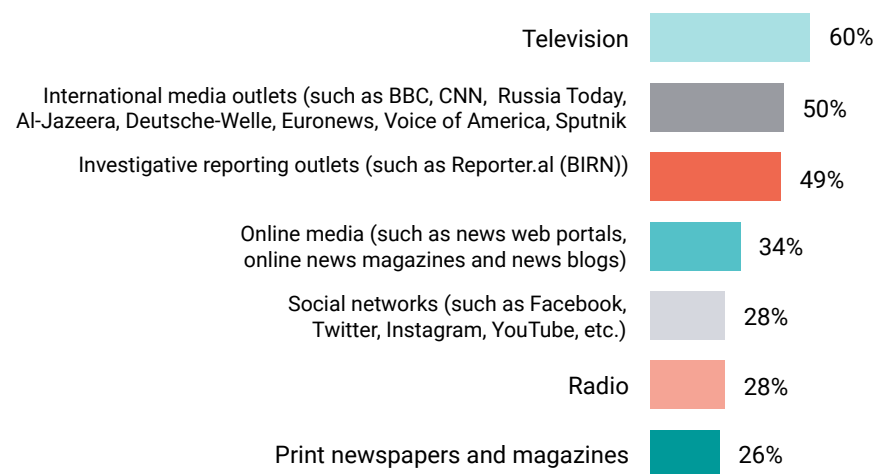
Graph 3. *In general, how much trust do you have in the media – such as newspapers, TV, radio or online news sources – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly in Albania?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

When looking at the level of public trust in the media, the respondents are clearly divided, although more of them tend to trust rather than distrust the media: 52% of the respondents said that they have trust versus 46% who did not have any. However, the breakdown of the level of trust and distrust reveals that 15% of citizens do not have any trust at all, versus 6% who completely trust the media, indicating that distrust tends to run deeper than trust.

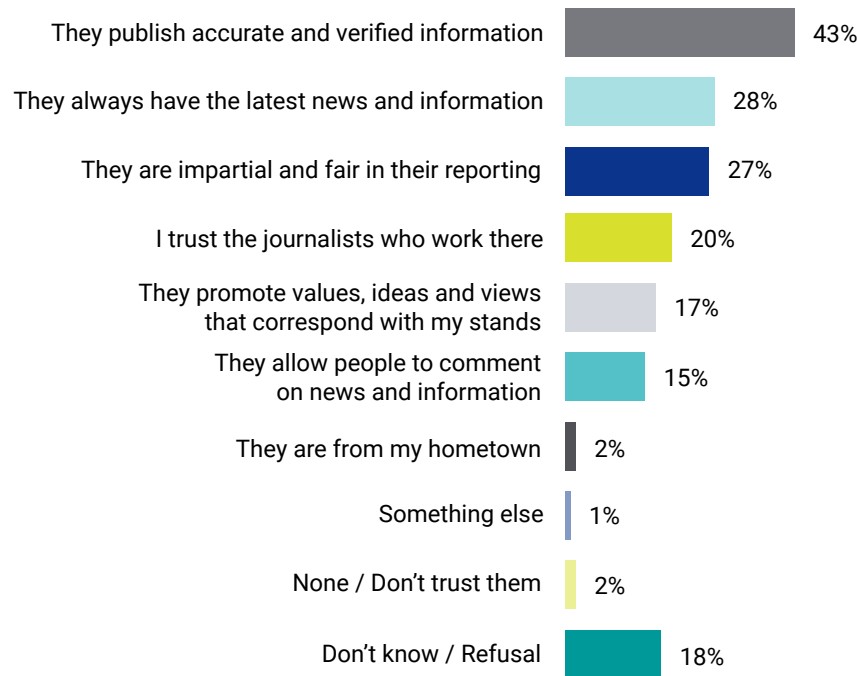
Graph 4. *To what extent do you trust each of the following media is a reliable source of news and information? - Mainly + Completely trust (Marks 3+4)*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Asked specifically about what media type they find more reliable in terms of news and information, television is the most trusted type, with 60% of the respondents ranking it high. It was followed by international media outlets and investigative media. Even though the list of international media also included less trusted sources such as Sputnik and Russia Today, there was no difference made in this respect. Journalists and editors – participants in the focus group expressed surprise at the fact that immediately after these sources the public considered online media and social networks as more trusted, while radio and print newspapers were ranked the lowest. They said that even though all types of media have their own issues, reliability of information is certainly not a defining feature of online media and social networks, quite often the opposite is the case.

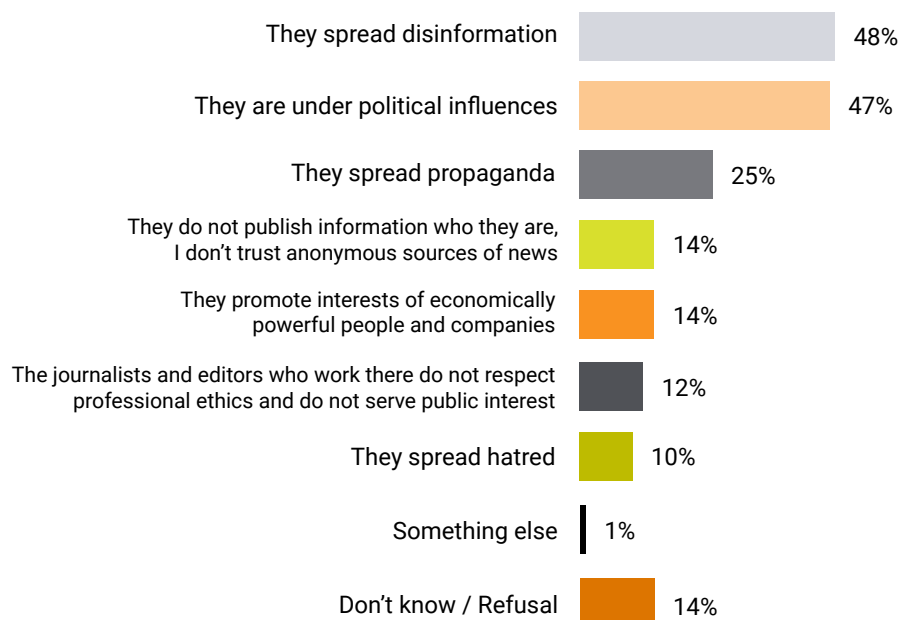
Graph 5. *You may trust some media outlets more than others. Thinking about the media you consider the most trustworthy, what are the main reasons you trust them? - All answers*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Asked to provide reasons for their trust in media by ranking the answers provided, 43% of them considered accurate and verified information as the main reason for trusting particular media outlets, while the second most ranked reason was the perception these media outlets had the latest news and information, immediately followed by impartial and fair reporting. It is important to note that a relatively large percentage, 18%, said they did not know or refused to answer, which might indicate that there might not always be a clear or solid opinion why certain media outlets are more trusted and what citizens really look for in media outlets and the information they provide.

Graph 6. *Thinking about the media outlets you consider the least trustworthy, what are the main reasons you do not trust them? - All answers*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

On the other hand, when asked why they distrust media outlets, the public seemed to have a clearer idea. Almost half of them provided as their main reasons the spread of disinformation (48%) and the perception that media outlets are under political influence (47%), while another 25% said they spread propaganda, which is linked mainly to the political influence. Spread of hate, lack of ethics, lack of media transparency and promotion of economic interests were not so much a cause of concern as the first three. Here, again, 14% refused or did not know how to answer, which is a sizable part of the respondents that did not indicate reasons for distrusting the media.

The focus group (FG) participants did not find the results on media trust particularly surprising. They indicated as a very positive outcome the fact that 43% of respondents had stated that accuracy of news is what made them trust more, even though quick publication of news was ranked just behind it at 28%. “It is also very positive that at least 20% trust media outlets because they trust individual journalists and this increases public trust in the media, and makes us more confident in our own job,” said one of the FG participants.

At the same time, the focus group participants debated some of the findings, doubting whether there was a common understanding between citizens and journalists of certain terms and perceptions of the media reality in the country. For example, the poll indicated that 47% said they did not trust the media as it is under political influence, while economic influence as a reason for distrust was only 14%.

*“This does not fit the reality we know; economic influence is as strong as the political one, and we know that often they come from the same source and are the same thing. This means that there is something wrong with the public perception of economic influence, and the general focus of the public remains on politics,”* said FG participant 4.

Another contended point was the low perception of anonymous news sources as a problematic aspect that increases distrust in the media. The online media landscape suffers considerably in terms of transparency of its ownership and its newsroom staff, making anonymity the norm. In this respect, the focus group found the low importance given to this problem by the public as a perception that did not reflect the reality. “Only 14% say they do not trust the media because of anonymous sources. For years now, I have not been able to find the sources of news on news portals. I cannot find even the authors, they are totally anonymous, so this perception is not entirely correct I would say,” said FG participant 1.

In general, the media professionals – participants in the focus group indicated that they agree on the reasons and understand the public’s concerns when it comes to distrusting the media, mentioning other existing problems not identified in the poll.

*“The main problems are not only disinformation and propaganda, but also the promotion of hate speech culture, the continuous presence on TV screens of people that quarrel or just should not be on TV at all. Corruption in the media is another element that we know exists. These are missing in the reasons for distrust, and are also part of the whole picture,”* said FG participant 2.

When shown the trust of citizens in the poll on specific media outlets, the perception of the focus group participants is that the gap between the public’s perception of the media and the media community’s own perception regarding the range of existing problems has become stronger.

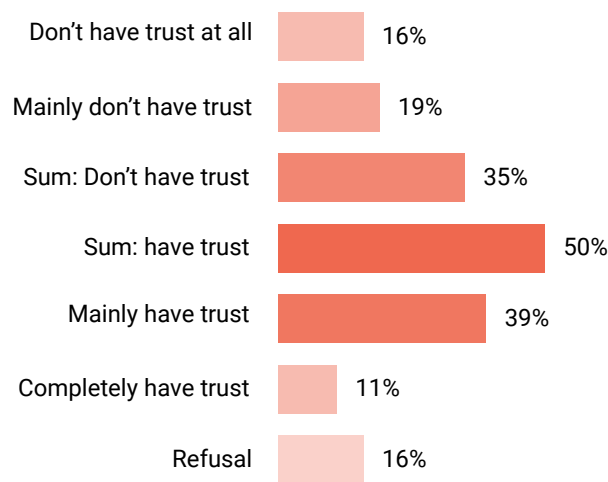
*“We see at the top of trusted media outlets two TV stations that used to be diametrically opposed in terms of their editorial line a while ago and now they are the same. Here, we can also account for individual media bias or preference, but also that the public cannot always understand standards of editorial independence,”* said FG participant 5.

Another focus group participant said:

*“On the one hand, you indicate that the main preference for a trusted media outlet is providing accurate and verified information; on the other hand, we see that the most trusted media outlets are those that are clearly politically aligned. This leads us to believe that the public has problems understanding propaganda and distinguishing between independent news sources and propaganda.”* (FG participant 4)

They also mentioned that the fact that foreign media, such as the BBC, or investigative media in the country are ranked as less trusted than Albanian media which the focus group participants considered has very little independence, indicates the problems the public have in distinguishing what makes media reports independent and trustworthy. The focus group participants were unanimous in highlighting the need for media literacy initiatives as a way to improve the ability of the citizens to be critical of media content.

Graph 7. *On a scale from 1 to 4, how much trust do you have in Public Service Media (RTSH - Albanian Radio Television), when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Finally, the poll also enquired as to the trust of citizens in the public media. Half of them said that they trusted the public broadcaster, whereas 35% did not have such trust. The percentage of people who were at the extreme end of the scale regarding trust was higher than for those ones who were sceptical: 16% did not have any trust at all, whereas 11% said they trusted the media completely.

Overall, the media professionals in the focus group indicated that this was a positive outcome for the public service media, but it needed to be explained and qualified. FG participant 1 said that more than an improvement in trust in public media, this could also reflect the deterioration of the quality of information in commercial media, which has degraded considerably. The focus group participants all generally agreed that the answers might reflect also the gradual changes in programming and in the quality of information, pointing out the generally neutral news content, and also increased targeting specific population groups in a more attentive manner.

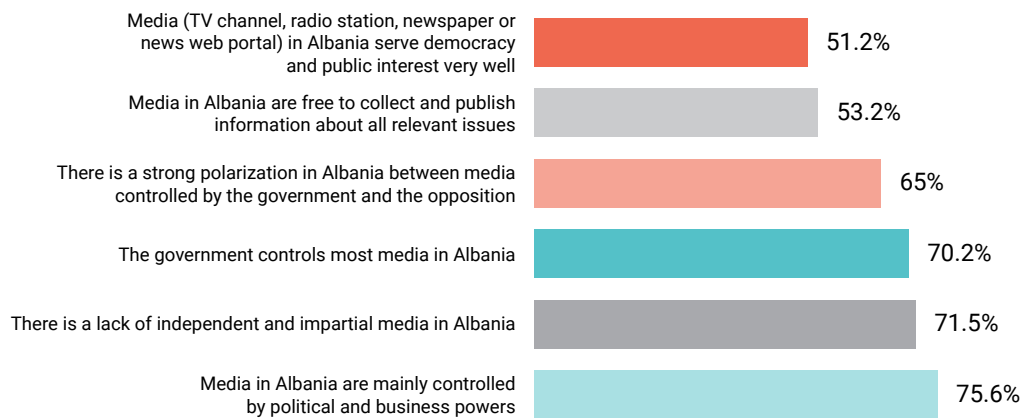
*“During the last violent protests of the opposition, you could see that the anger of political militants was not directed at the cars of public broadcasters, but at those of public media, which reveals that the public perception of television as siding with one party or another is not as strong as it used to be, and it seems to have switched places with commercial media, in some respects,”* said FG participant 1.

While there was strong agreement on the increased political neutrality of the public broadcaster, there was also an opinion that when asked to assess what they think of the television in general, the citizens have in mind all programmes, not just the quality of the news.

### 2.3. Attitudes and experience with the media

The final group of questions looked at the attitude of the public regarding the media, trying to probe public perception of the current status of media independence and the role of the media in society. The spreading of hate narratives and perceived media involvement in this respect was another issue addressed by the poll.

Graph 8. *On a scale of 1-4 how much do you agree with the following statements?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The public largely believes that media independence is a huge problem in the media landscape. Between 70% and 75% of the respondents agreed that the government controls most media in the country, that there is a lack of independent media, and that the media is controlled mainly by political and economic centres of power. There was also a strong opinion that the polarization and division between media outlets supported by the opposition and those supported by the government is very real. On the other hand, about half of them also indicated that they believe that the media serves democracy and the public interest very well and that media outlets are free to receive and publish information on important topics, which is a perception that does not fit with the overwhelming opinion on the lack of media independence in the following statements.

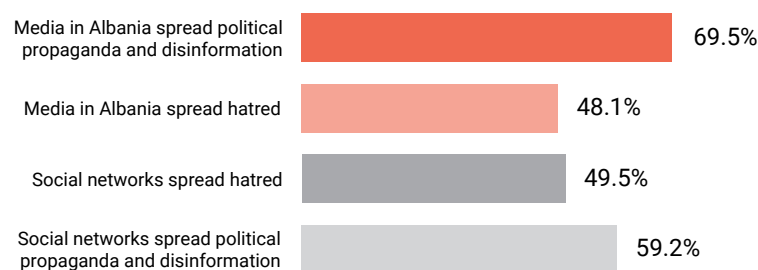
The focus group participants said that, in general, the perception reflected also their own reality. “They know that the media is influenced by politics, and 75% said so,” said FG participant 1. However, the discrepancy between the good role of the media and its satisfactory freedom and its weak independence in the other statements was also discussed in the focus group. “This is a paradox, because 50% say that media is free, and yet 75% indicate that there are many problems with its independence, meaning it is simultaneously an independent media and also a captured media; it is a confused perception,” said FG participant 3. One potential explanation for this discrepancy is the inherent media bias that individuals might have on the media outlets they follow, considering them free media outlets serving democracy, just because it fits with their own vision and opinion, even though they are far from independent.

Overall, the media professionals in the focus group identified the statements that describe media independence as controlled by economic and political centres of power, and the absence of independent media outlets as the stands that best describe their own perception and feeling of the current trends in the media landscape. They discussed the role of media outlets owned by NGOs as the only existing islands of editorial independence at the moment.

*“Even though reports from these media outlets are often published in traditional media and other online media, the ability to reach the audience remains a problem. While you publish a report in several online media outlets, a mere news story on TV reaches more people and has greater impact,”* said FG participant 3.

At the same time, FG participant 5 indicated that even the publication of these news stories in online media outlets is selective, as the media choose to publish what fits their own editorial stance.

Graph 9. On a scale of 1-4, to what extent do you agree with the statements:



Source: Ipsos, 2021.



Asked about the role of media and social networks on spreading propaganda and disinformation on the one hand, and hate speech, on the other hand, revealed results surprised the focus group. Some 69% of respondents indicated the media as the culprit in spreading propaganda and disinformation, compared to 59% who said that social networks are spreading these. When it came to spreading hatred, the social networks were only slightly higher than the media: 49.5% to 48.1%.

The focus group participants found this perception a wrong and exaggerated one, or indicated that the public has not understood the question or what they mean by hate.

*“Apart from some TV shows that might contain hate speech, you cannot compare the media to the social networks when it comes to spreading hate speech. The media is in a bad shape, but it is much better than social networks in this respect. Social networks are the main sources of hate speech. We see all kinds of statuses of hate speech and comments on Facebook, by politicians, citizens, in all forms; in traditional media, it is not that often that this happens,”* said FG participant 6.

The anonymity provided by social networks was also another factor mentioned that exacerbates the tendency to engage in hate speech. Finally, one of the focus group participants suggested that this might also be a self-defence mechanism of the respondents, which identifies the social networks with themselves, the people, while the journalists in the media are easier to be negative about.

### 2.3.1. Journalists and editors on hate and propaganda models of media and communication trends

The focus group participants considered the presence of hate and propaganda models in the media and communication as ubiquitous and rather problematic. They devoted a longer time to discussing propaganda in particular, which was considered to be prevalent compared to hate speech. The publication of articles that clearly originate from press offices is widespread, while direct broadcasting of political events from the government or opposition is also an everyday event in all news channels. Having all this space and time on media and often with minimum comment or filters from journalists leads to the massive presence of politics in the media.

All the media professionals in the focus group mentioned the fact that the Prime Minister has his own online television channel as a clear sign of the presence of propaganda, given that most media outlets directly broadcast what ERTV broadcasts.

*“Propaganda is very much present in the media and in communication, as the politicians themselves have become media outlets in Albania. This means that there is no interest in fair reporting, representing*

*the other side, or fact-checking. Propaganda has reached disturbing dimensions, as we have come to accept that politicians are in fact media outlets,”* said FG participant 1.

Another focus group participant also added that the hand of propaganda is visible everywhere in media coverage, saying that this is an increasingly frequent and disturbing phenomenon. “Our e-mail inboxes are full each day with communication from ministries and press offices. They bring ready-made news and even TV stories, with the completed editing, that should just be broadcast,” said FG participant 4.

Agreeing that the problem of propaganda is very concerning, what was highlighted as a more worrying problem is the inability of the media so far to react to the pressure of such a phenomenon.

*“What is most worrying is not propaganda on its own, but the problem that we have agreed to become a conveyor belt for this propaganda. We have not established any mechanisms for how to face it, because sometimes we do not want to do it, do not know how to do it, and we are unable to resist it. We fail to do the minimum, indicating that certain content comes from a certain press office. We have become spokespersons of spokespersons, plus we are not telling the truth, which is the basic principle,”* said FG participant 3.

According to all the focus group participants, the only way to come out of this extremely worrying trend is to return to the basics of the profession, no matter how difficult it seems. “At the moment, the propaganda and media have almost become one and the same, all boundaries have been erased. We must start from here, we should start putting boundaries and return to the basics,” said FG participant 3. However, the focus group participants highlighted that it is difficult to resist to pressure to publish propaganda connected both with political pressure and the workload in newsrooms that are already quite sparse.

*“However, what we can do as journalists is to not just copy-paste the press releases or other ready-made material. We should also add some context, include official figures and statistics, mention previous statements from the same actor, etc. There are ways to counteract propaganda and resist it in some ways, it just needs more work,”* said FG participant 4.

Discussing the trends on hate speech in the media and communication also produced a generally harmonious opinion among the participants in the focus group. They all accepted that hate speech was present in the media, but more so in online media and portals and social networks. The traditional media tries to maintain a more ethical level when it comes to generating such hate speech, although it is not exempt from republishing hate speech coming from different actors, especially politicians. The focus group participants also thought that most current affair debates tend to feature heated discussion,

often degenerating into hate speech. However, all the focus group participants agreed that the main source of hate speech was the online media, especially those outlets that do not filter and moderate comments. “In general, user-generated content is the main problem in spreading hate speech and that is where we should start. We should make some examples in this respect,” said FG participant 1. “It seems harsh to talk in this way, but we do need some punitive mechanisms within our community. I understand that some hate speech is published to get more clicks, but this is a harmful practice and we must cut off the channels that use this kind of language,” said FG participant 3.

Another FG participant suggested that trying to engage in self-regulation and establish the proper mechanisms is a slow and lengthy process and does not always work.

*“We can learn also from the practice of social networks in this respect. They have the practice of reporting on hate speech or problematic content, and they react immediately. We can also do a similar thing, telling our audience that we are giving them this mechanism, and they should use it,”* said FG participant 5.

### 2.3.2. Journalists and editors on hate narratives against journalists and media trust

Asked on their opinion of journalists as a target of hate narratives in public communication, all the participants agreed that they were certainly a target, though there were differing opinions on whether this group was a main and primary target of such hate narratives. Cases of verbal abuse and debasement of journalists and their lack of integrity has been a constant feature of the public debate, but this trend has intensified in recent years. The journalists referred in this respect especially to the language and role of Prime Minister Edi Rama, who is often far from diplomatic with journalists, describing the media as a “rubbish bin,” ridiculing journalists and claiming they are incompetent or unprepared.

*“We as journalists are undoubtedly among the main targets of hate narratives, reflecting also the repeated narratives of the Prime Minister against the media. In a way, this practice has allowed people on the street and online to see journalists as a category that can be attacked. The Prime Minister is the highest authority in terms of communication; he has the broadest access to all the media, uses his own media outlet, and there is an immense possibility of repetition. The repetition of these narratives through different channels has led to a solidification of the lack of trust in the media from citizens,”* said FG participant 3.

Another FG participant brought up the example of an interview with a citizen, who, when invited not to be politically biased, turned to the reporter using the exact terms that the Prime Minister uses to describe the media, meaning that this has become part of the common language used against the media.

Other FG participants agreed, but they said that the problem cannot be limited just to the narratives of the Prime Minister. The problem is that journalism as a profession is no longer respected. While hate narratives do play an important role, that is not the only impact.

*“This used to be a respected profession, citizens used to look at us with respect, and this is no longer the case. It has been a very gradual process, and now, ignoring or verbally assaulting a journalist is no longer a problem. The whole profession has been devalued, it is a gradual but consistent process that has led us to this point,”* said FG participant 6.

While the focus group participants recognized the harshness of political hate directed at journalists, it was highlighted that this is only part of the problem in the hate narratives against journalists. Another major problem is the fact that particular media outlets or journalists also attack their own colleagues and the solidarity within the community is missing.

*“We have cases of news portals attacking some specific journalists without proper arguments to do so. This becomes part of the public communication and the public tends to believe such narratives. Ultimately, this is discouraging and has a chilling effect on our work, as we tend to stop and think that our turn will come, too,”* said FG participant 2.

Other focus group participants agreed.

*“We see cases of articles being published that throw mud at hard-working reporters, and they are published even if the editor knows that this is not the truth. This is not acceptable and leaves a very bad taste; you give space to unproven charges and work against your own colleagues. If we do not defend our own colleagues, how can we expect the public to trust us and defend us?”* highlighted FG participant 5.

In addition, the focus group participants identified other factors that also come into play and reinforce the existing practices of hate narratives against journalists.

*“In a way, journalists are also a victim of the populist discourse. This discourse has as its main element the identification of the leader with the people and hate against elites, including the media elite, leading to a natural turning against journalists, even when there is no reason to do so,”* said FG participant 1.

The situation with professionalism in the Albanian media currently also has not helped. “We must admit that within our profession we are not all angels; there are also blackmailers among us, people who publish information just to achieve a particular end,” said FG participant 6, noting that this does not help with the public trust in journalism. At the same time, another FG participant

mentioned the introduction and reinforcement of the culture of fierce verbal clashes in the television debates. “These ugly episodes lead the public to believe that we are all the same. We find ourselves within a vicious circle, where the media is still trusted but public faith is continuously weakening,” said FG participant 5.

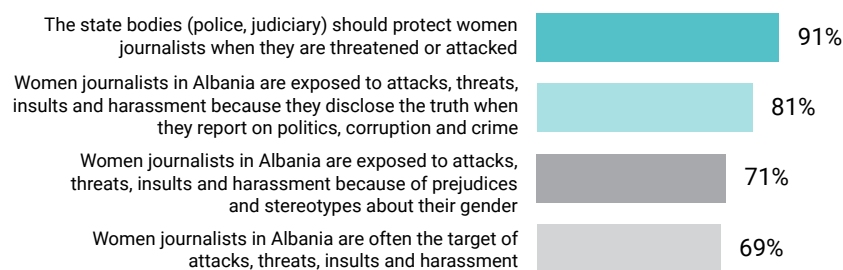
The media professionals in the focus group were rather pessimistic about finding ways out of this vicious circle. “Unfortunately, I do not expect any improvement in this respect anytime soon. We also see the developments in the region, and the climate that has been sown is harsh against journalists,” said FG participant 2.

*“We are facing fundamental problems, and it is difficult to find a recipe. Perhaps an example can be the so-called NGO media, namely the non-business model. They are the only ones that seem to work for the moment, not affected from politics and economics. While influence of donor agendas is still there, they remain for the moment islands of integrity; if they can join and become a peninsula, it would be a very good thing,”* said FG participant 1.

### 2.3.3. Gender-media issues

Both the public in the opinion poll and the media professionals in the focus group were asked about the situation with gender issues in the media, more specifically the problems faced by women journalists and their overall position within the media scene.

Graph 10. *The following statements refer to the position of women journalists in Albania. On a scale from 1 to 4, how much do you agree with each? - Agree (Marks 3+4)*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The public had a high perception of the issue of women journalists in Albania often being the target of attacks; namely, 69% of them thought that this was the case. At the same time, 71% related this exposure to gender prejudices and stereotypes, whereas a higher percentage, 81%, thought that this was more likely to happen because they disclose the truth. Even more people believed that the authorities should protect women journalists in cases of threats

and attacks. The poll reveals that there is a significant sensitivity among citizens that women journalists are more often exposed to harassment or to threats for doing their job, but also because of their gender, and also a strong solidarity towards them.

The focus group participants were divided on whether gender tended to affect the position of women journalists and the difficulties they face on the job. One of the FG participants brought her own experience, saying that when reporting on politics especially, women journalists tended to be more exposed to threats and harassment.

*“When you report on political protests, or from the headquarters of political parties, you are surrounded by militants, and I was very careful in choosing my words, as this might create unnecessary exposure, so this has affected also my reporting,”* said FG participant 4.

On the other hand, another woman journalist in the focus group said she had not experienced any discrimination because of gender. While generally agreeing that even in the communication with woman journalists there was a tendency especially of politicians to devalue their questions because of gender, the FG participants also brought examples of instances when interviewees had been equally harsh to male counterparts. The percentage of women journalists is perceived to be high, and newsrooms are often made up of more than 50% of female staff. However, this number might create a false sense of lack of discrimination. “My impression was that gender-based harassment or exposure is not an issue due to the high number of women journalists, but some studies and discussions of this nature have shown that this perception might be wrong,” said FG participant 1. The tendency of women journalists to keep quiet in cases of harassment was another factor the focus group identified as keeping awareness on such a problem at a minimum. According to FG participant 3, women journalists face more discrimination within the newsroom, rather than from external factors, especially in terms of workload and salary.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The opinion poll and the discussion with journalists provided interesting insights into the current public perception of media trust and the factors that contribute to such trust, as well as to the overall understanding of the public of media issues. The poll confirmed the dominance of television as the main source of information on a daily basis, as well as the most trusted source of information, especially for age groups above 45. The increased use of online media and especially social networks both in terms of frequency and as a source of information is another visible trend, reflecting the overall widespread use of social networks in the country. The proportion of people who tend to trust the media was only slightly higher than those who do not trust it, which should be a warning bell for the media community. At the same time, the public also believe that media independence is poor and that they tend to spread disinformation and hatred, probably even more than social networks.

The focus group discussion with journalists was an opportunity to probe the problems with their own profession, but also a way to face the public trust in them. In general, the journalists believed that the public trust in their work more or less coincides with their own perception of the situation, but the poll also revealed some findings that were paradoxes hard to explain. One of the main explanations for such discrepancies that came out of the poll was the lack of the due critical skills on media conduct related to increased propaganda effects and absence of media literacy policies for the public.

Journalists described that the current public perception of media trust was an effect of both internal faults within the media community and increased negativity in public communication on journalists, coming mainly from political sphere. The role of social networks and online media in opening the gates to floods of unethical comments and hate speech was also a factor that cannot be ignored, which has in a way legalized the right to verbally assault the media and journalists in all kinds of manners. The poor response in terms of self-regulation from the media, combined with unethical conduct from media itself, has not helped to ease this problem that contributes significantly to lowering of trust in the media among citizens. Lack of solidarity among media professionals was also a major source of self-criticism, along with the failure to react even minimally against propaganda efforts vis-a-vis the media.



## 4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The media should offer an option for users to reach them for complaints and respect the principles of publishing corrections or confutations if necessary.
- The media outlets should review a policy regarding ethics in communication and comments and user-generated Comments in general.
- The media should consider policies on the use of ready-made material from official sources, such as labelling it, editing it and contextualizing it.
- The media can consider the option of public reaction and reporting improper content related to disinformation and hate narratives.
- Efforts for the improvement of media literacy efforts should be ongoing from all actors. The government should engage in the adoption of a strategy and clear policies on the inclusion of media literacy as part of the curriculum in an appropriate form. Civil society actors should continue and intensify their efforts to raise awareness of critical thinking and media literacy in society. Public institutions and civil society should coordinate in this regard, possibly also engaging the media as a supporter of these initiatives and policies.
- Efforts to engage in media literacy initiatives should employ different formats, targeting all age groups, in order to cover the gap that exists in terms of media literacy skills.
- Public awareness campaigns highlighting professional standards and achievements in the media should be organized more frequently, contributing to the public debate on media conduct.



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Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021.

### ***PARTICIPANTS IN THE FOCUS GROUP:***

Participant 1: male journalist of a national television station.

Participant 2: female journalist of a news television station.

Participant 3: male journalist of an online media and host of a television programme.

Participant 4: male journalist of an online media outlet.

Participant 5: female journalist of a television station.

Participant 6: male journalist, columnist in print media and for television programmes.

## About the author

Ilda Londo holds a degree in Journalism/Political Sciences. She holds the position of Research Coordinator at the Albanian Media Institute. She is the author of several research works, focusing on media development issues, media ethics and professionalism, and analyzing media content.



**BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

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**POLARIZED PUBLIC TRUST IN THE  
MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS  
IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

*Anida Sokol*

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

The regional project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey' is implemented with the financial support of the European Union by partner organizations [SEENPM](#), the [Albanian Media Institute](#), [Mediacentar Sarajevo](#), [Kosovo 2.0](#), the [Montenegro Media Institute](#), the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#), the [Novi Sad School of Journalism](#), the [Peace Institute](#) and [Bianet](#).

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## POLARIZED PUBLIC TRUST IN THE MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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# POLARIZED PUBLIC TRUST IN THE MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Anida Sokol

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Media outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina are mostly fragmented along ethno-national and political party lines reflected in the public's trust and attitudes towards the media. Although the media sector is oversaturated with numerous media outlets,<sup>1</sup> they mostly do not reflect media pluralism but rather selective media reporting and sometimes different interpretations of the same events, based on ethno-national or political party lines, and the public mostly follow the outlets that support their stands.<sup>2</sup>

Annual polls on media freedom in BiH of the BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2020), conducted by the research agency Valicon, have shown that over the years, the media has been among the most trusted segments in BiH society along with religious institutions followed by the non-governmental sector.<sup>3</sup> Since 2014, trust in the media, has been mostly very high, ranging from 77% up to 81%, but reached a lower percentage in 2017 (53%). In contrast, trust in religious institutions has remained steady high from 71 up to 77%. In the last three years, the level of trust in the media in BiH was 77% in 2018, 66% in 2019, and 77% in 2020, while the level of citizens' satisfaction with the work of the media and journalists has been above 50% (69% in 2018; 53% in 2019; 65% in 2020). On the other hand, a high number of respondents agree that media freedoms are not present in BiH or are present only to some extent (84% in 2018; 80% in 2019; 71% in 2020), that politicians and political parties have the biggest influence on the work of the media (75% 2018, 64% in both 2019 and 2020) and that the work of journalists has been largely politically motivated (72% in 2018; 87% in 2019; 72% in 2020). The polls have also shown a growing percentage of those according to whom attacks on journalists can be justified (7% in 2018; 21% in 2019; 19% in 2020) (BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020).

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1 There are three public service broadcasters, around 100 television channels, 146 radio stations, eight news agencies and eight dailies, and numerous online media outlets (Petković and Hodžić, 2020; 7).

2 One-sided interpretation in the BiH media has been discussed at IREX panels and pointed out in IREX annual reports. See for example: IREX, 2019.

3 Annual polls of the BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2020). The polls are conducted based on CATI – Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing, on a sample of around 500 respondents.

This report draws on previous polls and research studies to discuss the results of a new IPSOS' public opinion poll in Bosnia and Herzegovina on public trust in the media and media-gender issues, which was conducted for the Resilience project, from 10 to 30 March 2021, on a sample of 1003 citizens with the face-to-face method of data collection. The sample is stratified along different demographic characteristics, including gender, age, educational level, employment status, region and type of settlement, rural and urban. The aim of the poll was to identify the main patterns of media usage habits, the public's trust and attitudes towards the media and social networks, and their attitudes towards the position of female journalists in the country.

The poll results were further discussed at a focus group convened on 20 April 2021, gathering seven media representatives from different professional media outlets in BiH. <sup>4</sup>

The publication is the last report within a three-part research study in the Resilience project, following a research study on disinformation, propaganda and hate models in the media in BiH (Sokol, 2020a) and a research study on hate narratives in the media and user-generated content in BiH (Sokol, 2020b).<sup>5</sup>

Using the qualitative-quantitative research method, this final report aims to show the level of trust of the public towards the media in BiH and the reasons for the lack and presence of public trust, whether and to what extent propaganda, disinformation and hate models and narratives in the media influence the public's attitudes towards the media, and some of the recommendations for improvement. The report will also compare the results of the IPSOS poll with other polls and studies conducted in BiH and try to explain some of the discrepancies between trust in the media and negative attitudes towards the media and the work of journalists in general.

In the following sections, the results of the IPSOS poll and of the focus group discussion will be presented and analyzed, followed by a conclusion and recommendations.

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4 About the project, see: <https://media.ba/en/project/resilience-civil-society-media-free-hate-and-disinformation>

5 For the same studies from other Western Balkans countries, see: <https://seenpm.org/category/resilience-news/>



## 2. MEDIA USAGE – TELEVISION AS THE MOST USED SOURCE OF NEWS IN BIH

Despite the rise in the numbers and popularity of online media in the last decade, the IPSOS poll, conducted for the Resilience project in March 2021, shows that television stands out as the most-used news source in BiH. Almost three quarters of respondents (71%) claim to watch television daily to get news, i.e. information about political and social events. One half of the respondents (50%) use social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube)<sup>6</sup> on a daily basis to get news compared to one third (33%) who follow online media daily, such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs, to obtain information. On the other hand, 44% of respondents obtain news daily from people they predominantly know, such as family, friends or colleagues, while only a fifth of respondents (21%) listen to the radio and only 5% read print newspapers and magazines daily to obtain news. However, the results indicate significant differences in the use of information sources according to age. Respondents belonging to the age group of 60 and above are more likely to watch television on a daily basis to obtain news (88%) than those in the 18–29-year-old age group (45%). Regarding other demographic characteristics, television is watched across all educational levels daily – somewhat more among those with primary education or less (77%) compared to those with higher education (60%), both in rural (72%) and urban (71%) settings, among the employed (65%) and unemployed (68%), and among those who do not trust the media (69%) and who trust the media in general (74%).

Graph 1. *Media usage: How often do you use the following sources to get news, i.e. information about political and social events?*

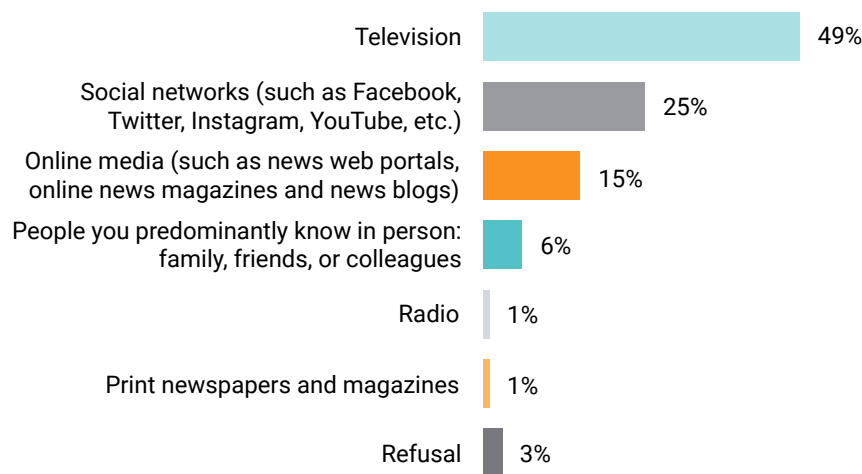
	Every day	At least once a week	At least once a month	Less often than monthly	Never	Don't know / Not sure / Refusal
Television	71.4	16.0	4.8	3.9	3.5	0.4
Radio	21.2	14.5	10.8	15.0	35.8	2.6
Print newspapers or magazines	4.6	7.4	8.4	13.2	62.5	3.9
Online media (such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs)	32.6	17.1	9.3	9.5	28.9	2.6
Social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, etc.)	49.5	11.8	4.5	4.5	26.9	2.7
People you predominantly know in person: family, friends or colleagues	43.6	22.8	14.6	10.1	7.1	1.9

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> In BiH, the most important social network is Facebook, followed by Instagram. There are around 1.8 million Facebook users and around a million Instagram users. Data obtained from [statista.com](https://www.statista.com).

Younger generations, in the group age 18–29, more often obtain information following social networks on a daily basis (84%) and online media (49%) on a daily basis compared to those in the age group 60 and above (14% and 12%, respectively). Those with a higher level of education report following online media and social networks daily (54%, online media; 67%, social networks) more than those with primary education or less (16%, online media; 36%, social networks), more among those with higher household income (48%, online media; 60%, social networks) than lower (15%, online media; 30%, social networks).<sup>7</sup> Online media are somewhat more followed by those in urban (38%) than in rural (28%) settings, while social networks more by those who do not trust the media (57%) compared to those who trust them (43%).

Graph 2. Sources of information: And what is your main source of information?



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The IPSOS poll results also illustrate that television is the primary source of information for half of the respondents (49%), followed by social networks (25%) and online media (15%), while radio and print are far behind, at a single-digit level. Television is the most important source of information for those in the age group 60 and above (82%), while its relevance as a source of information decreases among lower age groups – 45–59 (59%), 30–44 (36%) and 18–29 (12%). It is also a more important source of information for those with primary or lower level of education (65%) compared to those with higher education (34%), with less income (71%) compared to those with higher (31%), for those who trust the media (56%) compared to those who do not trust the media (43%). Social networks and online media, on the other hand, are more important sources of information for younger generations (age group 18–29, 54%, 26%, respectively) than for older ones (age group 60+, 3% both social networks and online media) and for those with higher income (35%, 16%, respectively) than with lower (12%, 8%, respectively).

<sup>7</sup> Higher household income refers to more than 1500 BAM (around 760 euro) and lower to less than 600 BAM (300 euro) a month.

Overall, the results reveal that almost three quarters of respondents watch television on a daily basis to obtain news and half of them consider it the most important source of information. Such results are in line with other studies according to which television is still considered the dominant source of information in BiH, especially among the older population (Petković and Hodžić, 2020; 15). The poll on media freedoms for 2020, for example, showed that television is the first choice as a source of information for 54% of the population, followed by the internet (38%) and the radio (4%) (BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020; 29).

The poll on the level of information of citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic in BiH, conducted by IPSOS and UNICEF in 2020, has demonstrated that people's most important source of information on COVID-19 was television (79%), followed by web portals (30%), social networks (23%) and non-formal sources of information, such as social gatherings (15%) (UNICEF, 2020: 13).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, global studies have indicated that the importance of television as a source of information has 'revived' during the COVID-19 pandemic and its use increased during 2020 (Newman et al., 2020: 9).

Studies have also shown that the use of online and social media in 2020 also substantially increased (Newman et al., 2020: 9). For younger generations, the internet, including social and online media, has been the most important source of information (Sokol, 2019: 48; Galan et al., 2020: 3). The internet has been the main source of information on COVID-19 in BiH for respondents in the age groups 31–34 years (77.2%), 25–30 (76.7%), and 20–24 (66.7%), a poll conducted by the Regulatory Agency for Communication and UNICEF in 2020 revealed (CRA, 2020: 4).<sup>9</sup>

According to the focus group participants, the results of the IPSOS poll (March 2021) were predictable; however, one representative of an online media outlet said that he had expected a better positioning of the online media and a decline in television as a news source due to the rise of technology.<sup>10</sup> The IPSOS poll results demonstrate that social networks rather than online media are the second most important source of information after television and are used more on a daily basis for obtaining news than online media. However, such results should be taken with caution since previous studies on the media consumption habits of young people (18–30 years of age) have shown, for example, that young people sometimes do not make distinctions between professional online media and social networks, that they also obtain news from the social media accounts of professional media outlets on the internet, and that local online portals are also important sources of information for

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<sup>8</sup> The poll included 3000 respondents, combining CAWI (Computer-assisted web interviewing) and CATI (Computer-assisted telephone interviewing) methods.

<sup>9</sup> A poll on the level of information of young people on COVID-19, conducted by the Regulatory Agency for Communication and UNICEF, indicated that overall, the internet stands out as the most important source of information for 64% of respondents (3445 respondents), including different age groups. However, such high internet usage can be explained by the fact that the questionnaire was sent through Viber and Facebook and that 75% of the respondents are under 35 years of age.

<sup>10</sup> Focus group participant 2.

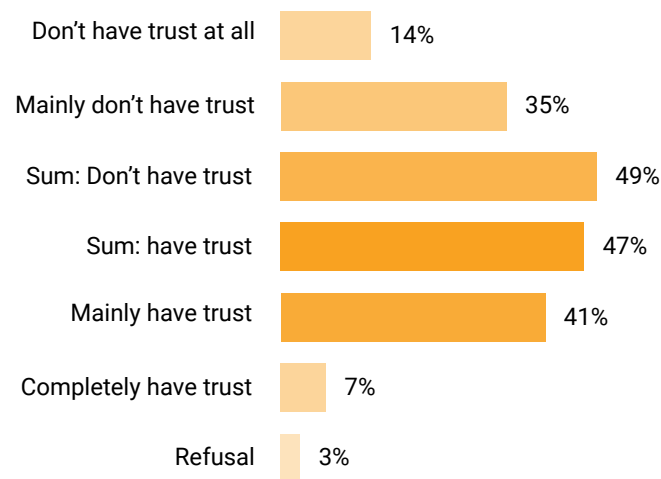
them (Sokol, 2019a: 48-51). There is a tendency among younger generations to scroll through social networks consuming information that “comes up” rather than searching for information and relying on information shared by their friends on social networks (Sokol, 2019a: 48-51).

The poll results also show that the significance of television decreases among younger age groups, among those with higher income and education and those who have less trust in the media. Such results are in line with global trends among young people to disregard traditional sources of information, which points to the need for traditional media to find alternative ways to attract younger generations (Galan et al., 2020: 4). Unsurprisingly, only 1% of respondents consider radio and print as their main source of information which attests to the global trend of the decline of the print media, which has been particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic (Newman et al., 2020: 9). Although radio is not considered a relevant source of information, according to the poll, other studies have pointed out that it is used for entertainment and relaxation (Sokol, 2019b: 50).

### 3. MEDIA TRUST – PUBLIC DIVIDED OVER THEIR TRUST IN THE MEDIA

The poll results illustrate a sharp polarization of the public in BiH regarding their trust in the media: half of the respondents, in sum, claim to not trust the media, while nearly as many claim they trust the media (49% vs 47% ratio in favour of distrust). More specifically, the results indicate that 41% of the respondents said that they mostly trust the media, such as newspapers, TV, radio or online news sources, when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly, and on the other hand, 35% said that they mainly do not trust the media. Only 7% of the respondents said that they trust the media completely, and 14% said that they do not trust the media at all.

Graph 3. *Trust in the media: 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 BiH?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

When compared with the results of the poll conducted by the BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in 2021, in which 76% of the respondents say they trust the media, the data obtained in this IPSOS study display a lower percentage of the overall trust in the media in BiH. The reasons for this can be found in the different designs of the questionnaires, since the public, in the case of the poll conducted by the BH Journalists Association, can exhibit a higher trust in the media when confronted with questions about their trust in other actors, such as public institutions and political figures. However, the BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung poll (2020) points to a high percentage of negative attitudes towards the media in general, such as that the work of journalists is politically motivated.

Polarization of trust is present along different demographic categories, but the IPSOS poll results indicate, however, a slight tendency towards a decrease in distrust in the media in higher age groups – in the age group 60 and above, 28% of the respondents claim that they mainly do not trust the media compared to the 18–29 age group in which 40% said they mainly do not trust the media. Polarization of trust is visible also within the three main ethno-national groups (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats), but a higher percentage of distrust is present in the group Others<sup>11</sup> – in which 60%, in sum, do not trust the media, compared to 30% that, in sum, trust the media. Such results can be explained by the overall fragmentation of the media along ethno-national lines, in which the mainstream media usually reflect the interests of the three ethno-national groups and their political parties, disregarding the others. Research has also pointed to the overall exclusion of minority groups on broadcasters (CRA, 2019: 40).

Generally, levels of trust are higher among those who prefer traditional media such as TV, radio and the press. Among those who follow traditional media, 28% mainly do not trust the media, and 48% mainly have trust compared to those who follow modern media, among which 43% mainly do not trust the media and 36% mainly have trust. Such results can be explained with a higher percentage of disinformation and problematic media content in the modern media, i.e. online (Cvjetičanin et al., 2019: Sokol 2020a: 7) and with the tendency that those who follow modern media, mostly younger generations, exhibit more distrust generally towards institutions—including the media, but also have more knowledge on disinformation since most of the media and information literacy educational activities of the non-governmental sector in BiH targets younger age groups (Hodžić, Petković and Bašić-Hrvatini: 2019; Sokol, 2019a).

The focus group (FG) participants pointed that one of the main reasons for the decrease in trust in the media is the existence of numerous anonymous portals that spread disinformation and propaganda both for financial and political purposes and which, according to them, mar the image of professional media outlets. The Communications Regulatory Agency has been effective in regulating the content of TV and radio stations to some extent, but, according to the focus group participants, the internet has posed news challenges to the media sector, and there is a lack of efficient regulatory frameworks for online media.

*“With the advent of the internet, it turned out that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as I also see in the surrounding countries, it was as if we were not ready for this degree of democracy... Today, there is no political party that does not have at least two portals... I think that with the development of such online media, we are in a situation in which the public’s trust in the media has weakened. I think we urgently need some regulation here.” (FG participant 1)*

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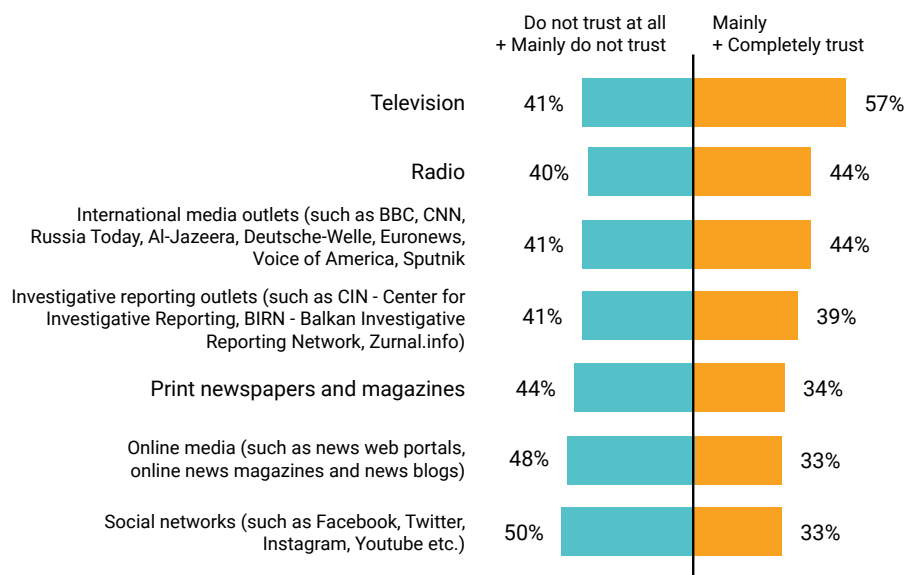
<sup>11</sup> This group includes minorities and those who do not self-identify according to the constituent categories – Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats.

The focus group participants see the other reason for the polarized trust in the media in the lack of financial sustainability of professional media that lower the quality of their reporting. Research studies have indeed identified numerous obstacles towards independent journalism, with some being the modest size of advertising markets (Petković and Hodžić, 2020: 9). The focus group participants stress the need to establish sustainable financial models for professional and independent media outlets in BiH.

### 3.1. Trust in different types of media – television as the most trusted source

Respondents have the most trust in television as a reliable source of news and information; nearly six out of ten claim they mainly or completely trust television to be a reliable source of information (57%). Respondents are divided over whether other types of media represent trusted sources of news and information. International media (such as BBC, CNN, Russia Today, Al-Jazeera, Deutsche-Welle, Euronews, Voice of America, Sputnik), investigative reporting outlets (such as the Center for Investigative Reporting, BIRN – The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, Zurnal.info) and radio have the trust of two out of five respondents (44%, 39% and 44%, respectively), while nearly as many do not trust them (41%, 41% and 40%, respectively). Similarly, approximately one third trust the press (34%), while more than two fifths consider it untrustworthy (44%). There is a higher percentage of distrust towards social networks compared to trust (50% vs 33%) and online media (48% vs 33%), which, as pointed out above, could be explained by the lack of effective (self)regulation of these media and large volumes of disinformation online.

Graph 4. *Reliable sources of information: To what extent do you trust each of the following media is a reliable source of news and information?*



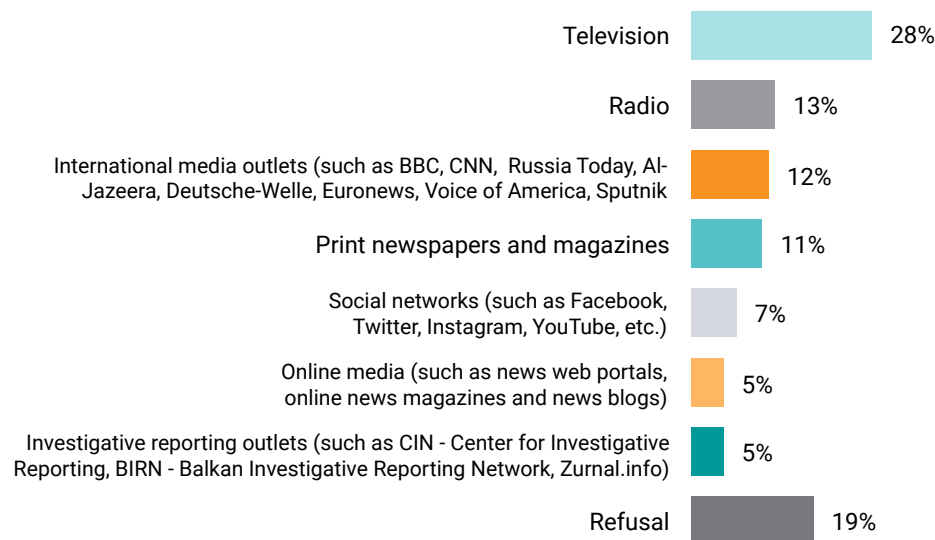
Source: Ipsos, 2021.



Trust in television increases with age, as in the age group 60 and above, 67% claim to completely or mainly trust the media, compared to the 18–29 age group, in which 47% claim to do so. Trust in television is more present among unemployed (57%) than employed (49%), among those with primary education or lower (66%) compared with those with higher (56%). On the other hand, among young generations, in the 18–29 age group, there is a tendency to trust social networks (45%) and online media (46%) more compared to higher age groups, 60 and above (16%, 17%, respectively). Respondents with a higher level of education and higher household income trust online media more (40%, 39%, respectively) compared to those with primary education or lower and lower income (24%, 18%, respectively). These results could be explained by media consumption habits because those in higher age groups and with lower levels of education follow TV more than those with higher levels of education and younger age.

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 over a quarter of the respondents ranked as the first source they trust the most (28%), followed by radio (13%), international news outlets (12%) and print newspapers and magazines (11%). In contrast, 7% of the respondents ranked social networks as the first source of information they trust the most, and only 5% named online media and investigative reporting outlets.

Graph 5. *Most trusted sources of information: And now, please rank the following sources from the one you trust the most to the one you trust the least when it comes to the news and information. - Rank 1*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.



These findings align with other research studies where television is indicated as the most trusted source among the media in BiH. For example, the UNICEF research showed that in terms of trust in the information on COVID-19, television is the most trusted among the media (22% of respondents have complete trust, 24% mainly have trust) above radio, social networks, print and online media and even above independent experts, but below friends and families and the World Health Organization (UNICEF, 2020: 17).

The IPSOS results show lower levels of trust in social networks and online media but also in investigative media outlets that have been singled out as good examples of independent journalism in BiH (Petković and Hodžić, 2020: 23; IREX, 2019: 7), compared to TV, radio, international news outlets and print. Such attitudes can result from a lack of knowledge about these media outlets, lack of trust in foreign-funded media, and the overall lack of knowledge of journalistic standards and investigative reporting. Research studies have indicated that, for example, young people are critical towards media reporting in BiH but are not able to explain journalistic standards and work procedures, such as fact-checking, which is an essential element of investigative journalism (Sokol, 2019a: 72).

The Ipsos results also demonstrate that respondents show similar levels of trust towards social networks and online media, which could point to the lack of distinctions between professional online media and non-professional internet and other social platforms. Focus group participants raised concerns that the lines between professional and non-professional media outlets and even social networks have been blurred, due to which it is difficult for citizens to distinguish professional media from non-professional ones, and there is a tendency of the public to treat them all alike. This is particularly problematic in a country where media and information literacy are not part of formal education and one of the answers the focus group participants see in educating citizens how to recognize professional media reporting and classifying professional media outlets from the non-professional ones.

However, research studies have shown that problematic media content is also present among the traditional media, and a number of them have been singled out as examples of propaganda, disinformation and hate models (Sokol, 2020a). As one focus group participant noted:

*“There is no doubt that these portals have caused enormous damage to journalism, and to media literacy in general, and to culture and politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina in general. But I think that the greater damage was done when other media, relevant media, started the race with those portals for readers. When they started adapting their titles to clickbait, when they started shortening texts and their content.” (FG participant 5)*

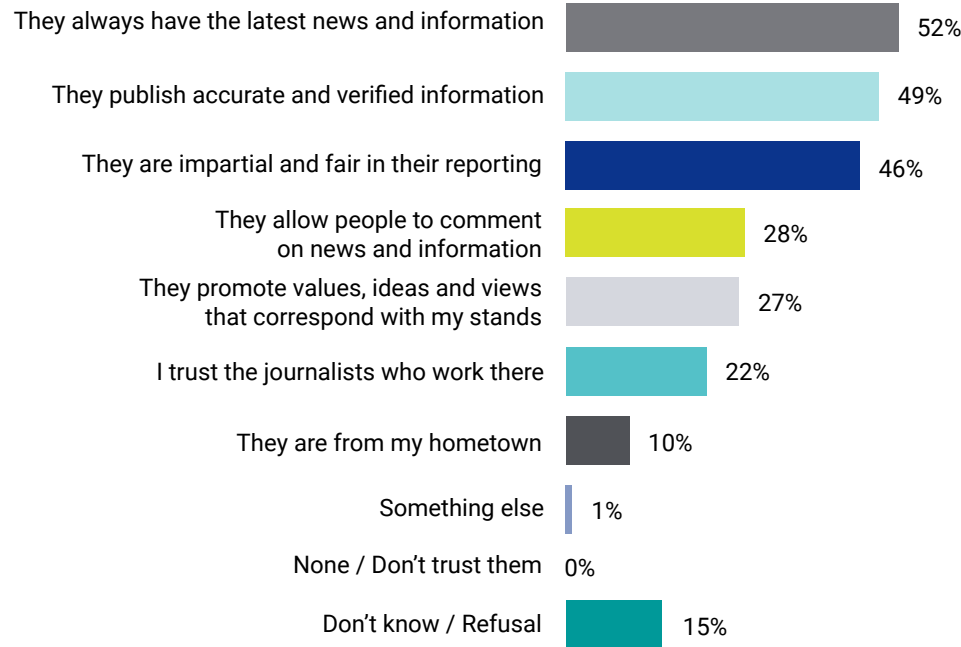
### 3.2. Reasons for trust: Having the latest news and information as the most important reason for trust

Looking at the first answers as well as when all the answers are considered, the main reason why respondents consider some media trustworthy is that they have the latest news and information (52%). Publishing accurate and verified information and being impartial and fair in reporting come next (49% and 46%, respectively). Other reasons are that they allow people to comment on news and information (28%), that they promote values, ideas and views that correspond to their stands (27%), and they trust the journalists who work there (26%), while 15% of respondents said that they do not know/cannot answer. Even though providing the latest news and information is one of the most important roles of the media, it should not be ranked as the main criterion of trust in a news outlet compared to other criteria such as accurate and verified information and impartial and fair reporting. Having the possibility to comment on news and information and promote values, ideas and views that correspond to their stands are also not relevant criteria for accuracy. Such answers provide insights into the levels of media and information literacy skills of citizens, which are considered to be poor due to lack of media and information literacy in formal education (Petković, Hodžić, and Bašić Hrvatin 2019: 11; Sokol, 2020a: 71). Even though media and information literary workshops mostly target young people and are urban-centred (Petković, Hodžić and Bašić Hrvatin, 2019, 1), no significant differences in reasons for trust in media outlets can be singled out among age groups, levels of education and urban and rural settings.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the fact that 27% of respondents consider the promotion of values, ideas and views that correspond to their stands as an important reason for their trust in the media can attest to the polarized public based on ethno-national or political stands. However, these results should be taken with caution since they were based on already given options. More research is needed to assess the public's level of media and information literacy skills in BiH.

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<sup>12</sup> That the media publish the latest news and information is considered as a more important reason of trust among those in rural settings (59%) rather than in urban (42%). However, that the media publish accurate and verified information and are impartial and fair in their reporting are considered more important reasons of trust in rural (52%; 51%) than urban settings (44%; 40%).

Graph 6. *Reasons for trust: You may trust some media outlets more than others. Thinking about the media you consider the most trustworthy, what are the main reasons you trust them?*

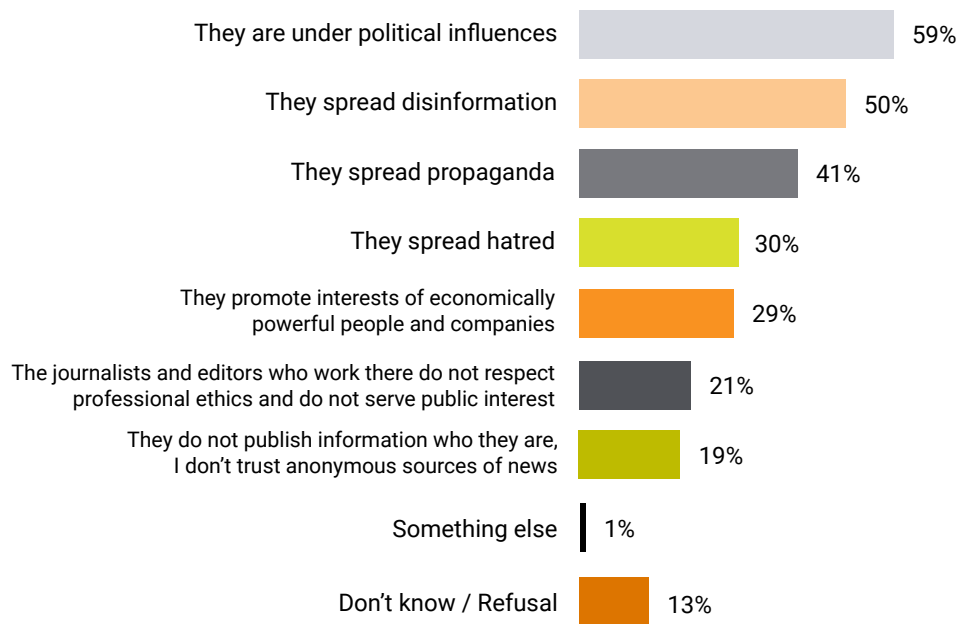


Source: Ipsos, 2021.

### 3.3. Reasons for distrust – political influence as the main reason for distrust

The main reasons for distrust are related to the perception that certain media are under political influence and that they spread disinformation (59% and 50%, respectively). In addition, more than two fifths do not trust certain media outlets because they believe they spread propaganda (41%), because they spread hatred (30%) and promote the interests of economically powerful people and companies (29%). Other reasons for distrust are that journalists and editors who work there do not respect professional ethics and that the media do not serve the public interest (21%) and that they do not publish information on who they are (19%). Such attitudes are present equally among different age groups and educational levels, even though some differences can be observed among those with different income. For example, that professional ethics is not followed by media representatives is more valued as a reason for distrust among those with higher income (37%) than those with lower income (14%).

Graph 7. *Reasons for distrust: And thinking about the media you consider the least trustworthy, what are the main reasons you do not trust them?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Political influences are singled out as the most important reason for distrust in media outlets (59%). These attitudes align with other research studies that point to the public's general belief that the media are under political control. For example, the results of the poll of the BH Journalists Association and Fredrich Ebert Stiftung (2020) showed that respondents believe that politicians and political parties have the biggest influence on the work of the media (2020, 64%) and that the work of journalists has been largely politically motivated (2020, 72%).

Focus group participants also pointed that political influence on the editorial policies of the media is one of the main reasons for the polarized public trust in the media. Research studies have pointed that most media outlets are affiliated with political parties through financing and ownership patterns (Petković and Hodžić, 2020: 8; Sokol, 2020a: 4). According to one focus group participant:

*“One of the reasons for distrust of the media in the last, let's say, five to ten years, is the complete polarization of the media on a political basis. So, if we are going to give the example of Banja Luka, you have to look at three news programmes to know what happened that day, because you don't have a real picture from one news programme.”*  
(FG participant 5)

Similarly, in focus groups discussions in other studies, young people said that they do not trust the media since they are under political influence (Sokol, 2019a: 59). However, often these attitudes are overgeneralized and reflections of common attitudes about the media: many respondents could not elaborate on connections between politicians and the media and explain the pattern of influence through, for example, financing and ownership (Sokol, 2019: 72). Such overgeneralizations can harm the work of professional and independent media due to the tendency of the public to consider all the media to be under political influence.

The focus group participants also noted that the media in BiH has been oversaturated with political topics and politicians, giving little attention to real-life stories, the economy and positive stories, which can also reduce public trust towards the media. Indeed, in previous research studies, young people stated that they are not satisfied with the media content and do not follow the media because they mostly dedicate space to politicians (Sokol, 2019, 56). The poll results of the BH Journalists Association and Fredrich Ebert Stiftung (2020) indicate that a large percentage of respondents agree that the media should report more on the everyday life of citizens (38%, 2020).

Other reasons for distrust are that the media spread disinformation, propaganda and hatred. Even though focus group participants pointed out that anonymous portals on the internet have largely lowered the public's trust in the media, that media outlets do not publish information who they are is a reason for distrust for only 19% of respondents, which points to the need for media and information literacy education.

### 3.4. Trust in specific media outlets – polarized audience along ethno-national and political party lines

Regarding trust and distrust in specific media outlets, no media outlet can be specifically singled out as the one with a very high percentage of trust or distrust, and answers with the highest percentage of responses were those in which the respondents said that they do not trust any media (19%), or that they do not know which media they distrust the most (51%).

A commercial television station from Bijeljina BN TV and the public service broadcaster of the Federation of BiH, FTV, are the most trusted media outlets by 15% and 16% of the respondents, respectively, while around a tenth of them name the public service broadcaster from Republika Srpska, RTRS (10%) and a CNN-affiliated broadcaster N1 (9%). Other specific media outlets that are trusted the most by 5–6% of the respondents are: the commercial television from Sarajevo, Face TV, the public service broadcaster on the state level BHRT, the international news outlet Al Jazeera Balkans, and commercial television stations: Hayat TV (6%), TV PINK, OBN TV, and NOVA BH (5%). Among the most trusted media outlets are popular commercial TV stations and public service broadcasters. In contrast, only a number of popular online

media were mentioned as the most trusted outlets, with somewhat lower percentages, including, Klix.ba (4%), Vijesti.ba, and Avaz.ba (2%). In addition, 19% of respondents stated that they do not trust any media outlet, and 10% stated that they do not know.

Trust in specific media outlets is different across ethno-national groups, which is the most visible regarding public service broadcasters:

- 30% of Serbs trust RTRS the most, 2% of Others, 1% of Croats and no Bosniaks;
- 24% of Bosniaks trust FTV the most, 8% of Others, 4% of Croats and 4% of Serbs;
- 9% of Bosniaks trust BHT, followed by 8% of Others, 4% of Croats and 2% of Serbs.

Polarization is also visible within ethno-national groups based on political party lines. For example, 30% of Serbs trust RTRS the most, whose reporting favours the ruling SNSD party in Republika Srpska and 40% BN TV, that favours the opposition parties in the Republika Srpska.

Face TV, Al Jazeera Balkans, Klix.ba and Avaz.ba are trusted more by Bosniaks (11%, 10%, 7%, 3%, respectively) and Others (8%, 10%, 9%, 2%, respectively) rather than Serbs and Croats, while Hayat TV is trusted mostly by Bosniaks (11%). Ethno-national polarization is also visible, for example in the data that 17% of Croats stated that they trust the Croatian national broadcaster HRT the most, which is the highest percentage compared to the other media Croats have selected.

Trust in some media outlets has, however, been seen in more groups, which include N1, which has Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian versions (Bosniaks 12%, Serbs 2%, Croats 11%, Others 16%) and in the commercial outlet PINK BH that mostly provides entertainment programmes (Bosniaks 7%; Serbs 6%). N1 has been pointed to as an example of an independent media outlet that complies with professional standards and whose reporting is well resourced (Petković and Hodžić, 2020: 28), but examples of its reporting have been debunked by the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje mostly in regards to disinformation and clickbait.<sup>13</sup> One focus group participant stated that he expected N1 to have a higher level of trust among the respondents.<sup>14</sup>

Differences of trust in specific media outlets are also visible along other demographic characteristics: BN TV, FTV and RTRS are trusted more by those with primary or lower education (22%, 22%, 13%, respectively) rather than higher (8%, 7%, 6%, respectively) and Al Jazeera Balkans, N1 and Klix more by those with higher education (8%, 13%, 9%) rather than primary or lower (2%, 6%, 1%).

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<sup>13</sup> See: <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/medij/n1>.

<sup>14</sup> Focus group participant 3.

Some other media outlets that have been indicated as the most trusted media outlets have been listed as examples of models of disinformation and propaganda in previous studies: the public service broadcaster RTRS, known for its selective media reporting against the opposition (Sokol, 2020b: 15-17), and Avaz.ba, the online version of the daily newspaper affiliated with the SBB political party (Sokol, 2020a: 11-12) that in recent years has been conducting a negative campaign against migrants and refugees (Sokol, 2020b: 7-11). Both media outlets have been listed as sources and distributors of disinformation by the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje (Cvjetičanin, 2019: 35). In addition, other most trusted media outlets have been pointed as high-risk media for the spreading of disinformation and other problematic media content, including RTV BN, Hayat, and Face TV.<sup>15</sup>

When it comes to the least trusted media outlets, there is also no high consensus of citizens: approximately one fifth mention RTRS, while one tenth name FTV as the ones they distrust the most (19% and 10%, respectively). Other media outlets that they distrust the most are BHRT (7%), BN TV (6%), Hayat and OBN (3%). Distrust in these media outlets is present across all ethno-national groups: RTRS is most distrusted by Others (27%), followed by Bosniaks (20%) and Serbs (19%), FTV by Croats (14%), followed by Serbs (13%) and Bosniaks (8%) and BHRT by Serbs (12%), followed by Croats (6%), and Bosniaks (5%). These results reflect both polarization along ethno-national and political party lines, but also generally negative attitudes towards the public service broadcasters and commercial media in the country due to political influences on them.

Results point to the phenomenon of the partisan knowledge gap in which the public relies on sources based on their ethno-national and political party affiliations and believe in facts that make one's own group look good (Iyengar, 2017: 242). Studies have shown that the media in BiH have been reflecting different ethno-national narratives, emphasizing the issues and the agenda of one's own ethno-national group and disregarding the others, which is visible, for example, in the selective coverage of the war events (Sokol, 2019b: 34). The focus group participants agree that the public in BiH usually follow the outlets that support their stands. One focus group participant noted that *"people watch television similarly to how they vote, they watch who they support and they are, in fact, for or against those media."*<sup>16</sup> Another participant emphasized the lack of dialogue in the media that reflects different standpoints.

*"It indirectly speaks of that one-sidedness of our media, which find it difficult ... to promote that kind of dialogue, in which you have completely different stances on issues being discussed ... But we do not have that healthy dialogue, constant discussion between people who speak with arguments, from different positions, so that you come to some comprehensive picture." (FG participant 7).*

15 See the lists of the media: <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/medij/n1>.

16 Focus group participant 5.

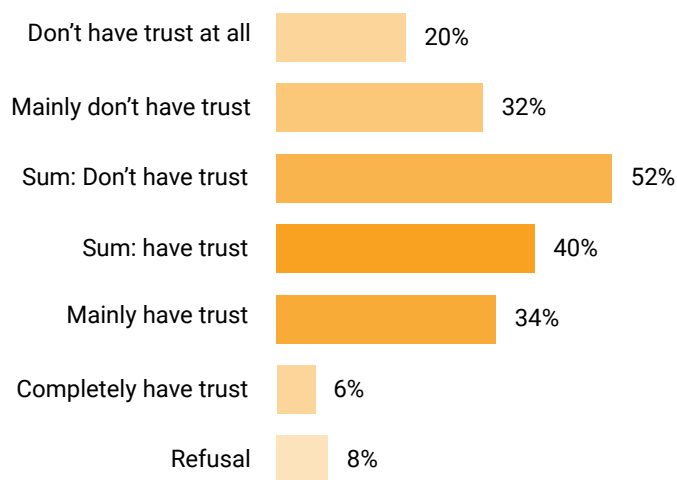


Finally, even though the public are polarized about their trust in the media, still 51% of the respondents stated that they could not name the media they distrust the most. These answers can point to the overgeneralized attitudes towards the media and the impossibility of the respondents to specify and elaborate their stands.

### 3.5. Divided trust in public service broadcasters

When asked specifically about their trust in the three public service broadcasters, BHRT, FTV and RTRS, the respondents are divided. In sum, half of the respondents say they do not trust the public broadcasting services BHRT and RTVFBiH (52% and 50%, respectively), while two fifths claim the opposite (40% and 42%, respectively). However, a somewhat higher share of respondents does not trust RTRS, with a 60% vs 31% ratio in favour of distrust. There is a clear ethno-national division in terms of trust in the public broadcasters, as Bosniaks are more likely to trust BHRT (51%) and RTVFBiH (57%), while on the other hand, they more often do not trust RTRS (69%). The opposite is true for Serbs, who have more trust in RTRS (54%), while the level of trust in the other two public broadcasters among them is lower – 68% of Serbs, in sum, do not trust RTVFBiH and 66% BHRT. Trust in public service broadcasters is also higher with age – 50% in the age group 60 and above in sum have trust in BHRT and RTVFBiH, compared to those in the 18–29 age group (32%) Distrust is higher among those with higher income: 63% in sum do not trust BHRT and FTV, compared to those with lower income, 44% BHRT and 39% FTVBiH.

Graph 8. *Trust in BHRT: On a scale from 1 to 4, how much trust do you have in Public Service Media – BHRT (Radio and Television of Bosnia and Herzegovina), when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.



Focus group participants noted that such results are predictable due to the high level of political influence on public service broadcasters, especially through the appointments of the steering boards. Public service broadcasters continue to be in a difficult financial situation due to the lack of an efficient financing system, the law on the public broadcasting system is only partially implemented, and entity laws are not in line with state-level law (State Department 2021). One focus group participant stressed the increasingly bad financial situation of BHRT and the lack of efficient legislation that would introduce a stable financing system. According to her:

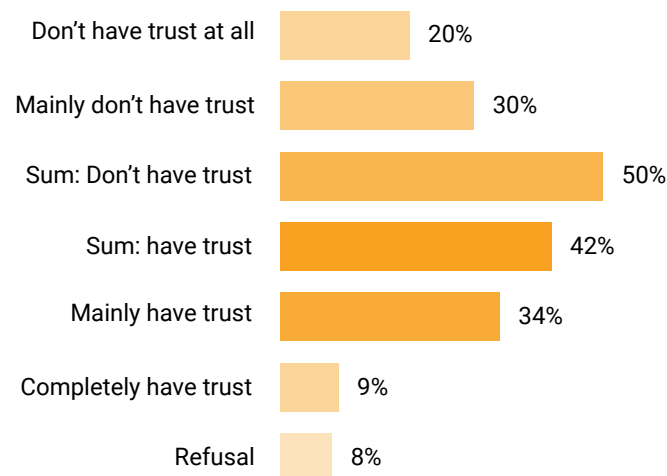
*“As long as politics shapes the members of the steering boards, as long as politics has not been persistently solving the issue of stable financing of public service broadcasters in BiH, turning us into a kind of beggars who have been patching up literally to produce anything, which is visible also on the screen and it is logical that the citizens lose trust.”* (FG participant 4)

Another participant pointed in particular to the problematic reporting of RTRS, which the CRA has fined multiple times for violating the principles of fairness and impartiality, including those related to war (Sokol, 2020a: 14).

*“It is really very difficult to avoid that elephant in the room, RTRS, that is not only under political influence, but a television channel that is so toxic for the media space and politics in general in BiH, for reconciliation processes, for transitional justice ... and it is high time we spoke openly about this.”* (FG participant 5)

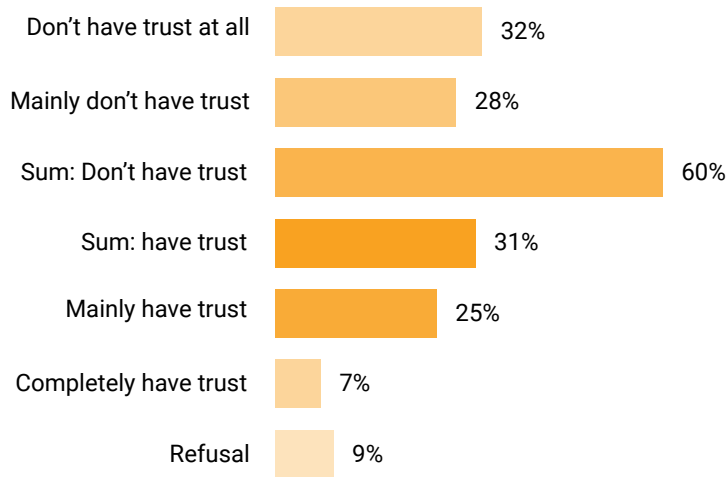
Focus group participants stressed the urgent need to solve the financial sustainability of the public service broadcasters and restrict political influence through financing patterns and the appointments of the managerial staff and steering boards in public service broadcasters.

Graph 9. *Trust in FTV: On a scale from 1 to 4, how much trust do you have in Public Service Media – RTVFBiH (Radio-Television of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Graph 10. *Trust in RTRS: On a scale from 1 to 4, how much trust do you have in Public Service Media – RTRS (Television of the Serbian Republic), when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

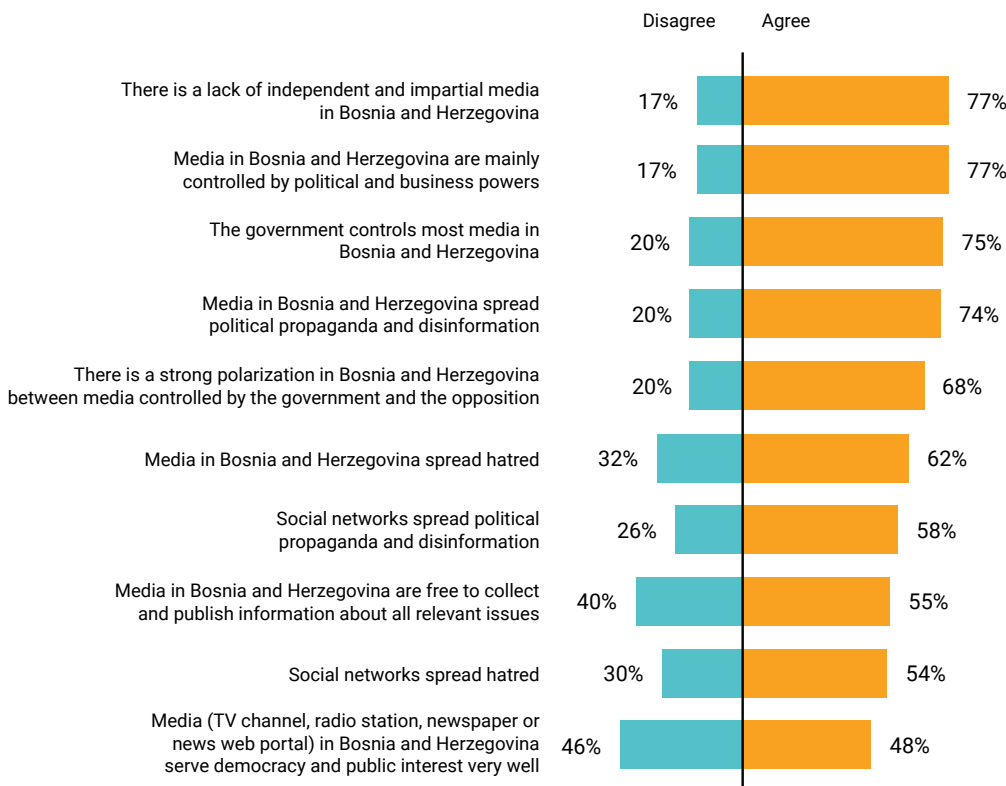
### 3.6. Highly negative attitudes towards the media

The poll results show highly negative attitudes towards the media in BiH. The largest share of respondents believes that the media in BiH are controlled and that there is a lack of independent and impartial media. Also, political propaganda and disinformation are widespread in the media and these attitudes are present across different demographic groups. More specifically, three quarters of citizens claim that most media in BiH are controlled by political and business powers (77%), as well as by the government (75%), that there is a lack of independent and impartial media (77%) and that the media spread political propaganda and disinformation (between 77% and 74%).

Furthermore, two thirds of respondents agree that there is a strong polarization in BiH between media controlled by the government and the opposition and that media in BiH spread hatred (66 % and 62%, respectively). The results attest to the general attitude among the BiH public that politicians and political parties have the biggest influence on the work of the media and that the work of journalists has been largely politically motivated (BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020). Studies have revealed that through ownership and financing patterns, political parties and business groups influence the editorial policies of the media (Sokol, 2020a: 4). However, there are examples of independent media outlets that adhere to professional standards, including non-profit media that receive support from foreign donors, media receiving support from global networks and commercial media financed through advertising (Petković and Hodžić, 2020: 23).

The attitudes to social networks are perceived similarly, even though somehow fewer respondents have negative attitudes towards social networks, which they agree spread political propaganda and disinformation, as well as hatred (58% and 54%, respectively). Agreement that social networks spread disinformation and hatred is higher among the 30–44 age group (70%) compared to those in the age group 60 plus (47%), and among those with higher education (73%) compared to those with primary education and lower (46%). The fact that more respondents believe that the media spread propaganda, disinformation and hatred compared to social networks point to worrying trends and to the level of negative attitudes towards the media. Previous studies have, indeed, exposed that traditional media in BiH, in addition to social networks, spread disinformation and propaganda and pointed to examples of hate campaigns against specific groups, including migrants and refugees, political opposition and minorities in the traditional media (Sokol, 2020b). Focus group participants agreed that such examples of hate narratives influence the public’s perception of the media and reduce their trust in the media.

Graph 11. Attitudes towards the media: On a scale from 1 to 4, assess how much you agree with the following statements



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Regarding perceptions on media freedoms and the media’s public service role, respondents are divided. Namely, approximately one half agree that media in BiH are free to collect and publish information about all relevant issues, as well as that they serve democracy and the public interest very well

(55% and 48%, respectively), while about two fifths claim the opposite (40% and 46%, respectively). Those who trust the media in general more often believe that the media in BiH are free (64%) and that they serve democracy and public interest very well (61%). However, such attitudes vary across different demographic data; more respondents from Republika Srpska and in Brčko District agree that there is a lack of independent and impartial media in BiH (88%; 86% respectively) than those in the Federation (72%). They also agree that there is a strong polarization between media controlled by the government and the opposition (77% and 74%) than those in the Federation (62%). These differences can be explained by stronger polarization of the media in RS along political party lines in comparison to the Federation and strong centralized control of the leading SNSD party's influence on the media. The government does not openly censor the media, but studies have pointed to the large presence of self-censorship among the media for fear of retribution and denial of access to information to journalists (Irex, 2019: 4-6), which worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although in recent years the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje has gained popularity and played a very important role in debunking disinformation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, two thirds of respondents are not aware of the existence of the platforms that deal with checking the accuracy of news and information in BiH (65%). One third of them have heard about fact-checkers (33%), of which one tenth also followed their announcements (11%). Percentages are similar in different age groups, but differences can be seen in income and place of residence. Eighty-one per cent with lower income have not heard about them, compared to 41% with higher income, while 77% have not heard about them in RS and 59% in the Federation. These results point to the need for media and information literacy education but also that the fact-checking platforms, together with the investigative media outlets, should do more to promote their work.

### 3.7. Attitudes towards journalists – female journalists often the targets of attacks

The majority of respondents perceive the position of women journalists in BiH as unfavourable. More precisely, more than three quarters of respondents believe that women journalists in BiH are often the targets of attacks, threats, insults, and harassment (78%) and that the state bodies (police, judiciary) should protect women journalists when they are threatened or attacked (87%). However, more respondents agree that such attacks are the result of revealing the truth while reporting on politics, corruption and crime (80%) and two thirds of them agree that attacks, threats, insults and harassment stem from gender prejudices and stereotypes (69%).

Studies have pointed to the overall precarious situation of journalists in the country and frequent verbal and physical attacks, online and in-person threats, smear campaigns, mobbing, and hate speech against them (RSF, 2021; BH

Journalists Association 2020). Female journalists are often the targets of harassment, and gender inequality is still present in managerial positions in the media (Sokol, 2020a: 6). There are examples of hate narratives in the media and social networks that target and demonize journalists, especially those who write critically against their own ethno-national group or the ruling structures (Sokol, 202b: 12-14). The focus group participants agree that such narratives influence the public's trust and their attitudes towards the media, which are especially exemplified in the results of the poll of the Association BH Journalists that around 20% of the respondents believe that attacks on journalists can be justified (19% in 2020, BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung).

The focus group participants agree that the position of female journalists has been particularly difficult but that there is a lack of efficient protection mechanisms of journalists in the country and a lack of solidarity among the journalistic community. According to one focus group participant: "It is true that female journalists ... are more exposed to attacks, but what is crucial and I think it must be given importance when it comes to the protection of female journalists, but also journalists in general ... is that her entire media house stands behind her".<sup>17</sup>

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17 Focus group participant 3.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The results of the opinion poll conducted by Ipsos for the Resilience project in March 2021 show a sharp polarization of the BiH public regarding their trust in the media – half of the respondents, in sum, claim to not trust the media, while nearly as many claim they trust the media.

Results also demonstrate that trust in specific media outlets and public service broadcasters is polarized along ethno-national and political party lines, which attests to the overall polarization of the media sector and the public in BiH. Some respondents listed as the most trusted media outlets organizations that previous studies singled out as examples of propaganda and disinformation models.

Respondents have highly negative attitudes towards the media that are mainly in line with commonly held beliefs that the media are under the influence of political parties and are controlled by governments. Although studies have pointed to political parties meddling in editorial affairs, such overgeneralizations can negatively influence the public's trust, even in professional and independent media outlets. The results show that investigative media outlets do not rate as high as television when it comes to the public's trust in specific media formats.

The focus group participants emphasized that a set of measures should be introduced for the improvement of professional journalism in BiH and consequently the public's trust in the media, ranging from education, efficient (self)regulation of online media and financial sustainability of professional media outlets and the public service broadcasters. The focus group participants indicated the presence of many anonymous websites and the lack of financial sustainability of professional media as the main reasons that influence the public's trust in the media. According to them, it is important to prevent the influence of political parties on the media's editorial policies and to improve the overall media reporting.

Results also point to the lack of media and information literacy skills among the respondents, due to which it is necessary to work on education and find systematic solutions for the introduction of media and information literacy into formal education.

## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH and ministries of education on the entity and cantonal levels should put efforts into introducing media and information literacy into formal education in all levels of education, including primary and secondary. Civil society organizations should work on the education of citizens, including all age groups, about media and information literacy and capacitating teachers to work with pupils and students. Particular attention should be paid to teaching pupils and attendees about journalistic standards and professional media reporting.
- Media outlets should be supported, including financially, by the public sector and the donor community to enable quality reporting, presentation of pluralistic views, and regular verification of information from multiple sources. Models for financial sustainability for professional journalism could include grants from governments on different levels based on transparent procedures, expert commission selection and precise criteria that serve the public interest. In addition, specific grants for investigative journalism could be introduced on the state level and given based on transparent procedures, precise and measurable criteria and evaluations from expert commissions.
- The ministries of communication and finance, including those on the cantonal, entity and state levels (Ministry of Communications and Transport of BiH and the Ministry of Finance and Treasury of BiH), should adopt regulations that will include provisions on the transparency of media ownership and precise criteria for the allocation of public funds to the media in consultation with the media industry and civil society organizations, to restrict the influence of political parties on editorial policies and increase the public's trust in the media.
- Professional media outlets should engage in the promotion of professional media reporting and education of the audience. Professional media should seek ways to engage the public, build supportive communities, involve them in dialogue, and gain support, including financial. They should also seek ways to attract younger audiences.
- Investigative reporting media outlets and the fact-checking platform should engage more in promoting their work to citizens to gain wider recognition and more trust. They should also be engaged in educating the audience to recognize professional media reporting.
- The governments on the state and entity levels should find ways to resolve the financial sustainability of the public service broadcasters and introduce measures against the political influence on their editorial policies and the appointments of steering boards and managerial staff. The CRA should introduce stricter fines for breaches of codes by the public service broadcasters, especially in relation to reporting on war events, which affect the overall process of reconciliation.

- The regulator and ministries of communication should adopt a strategy and concrete steps to prevent organized systems from spreading disinformation. The CRA and the Press Council codes should be amended to include different types of disinformation and its precise definition, taking into account their growing presence and spread. Civil society organizations should regularly monitor the media and report disinformation, propaganda and hate speech to the self(regulator) or other institutions and organizations.
- The police and prosecutors' offices should process cases of attacks against journalists, while journalists and media organizations should work on unifying the media community and strengthening solidarity among journalists.



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#### **FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS:**

Participant 1: editor of a local radio-television station (male).

Participant 2: editor of a popular online media (male).

Participant 3: editor of a regional newspaper (female).

Participant 4: editor of a public service broadcaster (female).

Participant 5: editor of an investigative reporting media outlet (male).

Participant 6: journalist of a popular online media (male).

Participant 7: journalist of a media watchdog (male).

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**KOSOVO**

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

*Jeton Mehmeti*

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

*Jeton Mehmeti*

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The first study covered hate and propaganda media models<sup>4</sup>, and the second examined hate narratives in the media and communication in Kosovo.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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,<sup>7</sup> 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

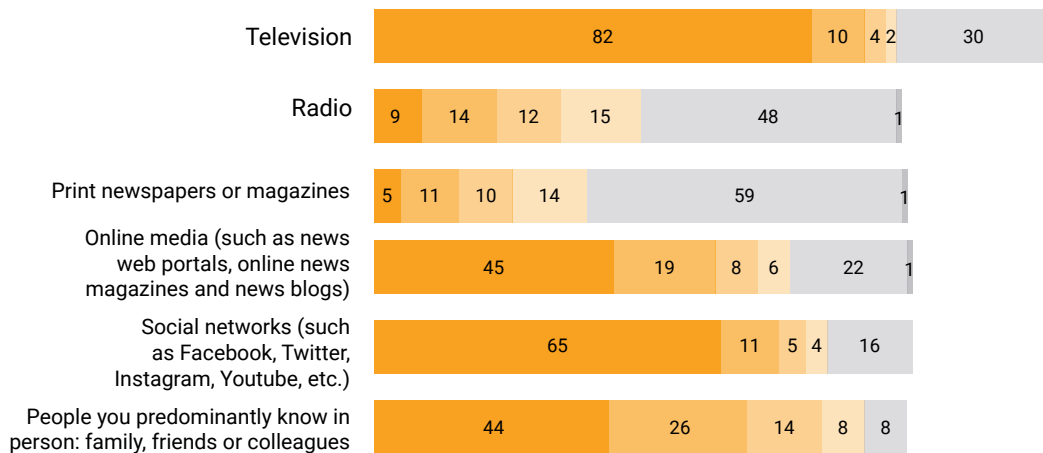
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<sup>7</sup> Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021

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.*"<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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."*<sup>11</sup>

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

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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.<sup>12</sup> 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.

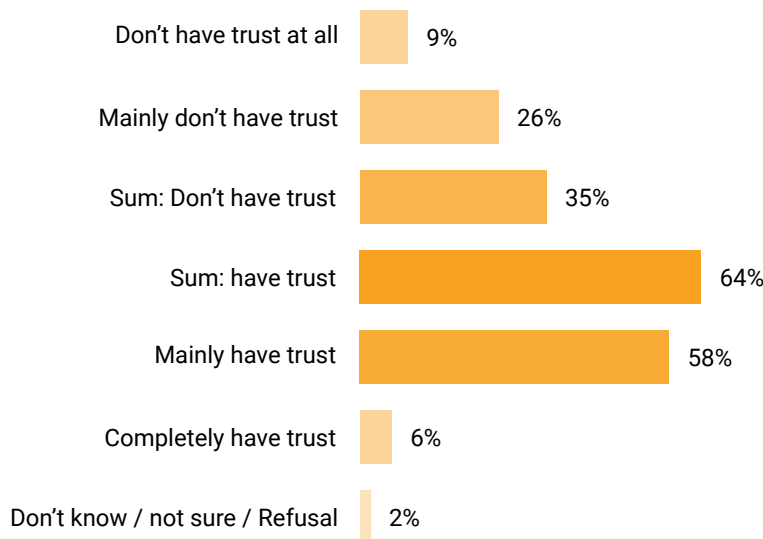
On the other hand, one out of four mainly does not have trust (26%), with an additional 9% who do not believe the media at all. Generally, levels of distrust are higher among the youngest (18–29 years), ethnic Serbs, and those who prefer getting their information through online media and personal contacts.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

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<sup>12</sup> Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021

<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> One explanation given

<sup>14</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>15</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>16</sup> Interviewee 3.

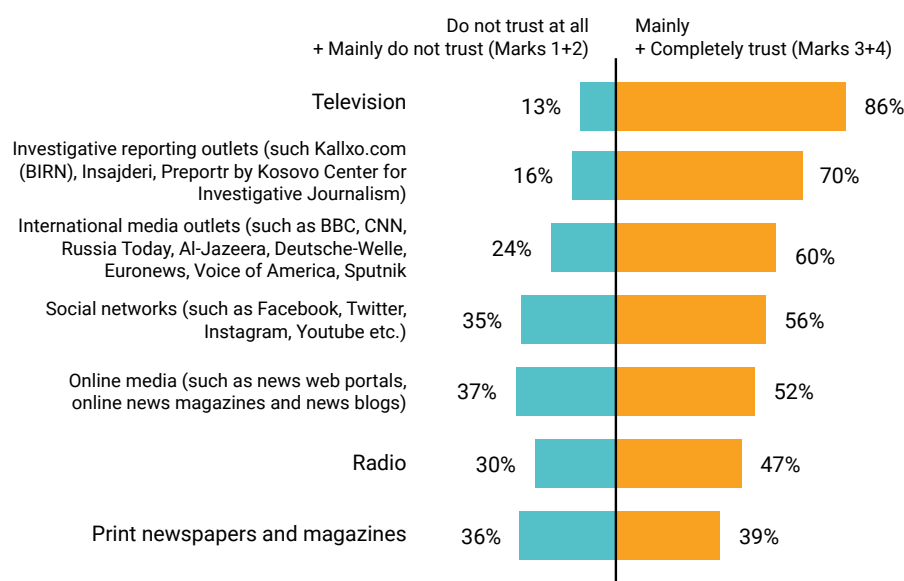


by the community of interviewed media professionals is that due to decreasing trust in political elites and public institutions, as well as corruption and misuse of power, the media has emerged as a critical voice. This has created a positive perception among the respondents.

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%).<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.

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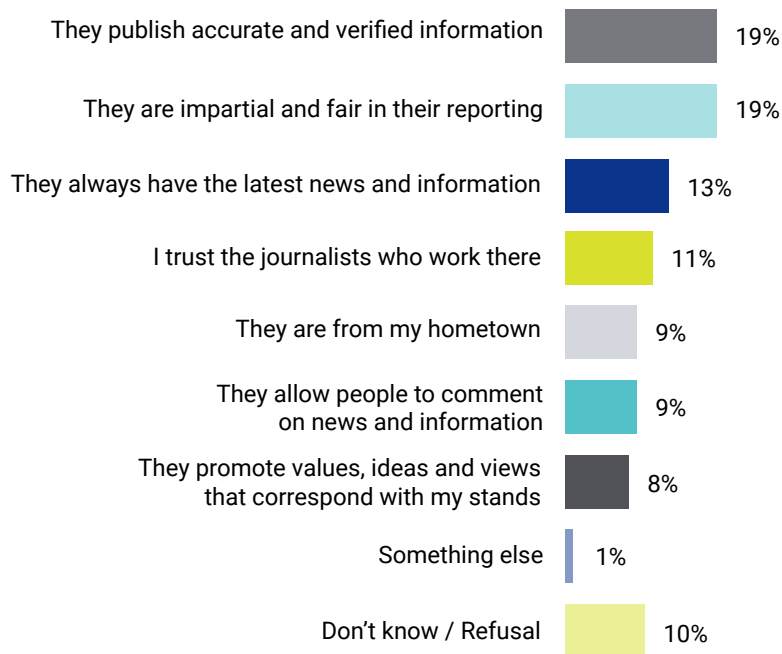
<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Interviewee 6.*

<sup>20</sup> *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.<sup>21</sup> *“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.<sup>22</sup> 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”*.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>22</sup> Interviewee 1.

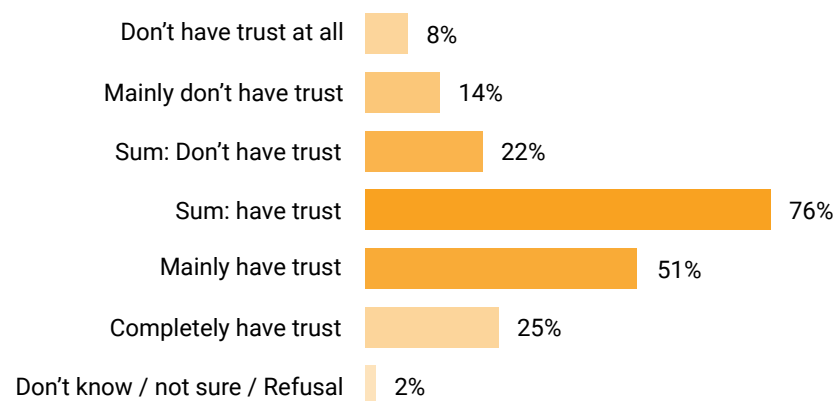
<sup>23</sup> Interviewee 3.

## 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup>*

Graph 5. Citizens' trust in public service media



Source: IPSOS, 2021.

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

<sup>25</sup> European Commission, Kosovo 2020 Report, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/kosovo\\_report\\_2020.pdf](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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> *“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.<sup>28</sup> 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

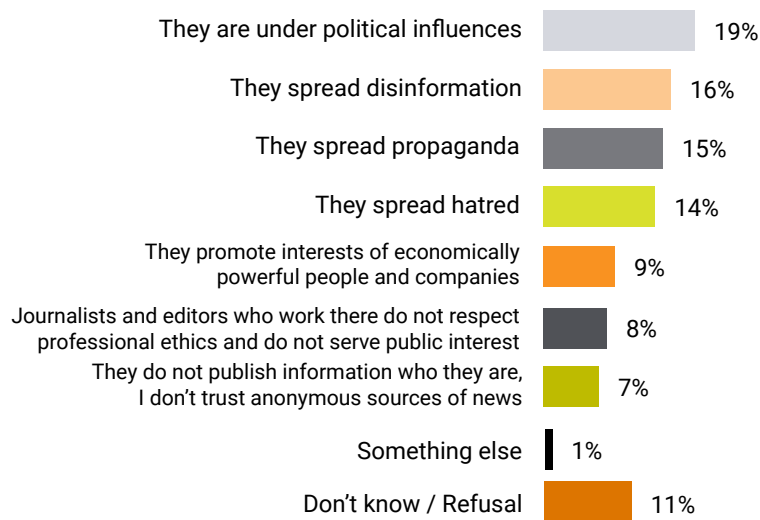
The IPSOS research shows that the main reasons why citizens do not trust certain media are related to spreading disinformation and propaganda and the political influence they are under (47%, 40% and 42%, respectively). In addition, more than a third of citizens do not trust certain media outlets due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

<sup>26</sup> Interviewee 4.

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

<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Interviewee 3.

<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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%).

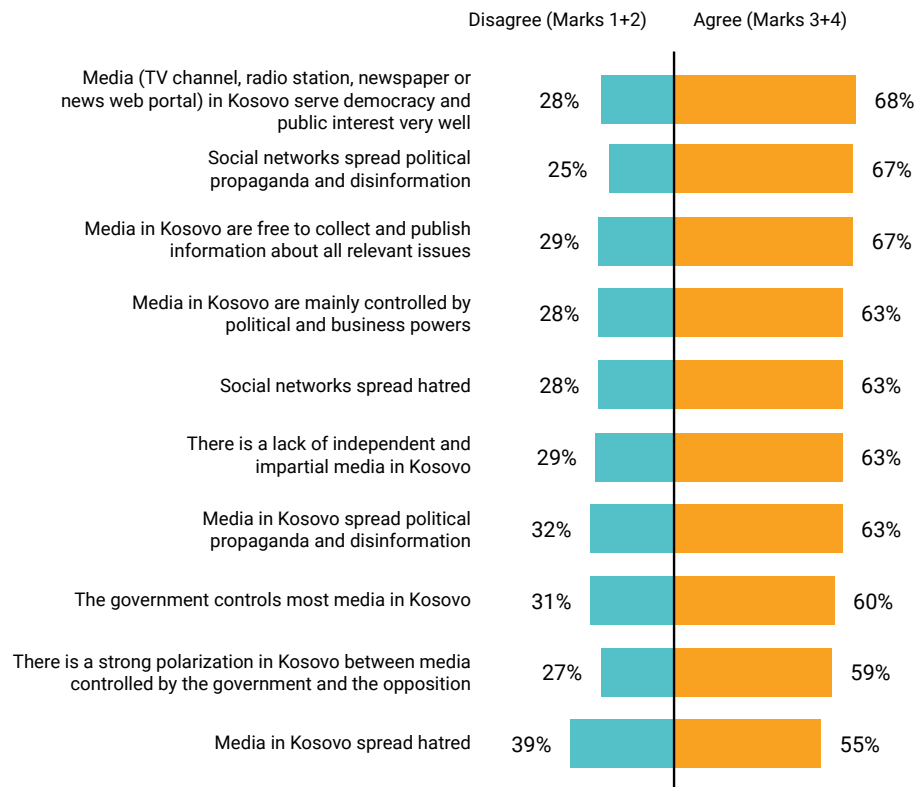
The situation on social networks is perceived similarly: about two thirds think that social networks spread political propaganda and disinformation as well as hatred (67% and 63%, respectively).

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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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.

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<sup>32</sup> The Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Interviewee 5.



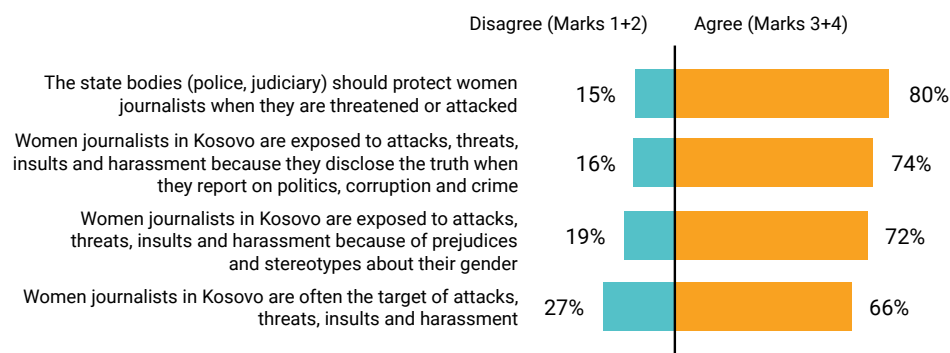
*“The government does not control the media in Kosovo. When I say government, I also think of the people linked to the financial sources that come from public companies distributed for the media, such as Kosovo Telecom, but not the government being a direct controller or censor over the media”, said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

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%).<sup>35</sup>

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



Source: IPSOS, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Interviewee 5.

<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

*“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.<sup>38</sup> 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 research<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup>

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*

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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.<sup>42</sup>*

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 expert<sup>43</sup>. 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.”<sup>44</sup>*

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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.





**MONTENEGRO**

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**STRENGTHENING PUBLIC  
TRUST IN THE MEDIA  
AS A RESPONSE TO  
DISINFORMATION  
AND PROPAGANDA**

*Milica Bogdanović*

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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## STRENGTHENING PUBLIC TRUST IN THE MEDIA AS A RESPONSE TO DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

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# STRENGTHENING PUBLIC TRUST IN THE MEDIA AS A RESPONSE TO DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

*Milica Bogdanović*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Along with the problems of financial sustainability and operating in an unregulated market, one of the serious challenges for the Montenegrin media is the inconsistent application of professional standards. Content in which different opinions of interlocutors are contrasted and which provide the public with a comprehensive overview of an important social or political topic has become a rarity in the Montenegrin media. Aggravating this issue is the lack of adequate self-regulation, which would stimulate media outlets to fully implement the Code of Ethics of Montenegrin journalists.

Although studies analyzing disinformation and hate speech do not recognize the established media as the creators of disinformation, domestic media, due to the lack of capacities, often rely on content created by regional media (Bogdanovic, 2020). Thus, Montenegrin media release incorrect information, failing to fact-check the information they take.

Because they share a common language with the rest of the region, regional media do not only create content for the audience in their own countries but audiences throughout the region, including Montenegro, through the online space. Earlier statistics showed that Serbian tabloids, which local journalists' associations and fact-checking websites recognize as a source of disinformation and hate speech, are among the most read websites in Montenegro (Bogdanovic, 2020). In crisis situations (coronavirus pandemic, elections or the passing of the Religion Law), these media intensify reporting about Montenegro, releasing a series of disinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda, which undoubtedly affects public opinion

During 2020, the South East European Network for Professionalisation of Media (SEENPM) established through the first study that hate speech, disinformation and propaganda are created and released through **media operating in the countries of the region that are read in Montenegro**. The content is then carried by certain Montenegrin online media, thus contributing to the widespread distribution of unprofessional media releases. The content is disseminated through **certain right-leaning Montenegrin online media**

established/edited by individuals recognized as anti-NATO activists and via **pages on social networks** that continuously release insults and hate speech against public figures in Montenegro, with unknown organizations/structures financing them (Bogdanovic, 2020).

The second study showed that these are the main channels through which disinformation, propaganda and narratives containing hate speech are released, regardless of whether the reports are on migrants, journalists, opponents of the authorities or advocates of some other important social issue.

After these analyses provided a clear overview of the media community, due to the important social role the media has in shaping the public opinion, SEENPM decided to examine how citizens perceive the media. The study was intended to establish whether citizens believe they are correctly and fully informed by the media and how strengthening public trust in the media can help raise professional standards and prevent the spreading of disinformation.

Under the Resilience: For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation project, financed by the EU, a public opinion poll was carried out as well as a focus group with journalists and editors. This analysis was carried out based on the findings, providing guidelines for institutions, civil society organizations and the media community in building social resilience to disinformation, hate speech and propaganda.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In cooperation with the Ipsos Strategic Marketing agency, which is present in Montenegro and five other partner countries (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and North Macedonia), public opinion polls were conducted in February and March of this year on a representative sample of respondents. The regional research team formed a list of the ten most important questions, with suggestions from local researchers, and citizens in all the countries answered the same set of questions.

The questions cover three areas: **use of media** (which media serve as the most frequent source of information for citizens – TV, radio, press, online media, social networks, personal contacts, such as family, friends and colleagues), **trust in the media** (do people believe that media provide complete, accurate and balanced information; what type of media is considered reliable – TV, radio, press, online media, social networks, foreign media agencies, media specializing in investigative journalism; what is public confidence in the media based on; how much the public broadcaster Radio and Television of Montenegro is trusted), **standpoints and experiences with the media** (do people agree with the claim that the media serves democracy and the public interest; that the media is under government control; that the media lacks independence and impartiality; that the media spreads political

propaganda, disinformation, hate speech, etc.). The study was carried out in Montenegro between 3 and 7 March 2021, on a representative sample of 1,018 respondents. The data was gathered by using a combined method – phone calls and an online questionnaire.

The results of the public opinion poll were discussed in the focus group with media professionals in Montenegro to better understand its findings and establish a possible course of action to improve public confidence in the media and prevent the spreading of disinformation. To spark a discussion and reflection on the issues we research, we presented to the focus group members, who have many years of experience as journalists and editors, the results of the study as well as the findings of previous analyses on the presence of media and communication practices responsible for spreading disinformation and propaganda in Montenegro and on the narratives containing disinformation and hate speech. We collected their views and made good use of their experience and suggestions for how to improve the current situation in the media community, thus increasing public trust in the media. Seven of the focus group participants are employed by different media in Montenegro. The results of the discussion in the focus group will be presented without stating the names of the participants.

An important aspect of this analysis is the gender-based violence to which female journalists in Montenegro are subjected. Through the public opinion poll, we investigated whether citizens recognize female journalists as targets for insults/threats/harassment/assaults and whether they recognize gender-based violence and which parts of society they deem important in protecting female journalists. Through the focus group, we addressed in more detail how journalists and editors perceive gender-based violence against female journalists and how much that affects their work.

In the following chapters, we will display the results of the public opinion poll and the views of media professionals from Montenegro.

## 3. TRUST IN THE MEDIA

### 3.1. People mostly watch TV

The majority of the Montenegrin population get inform themselves via television. More than three quarters of the respondents (78%) claim that they watch television programmes every day, while television is the primary source of information for almost half the population (43%). Because of this, television stations, especially ones that broadcast nationally, have an additional responsibility to release accurate and complete information and, through professional reporting, prevent disinformation from shaping public opinion.

Social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube) are the second most common source of information in Montenegro. Some 59% of the population follow these media daily, and for one in five citizens (19%), social networks are the primary source of information. Almost a third of the population (28%) never use social networks. Half of the population (57%) follow online media daily. For one in three respondents (30%), online media are the primary source of information, while one in four citizens (25%) never follows online media.

Almost half of the respondents said that they inform themselves daily through conversations with people from their immediate environment (family, friends and colleagues). However, this is the chief source of information for only 4% of them.

Apart from television, other traditional media are not particularly popular among the Montenegrin population. Only one fifth of the respondents (21%) said they listened to the radio every day, while 14% of the population read a newspaper daily. The press is the primary source of information for 2% of the population, while radio is the primary source of information for only 1% of the population. Half of the population never read newspapers or listen to the radio.

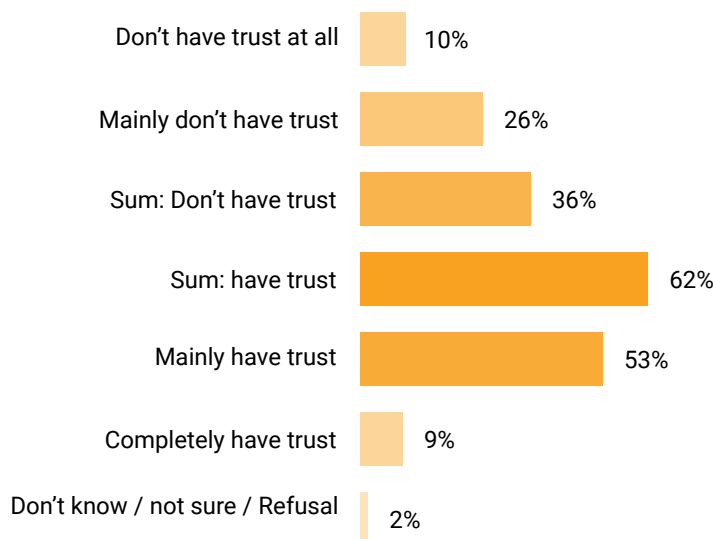
The older population (60+) mostly watch television, while the younger generations (ages 18 to 29) more frequently choose online media and social networks as their preferred source of information. Knowing that online media and social networks are recognized as the channels most frequently used to spread disinformation and propaganda, the younger segment of the population can be more exposed to unprofessional reporting and content. Therefore, civil society institutions and organizations have the additional obligation to initiate educational programmes to enable young people to develop the skills needed to recognize credibility in media content, compared to disinformation.



### 3.2. Most people trust the media

The majority of the Montenegrin population (62%) trust media such as television, radio, newspapers and web portals to release complete and accurate information. In comparison, one third of the population have the opposite opinion (36%). The level of public trust in the media is lower in people who choose to get most of their information through contacts with people from their immediate environment.

Graph 1 - How much do you trust, in general terms, that the media (press, TV, radio, web portals) release complete and accurate information?



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Most journalists and editors participating in the focus group (FG) said that these results were expected.

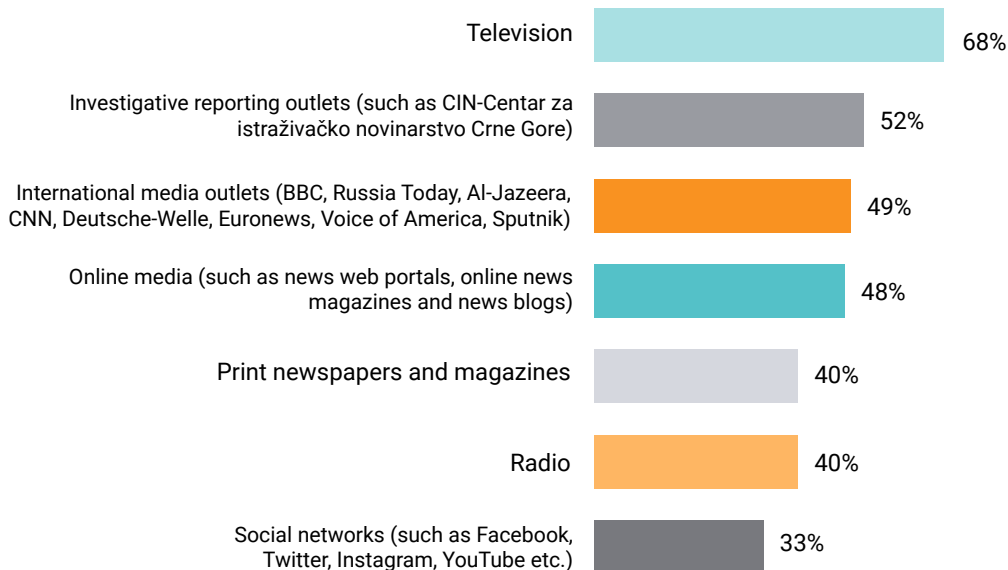
*"I'm glad if that's the case and if people are true to traditional media. Because, regardless of how good or bad they are, they are still the best place to come by information. We know what social networks are like, we know how they work, we know what the potential for manipulation is",* said the FG participant 6.

*"I'm glad that people trust traditional media the most, and that's where I see a chance for traditional media in Montenegro. If they garner the most public trust, that that opportunity should be embraced and capitalized on",* said the FG participant 1.

*“The oversaturation of the public with an abundance of information at unbelievable speed, via the internet and which, for the most part, isn’t fact-checked, leads to traditional media being increasingly valued, which still adhere to the Code of Ethics and fact-check all the information they release to the public”, believes the FG participant 3.*

Most citizens who took part in the public opinion poll (68%) recognize television as a reliable source of information. Around half of the population trust media specializing in investigative journalism (52%) and foreign media agencies (49%) and online media (48%). Also, four in 10 citizens consider radio and print media/magazines reliable sources of information (40% each), while one in three citizens believes that social networks are reliable (33%).

Graph 2 – To what extent do you trust that each of the listed media is a reliable source of information? Sum of “I trust it for the most part” and “I completely trust it”



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The youngest respondents (ages 18 to 29) most often trust foreign media agencies, then online media and radio, while highly educated citizens more often consider foreign media agencies and media specializing in investigative journalism more reliable. On the other hand, foreign media, media specializing in investigative journalism and online media enjoy a far lower level of trust amongst the older population (60+).

Citizens have the least confidence in social networks as reliable sources of information. In total, 45% of them recognize Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube as the least reliable sources of information.

All the focus group participants, who see online media and social networks as the channels that most frequently spread disinformation and propaganda, agree with such evaluation.

*“Large quantities of false information, semi-information and spin originate from Twitter and Facebook. These are all big organizations, with target groups and a schedule for releasing certain information. I think we have a big, much more extensive problem here”,* the FG participant 4 stated.

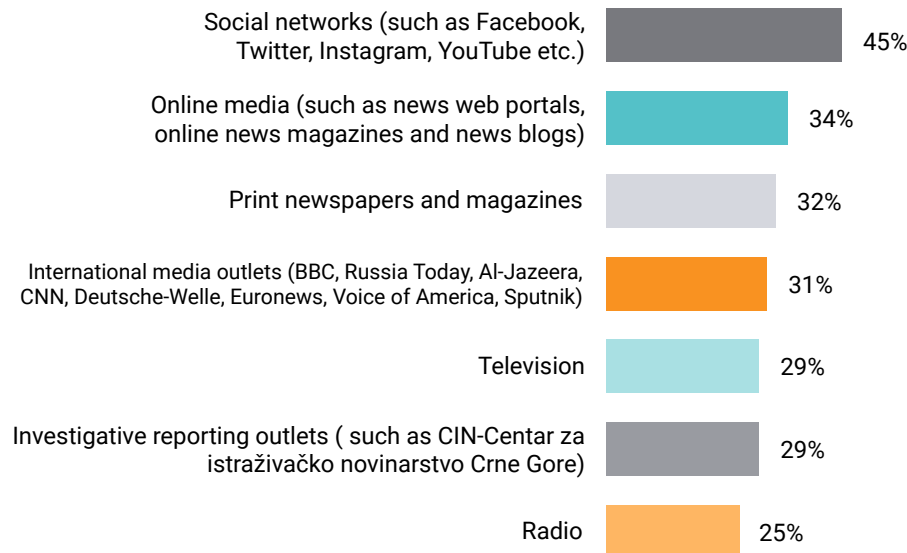
*“Social networks and, in general, communication in the online space are recognized as places where, basically, anything goes; that is to say, nothing is strictly prohibited, at least not in an organized and systematic way and they are actually not legally and formally defined as media, which is why most disinformation, propaganda and hate speech is spread there”,* said the FG participant 3.

Regardless of the majority of respondents in the public opinion poll saying they use online media daily, one in three (34%) does not believe them to be reliable sources of information. The focus group participants also think that the online space lacks resilience to disinformation but they cite the financial challenges they face as the reason for this, which is why they are “on a constant hunt for clicks”.

*“In recent years, the number of clicks has become the most important concern for online media. The more clicks they generate, the more influential they become or the more followers they generate, regardless of the quality. However, there are those media that don't publish disinformation consciously; that is, they do it out of ignorance, laziness, lack of professionalism and time and inability to fact-check some information and, with such practice, in my opinion, professional journalism falls victim”,* said the FG participant 3.

The public opinion poll showed a tendency in people to characterize their favourite media as reliable too. Therefore, those who prefer traditional media more often name television, radio and the press as the leading three most reliable sources of information. On the other hand, respondents leaning towards digital media show more confidence in online media and social networks but also in media specializing in investigative journalism and foreign media agencies. The conclusion can be drawn that the response to disinformation and propaganda should come from both traditional and modern media, thus ensuring accurate and fact-checked information reaching the broadest audience possible and preventing the influence of disinformation on its viewpoints.

Graph 3 – *To what extent do you trust that each of the listed media is a reliable source of information? Sum of answers “I believe it is, for the most part” and “I don’t believe it is at all”.*



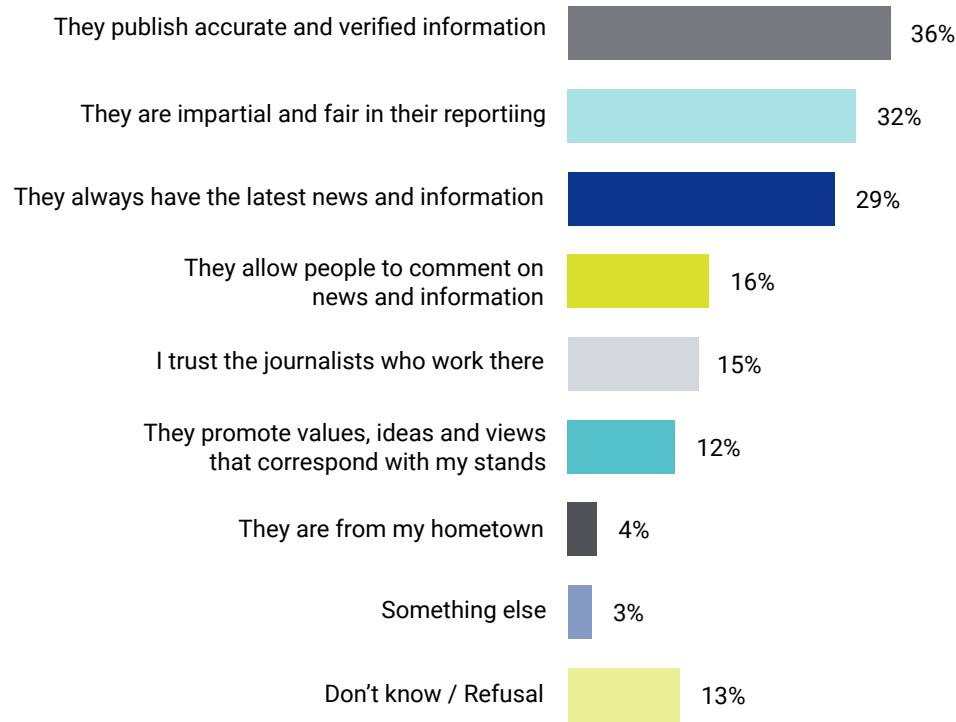
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Observing the main reason, as well as all other stated reasons, for citizens trusting certain media, releasing accurate and fact-checked information comes first (36%), while impartiality in reporting is the second most frequently stated reason (32%). Furthermore, more than a quarter of respondents mentioned the releasing of the latest news and information as one of the reasons for trusting certain media (29%).

A small portion (16%) of respondents stated as the reason for trusting a media outlet that it allows the audience to comment on the news and information it releases, and that they trust journalists who work for that media outlet (15%), which indicates that the work of individual journalists is not the decisive factor in building public trust in a media outlet. Furthermore, a small portion (12%) of respondents trust a media outlet because it promotes values and ideas compatible with their worldview.

The smallest percentage of respondents (4%) stated a media headquarters being in their hometown as the reason for trusting it, which could raise the question of whether citizens recognize the importance and role of local media in reporting on issues of importance to the local community.

Graph 4 – *In terms of media you consider to be the most reliable, what are the main reasons for trusting them?*

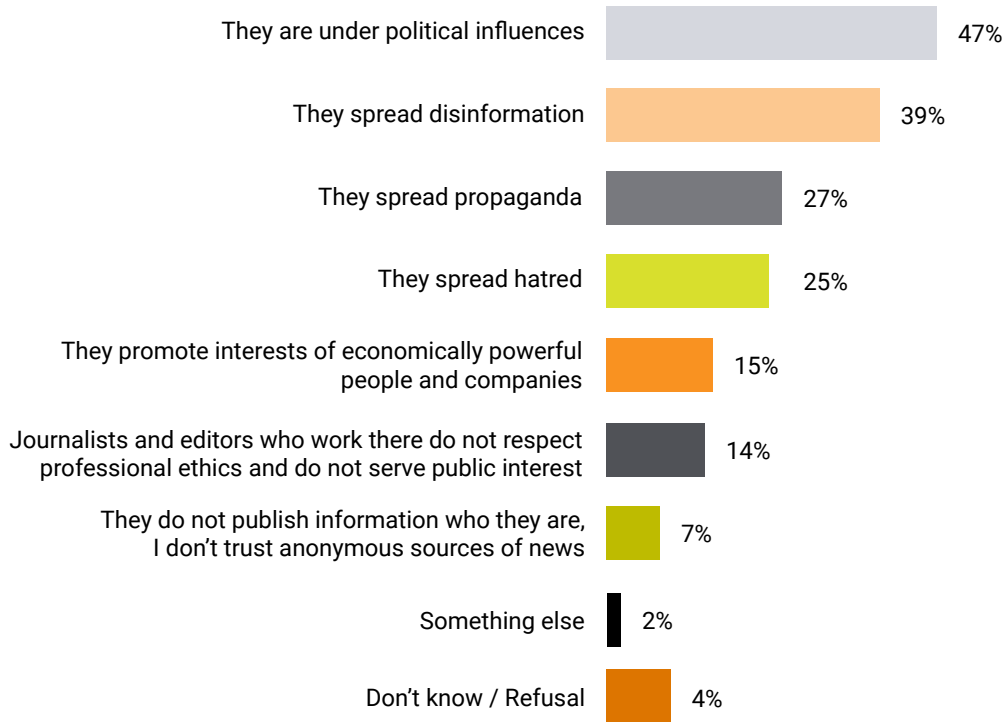


Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The younger population (ages 18 to 29) consider trustworthy media outlets that release the latest news and information, allow people to comment on articles and information they release and release correct and fact-checked information. The older population (60+) most often say they do not know why they trust certain media or that they have confidence in those that release correct and fact-checked information while reporting with impartiality and fairness.

On the other hand, the main reasons respondents do not trust certain media is that they believe that they are subject to political influence (47%) and because they spread disinformation (39%). Otherwise, around a quarter of respondents have no confidence in certain media because they spread propaganda (27%) and hatred (25%). As the reason for distrusting certain media, citizens leaning towards modern media state more often mention their “promotion of the interests of economically powerful figures and companies, because journalists and editors of those media neither adhere to professional code of ethics nor serve the public interest”.

Graph 5 – *Thinking about media outlets you consider the least trustworthy, what are the main reasons for distrusting them?*

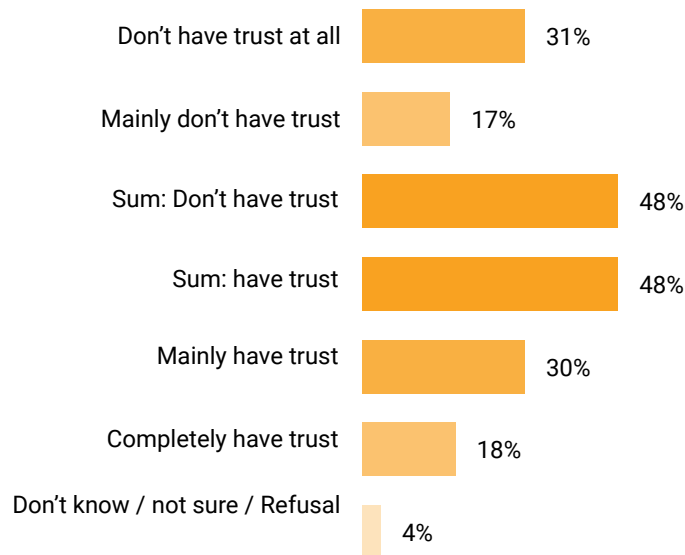


Source: Ipsos, 2021.

### 3.3. Polarization affects the attitude towards the public broadcaster

Opinions are divided when it comes to the Public Broadcaster Radio and Television of Montenegro (RTCG). While 48% of respondents in the public opinion poll think that this media outlet provides accurate, complete and balanced information, 48% do not share their position. This is also confirmed by the finding that one fifth of the respondents stress that RTCG is the outlet they trust the most (18%) while a quarter stress that RTCG is precisely the media that can be least trusted (25%).

Graph 6 – On a scale of 1 to 4, how much do you trust the Public Broadcaster (Radio and Television of Montenegro) as a media outlet that releases accurate and complete information?



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

All focus group participants agree that this is a consequence of the polarization of society. They think that belonging to a certain nationality or political group determines people's attitude towards the Public Broadcaster and the level of trust they have in this outlet.

*"People choose content that is compatible with their viewpoints; that is, they read what they are comfortable with and what they agree with. It is difficult, it seems to me, for people to read things that don't correspond to their opinions. Therefore, they read media they prefer as they know exactly what they will find in them. It has always been the practice in Montenegro that people choose which media to follow based on their political affiliation",* said the FG participant 5.

When establishing the demographic structure of the Montenegrin respondents in this study, their answers on ethnic identity were also taken into account. By crossing this information with their answers to how much they trusted the Public Broadcaster (RTCG) as a media outlet that releases correct and complete information, it is possible to infer that the level of trust also depends on the respondents' ethnic identity. Thus, the level of trust in RTCG is higher among ethnic Montenegrins and Bosniaks.

*"It would be ideal if we could establish what political option is supported by the 48% who trust or don't trust RTCG. Because, if these 48% of 'sovereignists' trusted television until yesterday, now they will not trust it; and the other 48%—if there are changes in the RTCG management structure, and there probably will be—will trust this media. So, this is a prime example of the division we're talking about, which I talked about earlier and which I'm still talking about, the division of Montenegrin society into 'pro' and 'contra'",* thinks the FG participant 6.

*"Everything that's happening in Montenegro reflects on the Public Broadcaster and the trust the public places in this outlet",* believes the FG participant 1.

*"You'll have a difficult time convincing a supporter of the Democratic Front, even if the Public Broadcaster was the most professional media, that it is the best. In any previous poll, those supporting this political option will say that Public Broadcaster is the worst and that it wasn't providing the most objective information. On the other hand, I think that people supporting the former authorities will believe that the Public Broadcaster is good, regardless of everything",* said the FG participant 2.

*"RTCG should enjoy the most public trust because it's a public broadcaster. That's why, to me, a poll showing an equal degree of public trust and distrust in this outlet is a cause for concern. This indicates that certain professional standards weren't, in actuality, adhered to. My concern is even bigger if, instead of the Public Broadcaster, the public places most trust in a private media outlet with far fewer resources. I mean, props to them, but I am sorry to say that the Public Broadcaster isn't like that",* said the FG participant 3.

Some of the focus group participants emphasized that opposing views of politicians, who talk about this outlet as the "propaganda tool of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS)" or a "flawless professional media", also fuel the public division about RTCG.

Members of the focus group agreed that efforts must be made to improve trust in the Public Broadcaster by having this outlet address all the problems in society.



*“The Public Broadcaster must be addressing all the problems in society, from a critical point of view, by asking questions and by not having any taboo topics or interlocutors, by uncompromisingly adhering to the Code of Ethics”,* thinks the FG participant 3.

### 3.4. Citizens vs journalists – prominent negative perception

Respondents in our public opinion poll expressed a prominently negative attitude towards the media. Four out of five respondents (82%) think that there are no independent and unbiased media outlets in Montenegro and that the Montenegrin media is controlled by the political and economic centres of power (81%).

Journalists and editors, focus group participants, reject these claims and consider them groundless.

*“People usually remember your mistakes or when you fail to adhere to the principles of professionalism and forget all the things you do well every day”,* thinks the FG participant 7.

*“A basic understanding of professional journalism doesn’t exist. In some cases, articles are even published that come from an interest group and are treated and presented as products of investigative journalism. I think this is one of the reasons why outlets aren’t addressing issues of general public interest and, which, ultimately, would result in a positive public perception of the media”,* said the FG participant 3.

*“Credibility is established over a long period, but it only takes one false step to lose it. If someone perceives our work as unprofessional, that we spread propaganda, then we have to ask ourselves why that is. Are we really spreading propaganda, representing someone’s political or business interests, or something else? Or perhaps it is the consequence of the media in Montenegro behaving like cats in a bag. I have a feeling that when something bad happens to a media outlet here, many enjoy their predicament”,* said the FG participant 6.

The fact that the majority of respondents in the public opinion poll believe that media outlets are spreading political propaganda and disinformation (76%) and that there is a clear division between outlets controlled by the Government and those controlled by the opposition (73%) sounds “impossible” to the journalists and editors participating in the focus group.

*“How is it possible to trust the media while simultaneously considering them responsible for spreading propaganda and disinformation? It’s as if someone asked you if you trust the media and you say ‘I don’t’, and when they ask you if you have a TV set or access to the internet, you say ‘I don’t’. It’s simply a groundless answer”,* thinks the FG participant 2.

*“It’s a fact that political propaganda is being spread and that much the people have got right. I disagree, however, with what they say about disinformation and propaganda. But, if such a high percentage of citizens thinks so, then it’s quite alarming and very problematic”,* thinks the FG participant 6.

Citizens included in the public opinion poll have a distinctly negative attitude towards social networks as well. Seven out of ten respondents (71%) believe that political propaganda and disinformation are spread on social networks, while two thirds of them think that social networks spread hate (65%). Almost the same number of citizens think that the media are spreading hate.

Half of the respondents (57%) think that the media can freely gather and release information on all important social issues, while 40% have the opposite opinion. Almost half of the respondents (54%) agree with the claim that the Government controls most of the media in Montenegro, while one in three people (35%) doesn’t share that opinion.

The public is also divided when it comes to the contribution of the media to democracy. Almost half of the citizens (49%) think that the media in Montenegro serves democracy and the public interest very well, while almost the same percentage (46%) think the opposite. People who mostly trust the media are prone to believe that the media in Montenegro is free and that it serves democracy and the public interest very well.

Some of the focus group participants see the reason for the negative public perception of the media in a series of crisis situations that took place in Montenegro during 2020 and up to the beginning of 2021 (from the events around the passing of the Religion Law and elections to the coronavirus pandemic), which also impacted the quality of media reporting.

*“Media outlets mobilized on a multitude of issues and put themselves in the service of different groups. Many political events that took place, then the pandemic and that’s what most of the manipulation and propaganda focused on, that could be the reason for such a result”,* said the FG participant 6.

*“We all seem to forget that it’s the citizens and the public whose best interest we should serve. We’re not supposed to be representing anyone individually or our own interests. It is up to me, as an individual, to decide whether I will or will not do something, whether I will stand behind something or not. I mean, the bottom line is, I know it’s very difficult, each and every one of us has to win that small battle and then move on or to simply make a break and say ‘OK, I will not do this and I will look for work somewhere else’”,* said the FG participant 1.

Participants in the focus group agree that continuous efforts have to be made to improve the public perception of the media and that the media and journalists themselves have a significant role to play in this.

*“It’s my impression, unfortunately, that there is a great number of those citizens who approach the media non-selectively and don’t know what they will get after clicking on certain content. No matter how much we journalists try to create quality, unbiased and accurate content, citizens have to be the ones to recognize it, which is why we need to make them media literate”,* stated the FG participant 1.

*“Representing a big problem in improving the public perception of the media is the fact that the majority of people are prepared to turn a blind eye to a lie reported by their favourite media outlet. Most people are more likely to believe a tweet or a Facebook status than an article signed by a journalist, and this is where our problem lies”,* said the FG participant 6.

*“We need media that are independent of their owners. I know that’s not easy to achieve and that the price to pay is high, but those who had to choose between freedom and safety and chose safety don’t deserve either. Surviving in Montenegro on this principle is exceptionally difficult, but there’s no other way. A wasteland remained and everything else will turn bad as well”,* thinks the FG participant 7.

*“But the most important thing is that you know you’re right, that you’re doing the best you can and know how and, of course, that you’re not defaming anyone. It means you’re doing your job in the public interest, in the best way possible. But you have to be committed to that and that’s what people will notice. I wouldn’t say this is how things are done in most Montenegrin media, unfortunately”,* continues the FG participant 7.

*“I think that citizens are entitled to be professionally informed and that they have the right to know all the facts. I think that platforms such as Raskrinkavanje.me and similar initiatives can help us uncover what some media are really like and use that knowledge to make ourselves better”,* said the FG participant 3.

However, despite the critical role that fact-checking platforms play, most respondents in our public opinion poll (74%) are unaware that such platforms exist in Montenegro. One in five citizens (19%) has heard about platforms such as Raskrinkavanje, while only 6% of them follow their releases. Those who follow these platforms are, for the most part, highly educated citizens leaning towards these media. That is why the fight against disinformation with the power to shape public opinion must be fought in parallel on different fronts and through those media with the widest reach.

The focus group participants see the solution for suppressing disinformation

and propaganda in both the education of journalists and media workers and the education of citizens through the promotion of media literacy.

*“There’s obviously a lack of will among decision-makers both those in the previous authorities and those there currently to address the problem of propaganda. It is there that I see an important role for us, people working in the media community, to commit ourselves to improve the media literacy of our people so that they are able to discern between propaganda and quality content independently”,* thinks the FG participant 1.

*“Our internal capacities and awareness of ethical reporting are what matter not only for us journalists but for citizens too, which is achieved precisely with media literacy”,* said the FG participant 3.

*“Additional education of all participants in the media industry is needed to compensate for the pressure exerted by politics on the media but also by other centres of power, primarily the business sector”,* thinks the FG participant 6.

*“I think that journalists have a special obligation and duty to be careful but also transparent in their work if they want to keep the public’s trust”,* said the FG participant 4.

### 3.5. Viewpoints on the protection of female journalists are encouraging

The majority of respondents in our public opinion poll expressed the opinion that the position of female journalists in Montenegro is distinctly unfavourable. Four in five respondents (81%) believe that female journalists are frequent targets for attacks, threats, insults and harassment. Also, almost three quarters of citizens (73%) agree that attacks, threats, insults and harassment of female journalists are a consequence of gender prejudice and stereotypes, while 87% of them think that the attacks were the consequence of their work on uncovering the truth and reporting on politics, corruption and crime.

Participants in the focus group think such viewpoints are encouraging.

*“This shows that we are not predominantly a patriarchal society after all, and that citizens can recognize when female journalists are the victims of insults and attacks”,* thinks the FG participant 1.

During the discussion, the question was raised of sanctions for those directing insults and profanity at female journalists and who harass them or physically attack them. Some of the participants in the focus group indicated that efforts had to be made to improve the mechanisms for protecting female journalists from different forms of harassment and attacks, which are especially prominent on social networks.

*“As journalists, we have to be careful about who we engage in conversation with so that the media space is made available to those who are recognized as not being sensitized and prone to gender-based violence and making sexist remarks against female journalists”*, thinks the FG participant 1.

They mention as a particular problem the fact that narratives are spread throughout the online space which contain disinformation, propaganda and insulting speech that refers to them and their colleagues. Our earlier study showed that the online reporting about journalists is dominated by the narrative of them being “the creators of fake news”, “victims of state repression”, “mercenaries working for third parties (Serbia, Russia, ANB, etc.), “enemies of the state” ... (Bogdanović, 2020).

Participants in the focus group claim that such messages don't affect their work directly or discourage them; however, they do notice that they often have a political connotation and call their impartiality into question.

*“If I know I have done something right and that I have presented correct information, I'm always ready to take pride in that and try my standpoints against opposing ones. People hide behind false identities online and on social networks and then insult journalists and their work. I don't think that any attention should be wasted on that”*, thinks the FG participant 4.

*“If it's obvious that a commentator is a bot, someone hiding behind a fake user name, I pay no attention to that. Such messages of hate don't concern me, nor speculation on who I work for, who pays me and whether I dare to write something about someone or not”*, thinks the FG participant 1.

Some focus group participants agree that messages referring to journalists' work often have a political context.

*“Messages from readers on web portals are most frequently insults and accusations related to journalists' political affiliation or religion, which is how we have been labelled everything from CIA collaborators, Liberal Alliance of Montenegro supporters, and DPS supporters to ustasas and chetniks...”*, explains the FG participant 6.

The social environment in which violence is considered an acceptable course of action, as some of the focus group participants point to, can lead to someone becoming bold enough to attack a journalist on the street.

*“I think that the biggest problem occurs when inflammatory comments and rhetoric are heard in society, in public, directed against journalists. When such changes occur, political, health, economic, due to someone’s interests, or otherwise, an atmosphere is created in which the lynching of all those writing, doing their job professionally, is called for and I’m sure that such an atmosphere affects both journalists and media”,* said the FG participant 3.

Participants in the focus group and respondents in the public opinion poll (96%) are almost unanimous in saying that the state authorities (police, judiciary) should protect female journalists if they are threatened or under attack (96%).

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Complex social events, such as the coronavirus epidemic, elections and change of power in Montenegro, are reflected in the work of the media and the quality of their reporting. The challenges the media were facing earlier, such as financial sustainability, the unregulated media market and lack of adequate self-regulation, became especially pronounced during these crises.

Although new media regulations have been adopted, the civil sector and international community indicate that there are still disputable legal provisions. There is still no strategic approach to the development of the media nor has the issue of online media been fully regulated. There is a continuous expansion of online media that do not adhere to professional standards and which, along with regional media, represent the main channels for spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda.

Social networks not contributing to the promotion of professional journalism but enabling additional spreading of disinformation and conspiracy theories play a great role. All this affects the level of public trust in the media and people's perception of the media as professional social actors who deliver correct and complete information based on which they can make correct decisions.

The public opinion poll carried out by the Ipsos agency for the purposes of this analysis shows that the majority of respondents claim they trust the media. The majority of them follow television news daily and believe that this is the medium releasing correct and complete information. More than half of respondents use online media and social networks daily but there is distinct distrust for social media as a reliable source of information.

Opinions are divided when it comes to trusting the Public Broadcaster. The same percentage (48%) of respondents believe that this media outlet is delivering correct and complete information as those who have the opposite opinion. Journalists and editors from different Montenegrin media to whom we presented the results of the public opinion poll and who discussed them in the focus group said that such positions are a consequence of the general division in Montenegrin society and that national or political identity significantly influence people's views and their perception of the RTCG. On the whole, they agree that it is necessary to work on improving public trust in the Public Broadcaster to make it a more professional outlet that people will have most trust in.

Journalists and editors agree that the fact that people trust traditional media the most is encouraging and represents a chance for Montenegrin media, especially national television stations, to create professional content and adhere to standards. The influence on public opinion of those media spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories could be reduced by strengthening public trust in the traditional media.



Although most respondents generally trust the media and consider that media outlets release correct and reliable information, they also expressed distinctly negative standpoints on the media. Most of the respondents think that media does not contribute to the development of democracy or serve the public interest. They also believe that media outlets spread hatred, disinformation and political propaganda and that they are neither independent nor impartial. Journalists and editors, participants in our focus group, think that such standpoints expressed by the people are, on the one hand, contradictory, and, on the other, concerning because they call into question the efforts that journalists and media are making, in adverse conditions, to do their job in the best way possible.

Focus group participants agree that there is a significant amount of room for improving the work of the Montenegrin media and adherence to professional standards as preconditions for strengthening public trust in the media. However, they also think that, along with professional media, society also needs media literate citizens, who can distinguish credible media from those that aren't. Therefore, they perceive both journalists and editors as important actors in promoting media literacy and developing critical thinking among the population.



## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve public trust in the media and thus curb the spreading of disinformation and propaganda, the Montenegro Media Institute, based on this and the previous two analyses, prepared a set of recommendations for decision-makers, the media community and the civic sector:

- During 2021, the Government should put together a Media Strategy, which would set out the directions for the development of the media and improvement of the working environment for journalists, as well as an accompanying Action Plan. To produce a general societal response to the spreading of disinformation and propaganda, the Government must include the Media Literacy Strategy and the accompanying action plan in its 2021 Work Programme. The Media Literacy Strategy represents a broader document that encompasses issues related to the media and online safety, radicalization in the public space and the study of media literacy in the school system. All interested social stakeholders must take part in developing both strategies.
- Institutions in charge of implementing the Law on Media must take the necessary steps to enable the most efficient possible implementation of new regulations and resolve possible dilemmas (registration of online media, the reaction in the case of failure to register, transparency of the media, etc.)
- Institutions in charge of implementing the Law on Media should provide for transparency in the work of the Media Pluralism Fund and precisely regulate the issue of financing self-regulation from public funds to prevent any undue influence on media and self-regulatory bodies.
- In the long term, the divided media community should form a common self-regulatory body, which would indicate the examples of spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda and promote professional standards.
- Online media should take concrete steps to improve comment moderation systems on their websites and social networks, thus curbing the spreading of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda in readers' comments.
- Professional associations and professional media organizations should help in strengthening the capacities of the media for moderating comments, recognizing propaganda and fact-checking information.
- In cooperation with the representatives of institutions, the established media, especially national television stations, should create professional and educational content that would serve as an adequate response to the spreading of disinformation and conspiracy theories about issues related to public health.

- With the support of foreign donors, professional associations and professional media organizations should help strengthen the capacities of the media for moderating comments, recognizing propaganda and fact-checking information.
- Local media analysts and fact-checking platforms should continue to contribute to the fight against disinformation and propaganda and strengthen their resources so that they can engage in more intensive monitoring and analysis of media content in Montenegro. To improve their visibility and influence, they should consider cooperating with the established media, first and foremost television stations with national frequency, which people watch the most often and which they trust.
- Civic society organizations (CSO) should continue activities in promoting media literacy, with an emphasis on the education system. CSOs should continue advocating the introduction of media literacy as a compulsory subject in all secondary schools in Montenegro. CSOs should initiate the studying of media literacy as an additional subject in primary schools.

CSOs should continue developing education programmes in media literacy for the younger population, who use online media and social networks the most, as well as for the more mature population, who usually get their information from traditional media. The synergy of CSOs and traditional media is the path towards improving media literacy and restoring public trust in the media.

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Participants in the focus group discussion, on 30 March 2021, via Zoom:

Focus group participant 1 – journalist from a print media outlet (female).

Focus group participant 2 – editor of an online media outlet (female).

Focus group participant 3 – journalist from a national television station (female).

Focus group participant 4 – news agency editor (male).

Focus group participant 5 – journalist from a weekly (male).

Focus group participant 6 – local media editor (male).

Focus group participant 7 – non-profit online media editor (male).

## About the author

Milica Bogdanović graduated from the Department of Journalism of the Faculty of Political Science in Podgorica. She gained professional experience in the media and the NGO sector. She produced this study as a researcher of the Montenegrin Media Institute.



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**PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM  
AND MEDIA LITERATE PUBLIC  
– Crucial for increasing  
trust in media**

*Vesna Nikodinoska*

## **RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation**

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## **PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM AND MEDIA LITERATE PUBLIC – Crucial for increasing trust in media**

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# PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM AND MEDIA LITERATE PUBLIC – Crucial for increasing trust in media

*Vesna Nikodinoska*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For years, the media community has pointed to the scarce media market in North Macedonia overburdened with a large number of media outlets as one of the main reasons for maintaining political and clientelistic relations between media outlets and centres of power that impede the freedom and independence of the media. Although the political climate has relaxed since 2016, media outlets continue to be financially dependent on political and business structures, which reflects in editorial policies, self-censorship and lack of pluralism in the programmes.<sup>1</sup>

The complex health and political situation during 2020 increased disinformation and hate narratives in media reporting. These phenomena additionally contributed to derogation from the professional and ethical standards, a practice more notable in online media, as noted in the reports of media CSOs.<sup>2</sup> The number of threats, verbal attacks and insults directed at journalists and media increased, especially on social media. The threats against media outlets have been noticed even by senior government officials.<sup>3</sup> All these served to reinforce the well-entrenched culture of impunity,<sup>4</sup> which the media community has been strongly opposing for years, appealing to relevant institutions for more determined action in the protection of journalists and media freedoms.

Considering the fact that the internet, as a source of information, has drawn level with television in terms of frequency of use (76%), the growing trends of disinformation and hate speech generally make it more difficult for citizens

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1 Kalinski, V. (2021). "Interview with Mladen Cadikovski, president of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia". [online] Radio Slobodna Evropa, May 2 2012. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/31230360.html>

2 Nikodinoska, V. (2020). "The Political and Economic basis of Media and Communication Models Spreading Disinformation and Hate Speech". Skopje: MIM. Available at: <https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/1231/Resilience-research-publication-1-MK-ENG.pdf>

3 Reporters without Borders. (2021). "Reporters without Borders' Report 2021". Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/north-macedonia>

4 *Ibid.*

to access information of public interest.<sup>5</sup> On the other side, the citizens lack the skills and knowledge to recognize and critically analyze professional and high-quality information from disinformation and propaganda.<sup>6</sup>

The first research conducted as part of the “Resilience – For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation” project showed that part of the online media in North Macedonia most commonly breach the professional standards, while hate speech is mostly present on the social networks.<sup>7</sup> Part of the online media maintain clientelistic relations with political and business centres of power, and often produce or spread disinformation and propaganda in a coordinated manner. In addition, for politically or ethnically motivated reasons, different groups and influential persons on social networks produce and spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech.

The second research study pointed out specific cases of disinformation and hate narratives produced and spread by some online media outlets, social media groups usually leaning towards the right, and prominent public figures. Hate narratives were directed towards political opponents, ethnic and religious groups and female journalists, which was a notable trend in 2020.<sup>8</sup> The current research aims to explore what influences citizens’ trust in the media, how they recognize and value professional media and journalism in terms of serving the public interest, media freedoms and media independence, as well as their perceptions of whether the media spread hatred, disinformation and propaganda. It also explores the media-gender dimension as a horizontal issue, looking into citizens’ attitudes to the reasons female journalists are the targets of attacks and the institutional mechanisms for their protection.

This is the third research study within the regional SEENPM project “Resilience – For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation” financed by the European Union. It consists of two parts: a public opinion poll on media trust and media-gender issues in the Western Balkans, and a focus group with journalists and editors, both conducted during February–March 2021.

After explaining the methodology, the analysis at the beginning presents the opinions of editors and journalists who participated in the focus group on hate and propaganda models and hate narratives. In the following chapters, the analysis will explain the findings of the opinion poll which are supplemented with the comments of the editors and journalists who took part in the focus group. At the end, the main points and messages will be summarized in conclusions and recommendations.

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5 AVMS. (2020). “Utvrdvanje na vlijaniето na novite mediumi vrz formiranjeto na javnoto misljenje i vrz robotenjeto na tradicionalnite mediumi”. Skopje: AVMS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2W7T1c3>. Pg. 7-8.

6 AVMS. (2019). “Mapping the levels of media literacy in North Macedonia among population 16+”. Skopje: AVMS. Available at: <https://mediumskapismenost.mk/istrazuvanje-na-avmu-2019/>

7 Nikodinoska, V. (2020). “The Political and Economic basis of Media and Communication Models Spreading Disinformation and Hate Speech”. Skopje: MIM. Available at: <https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/1231/Resilience-research-publication-1-MK-ENG.pdf>. Pg. 7-8.

8 Nikodinoska, V. and Dimeski, J. (2021). “Hate Narratives and Disinformation in Online Media and on Social Networks”. Skopje: MIM. Available at: <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Resilience-research-publication-2-N-Macedonia-English.pdf>

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The opinion poll<sup>9</sup> was conducted by the research agency Ipsos Strategic Marketing in six countries that are part of the SEENPM project: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, during February–March 2021. The questionnaire for the opinion poll was prepared in consultations with the project research team. The sample size in North Macedonia was 1002 respondents, while the data were collected by using a mixed method (telephone and online) in the period between 1–15 March 2021.

The questionnaire consists of three groups of questions that refer to: 1) Media use of news; 2) Trust in the media and 3) Citizens' attitudes and experiences with the media. The first group of questions explores the frequency of use of information and news sources by citizens about political and social events, as well as their main sources of information. The second topic examines trust and distrust in different media types when it comes to reporting fully, accurately and fairly and the reasons for trust and distrust in media, including the public service broadcaster. The third group of questions tackles citizens' opinions about media serving the public interest, media freedom and media independence, as well as the media's role in spreading hatred, propaganda and disinformation. This topic also covers media-gender issues, such as citizens' perceptions of attacks, threats, insults and harassment of female journalists, the reasons for attacks and the role of the institutions for their protection.

After the opinion poll, a focus group was organized giving journalists and editors the opportunity to comment on the findings of the polls and give their opinions on the related questions. In North Macedonia, it took place on 2 April 2021 and brought together nine participants from professional media outlets, traditional and online. The focus group participants discussed the findings of the opinion poll and gave their proposals for improving the situation in the different segments the questions referred to. Participation in the focus group was anonymous and, in the analysis, the participants are presented in numerical order as they took part in the discussion.

The findings of the opinion poll and the focus group participants' comments are presented in a complementary manner in the analysis.

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<sup>9</sup> Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021.

### 3. OPINIONS OF THE EDITORS AND JOURNALISTS ON HATE AND PROPAGANDA

#### 3.1. Editors and journalists on propagandistic media and communication models

The previous research showed that the reasons behind producing and spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda through the media most often lie in their connection with the political and business centres of power.<sup>10</sup> In 2020, the largest political parties, VMRO-DPMNE and the SDSM, maintained close connections with some news information portals, so they often used them to spread politically coloured texts or manipulations.<sup>11</sup>

The focus group participants agree that the internet portals generate the hate and propagandistic narratives from the political parties.

*“The entire narrative at these portals comes from the political parties. They will use their platforms for propaganda until we tell them they should stop... These portals gain readership because they are shared by political ‘bots’. It’s difficult to fight against them with professionalism, unless there is political will for that”,* says FG Participant 4.

Although some online media outlets breached professional standards, they had high rankings and were successful companies in terms of operating income in 2018.<sup>12</sup> The analyses point to existence of “politically directed advertising” which refers to some portals that do not have high readership, and have non-transparent ownership but still receive advertisements from local companies, municipalities or public companies. Advertisers affiliated with political parties allocate funds on such portals, which “calls into question the professional journalism [...] and create unfair competition for those who work professionally and raise funds from advertising based on readership”.<sup>13</sup>

*“A big part of the media still depends on money other than revenues coming from the market, the advertising, the clients or the public. This is the main problem – all of them that are financed in that way are part of that propaganda machinery. On the other side, the problem is our profession, the associations, the organizations that consider and legitimize those media and people that work in them as journalists, while it is clear for all of us that that has nothing to do with journalism”,* says FG Participant 1.

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10 AVMS. (2020). “Utvrduvanje na vlijanieto na novite mediumi vrz formiranjeto na javnoto misljenje i vrz rabotenjeto na tradicionalnite mediumi”. Skopje: AVMS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2W7T1c3>. Pg. 37.

11 Ibid.

12 AVMS. (2020). “Utvrduvanje na vlijanieto na novite mediumi vrz formiranjeto na javnoto misljenje i vrz rabotenjeto na tradicionalnite mediumi”. Skopje: AVMS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3emvH0G>

13 Ibid. Pg. 37.

Another problem stressed by the focus group participants is that the citizens do not differentiate between professional media and other subjects in the digital sphere that produce and spread information via social networks, such as bloggers, influencers, public personalities or ordinary citizens. In this way, those that are not professional media outlets can influence and reach a wide audience through social media and various advocacy campaigns, or can even spread fear and hysteria.

*“You cannot explain to the people what is a media outlet and what is not. They rarely discern that difference. At the same time, the traditional media are forced to fight with the unfair competition on the expense of professional standards”,* comments FG Participant 2.

The focus group participants also find it concerning that the propagandistic media that disseminate propagandistic narratives influence the general image of the media and citizens’ trust in the media.

*“[...] The image of journalism and the media is that they should always belong to a certain political or business group... This is certainly not true, there are professionals and media outlets among us who stick to professional work, no matter the editorial policy,”* says FG Participant 3.

### 3.2. Editors and journalists on hate narratives in the media and communication models

The pandemic crisis and the parliamentary elections in North Macedonia in 2020 created fertile ground for the escalation of information chaos and increased the spread of disinformation and hate speech, especially evident in the online sphere. The previous research showed that hate narratives identified in media and communication models were mostly related to political opponents, ethnic and religious groups and journalists, while migrants have not been a common target as noticed before 2017.<sup>14</sup>

Hate and disinformation narratives against political opponents have been triggered by strong nationalistic and identity issues constructed by centres of power and then perpetuated and reinforced by supporting media outlets during 2020.<sup>15</sup> The number of threats, insults and attacks on journalists and media professionals, especially on social networks, increased in 2020. Institutions such as the Public Prosecutors’ Office and the Ministry of the Interior are often pointed to by the media community for a lack of active engagement in cases which involve attacks on journalists.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Nikodinoska, V. and Dimeski, J. (2021). “Hate Narratives and Disinformation in Online Media and on Social Networks”. Skopje: MIM. Available at: <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Resilience-research-publication-2-N-Macedonia-English.pdf>

15 Ibid. Pg. 20.

16 AJM. (2021). “Dramaticen porast na napadi novinarite - barame itni resenija”. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3nKvz7>

One focus group participant explains that some journalists no longer report such attacks since *“there is no political will or will of the institutions to solve such cases.”*

*“There is insufficient awareness among the institutions on this issue. To improve the situation, the sanctions for such hateful narratives must be increased. In that way, the journalists will report more often”,* says FG Participant 3.

The research showed that frequent narratives used in certain professional media outlets and on social networks relate to journalists, alleging are that they are liars, foreign mercenaries, write for money and they should be eliminated.

*“The claims that all journalists are corrupt and they are not working properly, influence the degradation of the profession in general. Therefore, fewer and fewer young people choose journalism as their profession”,* says FG Participant 2.

More than half of the journalists and media workers who were the targets of attacks and threats in 2020 were women.<sup>17</sup> The focus group participants have noticed the growing trend of attacks on female journalists, especially those who are publicly notable:

*“I, personally, was insulted on many occasions .... The OSCE’s recommendation was to report it to the institutions. I reported it to Facebook, but that Facebook group still exists. That space is suffocated with disgusting things and instructed largely by the centres of power and political parties. That is a reason why trust in the media is falling,”* says FG Participant 6.

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17 TV 24. (2020). “Sekulovski: Vo 2020 godina ima 14 napadi vrz novinari, poveke od polovina se vrz zeni novinarki”, Studio 10, TV 24, December 2020. Available at: <https://www.24.mk/details/sekulovski-vo-2020-godina-ima-14-napadi-vrz-novinari-povekje-od-polovina-se-vrz-zheni-novinarki>.

## 4. MEDIA USAGE FOR NEWS

### 4.1. Television is the most common source of information

Television remains the most common source used by the citizens in North Macedonia for gathering information about political and social events,<sup>18</sup> while social networks are the second most commonly consumed news source, the Ipsos Strategic Marketing opinion poll results show.<sup>19</sup> These trends have been noticed in other research conducted in the country in the last four years, and have been increasing in favour of social media.<sup>20</sup>

Television is the most commonly used source of information on a daily basis for 75% of the interviewed citizens. It is also the main source of information for more than half of the respondents (52%).

The second most commonly used source of information for the population (18+) on a daily basis are social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) which are used by 54% of respondents, while 29% of them said they never use this source. Social networks are the main source of information for a quarter of citizens (25%).

One third of the citizens (34%) use news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs every day as most common source of information, while 36% never use them. This is the main source of information for only 12% of the citizens.

In total, 29% of citizens indicated personal contacts, such as family, friends or colleagues, as the most commonly used source of information on a daily basis, but only 6% use them as their main source of information.

According to the results of the opinion poll, other traditional media are far behind the figures for television and social networks, with only 7.3% of citizens saying they read the news in printed newspapers and magazines every day and 16% answering that they listen to the radio. Two thirds of the respondents (66%) said they never read print newspapers/magazines, while 58% never listen to radio. Some Macedonian language dailies stopped publishing their hard copy editions or reduced their circulation in 2020, due to the pandemic crisis, which additionally reduced the circulation of newspapers and the overall readership.

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18 Stopdezinformacii. (2020). "Se poveke se informirame onlajn, no se pomalku proveruvame od sto se informirame", [online] Stop dezinformacii, October 2020. Skopje: IKS. Available at: <https://stopdezinformacii.mk/2020/10/19/se-pove%20ce-se-informirame-onla%20n-no-se-pomalku-proveruvame-od-shto-se-informirame/>

19 Public Opinion Poll on Media Trust and Media-Gender Issues in the Western Balkans, prepared for SEENPM, March 2021.

20 Ibid.



The choice of information sources largely depends on demographic characteristics, especially age. The findings showed that people aged 60 and over more often watch TV on a daily basis (91%) than those aged 18–29 years (62%).

However, social networks are the primary source of information among the younger population aged 18–29 and 30–44, with 79% and 71% of them using them daily. Older adults use social networks less – the proportion drops to 47% in the 45–59 age group and even more in the 60 and over age group – 18%.

Citizens aged 18–29 get their news daily through online media more often (43%) than those aged 60 and over (13%).

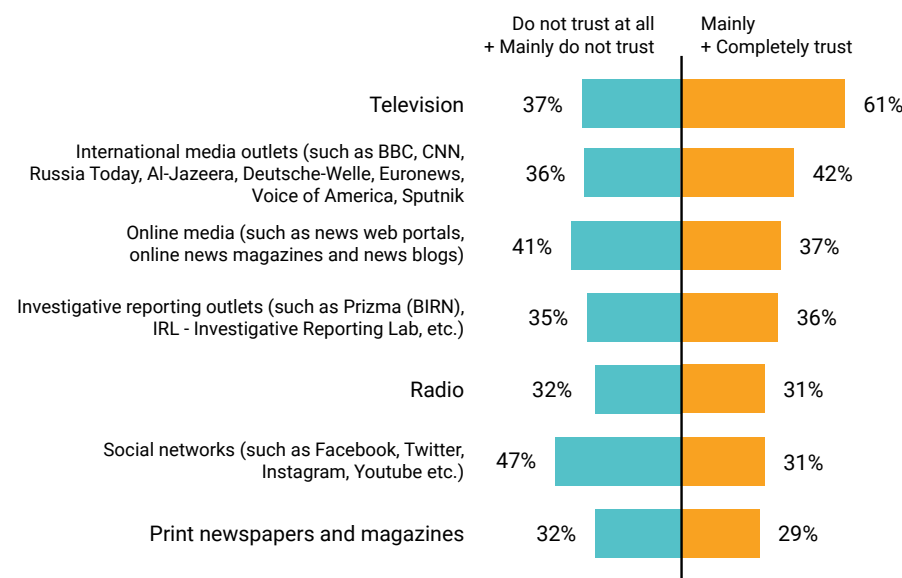
Social media and online media in general are more common sources for information for people with secondary and higher education, employed people and those who prefer modern over traditional media.

## 4.2. Citizens' trust in media

### 4.2.1. Trust in the media equally divided

The respondents are evenly divided over trust in media reporting in North Macedonia. In total, 49% of respondents said they have trust in the media, of which 41% mainly have trust in what is being said in the media, while only 9% trust the media completely. An equal portion of respondents (49%) expressed distrust in the media, of which 26% mainly don't have trust and 23% don't have trust at all.

Graph 1. *Trust in the media as a reliable source of news and information*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.



Citizens have the most confidence in the information they receive through television as a reliable source of news and information, as 61% said they mainly or completely trust this source. However, citizens are narrowly divided when it comes to the trust in other media types as reliable sources of news and information. International media outlets are ranked in second place, enjoying the trust of 42% of citizens. Approximately one third of respondents trust sources such as investigative reporting outlets, radio and the press (36%, 31% and 29%, respectively). Around one third of respondents said they believe social networks (31%) and online media (37%).

Graph 2. *Trust in the media as a reliable source of news and information (mainly and completely trust)*

Base: Total target population



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

People in the 18–29 age group have more trust in international media outlets, online media, social media and print media and magazines. Citizens with higher education and ethnic Albanians also expressed higher trust in international media outlets and online media. Trust in investigative reporting outlets is higher among people with higher education and lower among those with primary or lower education, as well as among people over 60 years of age. Employed people have more trust in online media and social networks. Trust in international media, online media and social networks is higher among people who prefer modern media.

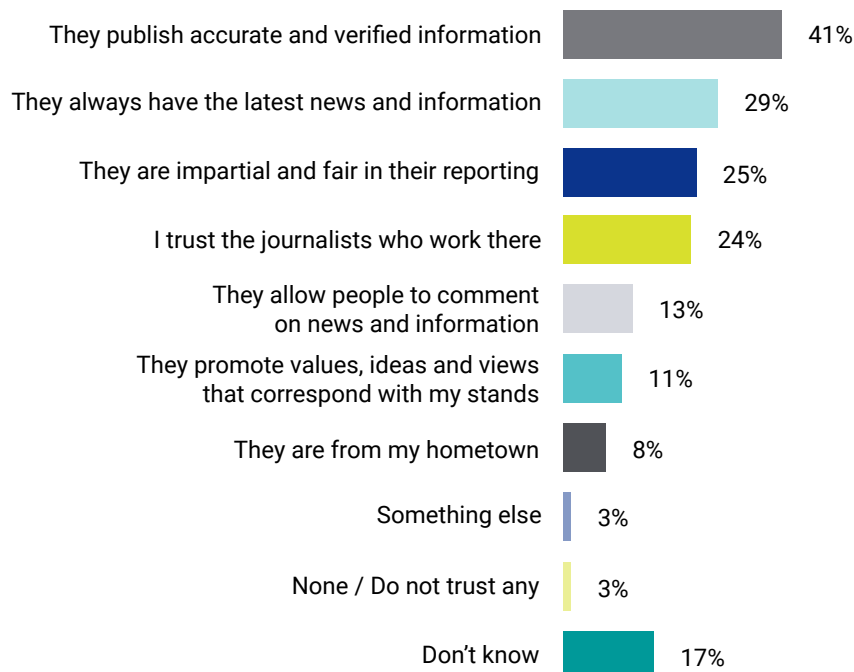
The focus group participants agree that considering the media and society in North Macedonia, the results are better than expected:

*“The public usually read the first information through the social and online media, but still wait for confirmation of the information on television and radio. [...] The information received from any online platform is taken with reserve until the moment the same information is confirmed in the analogue media. The public knows that the analogue media carry a bigger responsibility due to the regulation, which is a reason for greater trust in these media,”* says FG Participant 9.

Some of the focus group participants coming from the traditional media realize that the migration of the public to the social networks is an increasing trend that these media must take into consideration and adjust their work to the new digital environment:

*“People read [the information] on social networks and believe in what they read on the channel through which they receive the information. The biggest portion of our public follows us through their cellphones. The problem of the traditional media is that we are not sufficiently present where the most of the public is”,* comments FG Participant 6.

Graph 3. Main reasons for trust in the media (all answers)



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Looking at the reasons why citizens find some media more trustworthy than others, most of the respondents chose the publication of accurate and verified information (41%), while having the latest news and being impartial

and fair in reporting come next (29% and 25%, respectively). One quarter of respondents trust certain media outlets because they trust the journalists who work there (24%), which speaks for the individual professional responsibility the journalists have, despite the editorial policy of the media outlet. The possibility that some media outlets allow people to comment on news and information is a reason for trust for 13% of respondents. This shows that the opportunity for participation that some media outlets allow is not crucial for citizens' trust. Only 8% said they trust a media outlet because it is from their hometown, which indicates the low public awareness regarding the significance of local and regional media for the community.

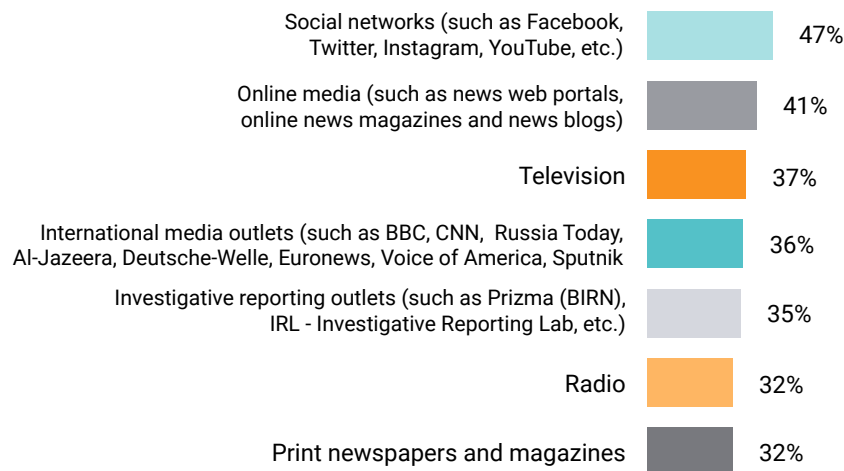
People with higher education find it more important than others that media outlets are impartial and fair in their reporting and that they promote values, ideas and views that correspond with their standpoints. Citizens of Albanian ethnic background trust a particular media outlet more because they trust the journalists who work there or if it is from their hometown.

#### 4.2.2. Distrust in the media and the reasons for distrust

Citizens expressed the biggest levels of distrust for social networks (47%) and online media (41%) as reliable sources of news and information. Around one third of respondents do not consider the investigative reporting outlets, radio and the press reliable sources of news and information (35%, 32% and 32%, respectively). The trust in social networks and online media decreases after the age of 60, as well as trust in radio and print media.

Graph 4. *Trust in the media as a reliable source of news and information (do not trust at all and mainly do not trust)*

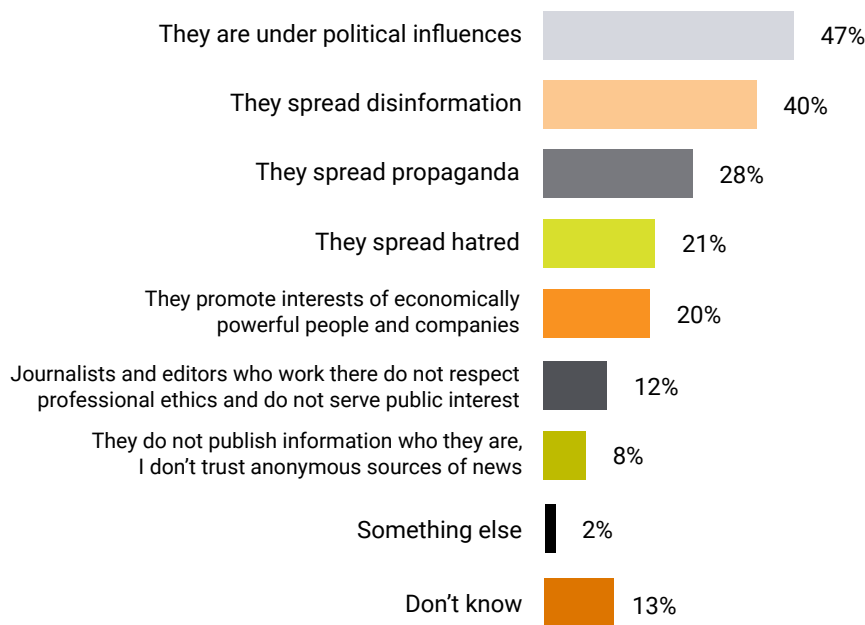
Base: Total target population



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

When asked about the main reasons for distrust in the media, almost half the respondents (47%) stress that media outlets are under political influence, while spreading disinformation (40%) and propaganda (28%) are the reasons that follow next. One fifth of citizens consider that the media spread hatred (21%), as well as promoting the interests of economically powerful people and companies (20%). Only 12% believe that the journalists and editors who work there do not respect professional ethics and do not serve the public interest, while only 8% do not trust them because they are not transparent and do not publish an impressum.

Graph 5. Main reasons for distrust in the media (all answers)



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

For the focus group participants, these results are expected. They think that distrust in the media increases due to political influence. Still, most of the participants recognize the interests of economically powerful people and companies as one of the biggest problems for the professional media in the online sphere in particular.

*“There are companies that post their ads on internet portals which do not work professionally and usually, their reason is to prevent the portals from writing about them in a negative context. That is contrary to our intentions – to persuade the companies to put their advertisements in professional media. [...] Even after a year of the agreement (with the Economic Chamber), we do not have positive feedback from the business community, since the companies continue to post the ads in the same manner [...] When you see who own the companies that put their ads in these media, you will understand the symbiotic relationship between business, politics and the media on the local level,”* says FG Participant 3.

*“Trust in media is determined by all these factors. Even the financing by these companies is related to the political parties, who direct the companies where to advertise,” says FG Participant 5.*

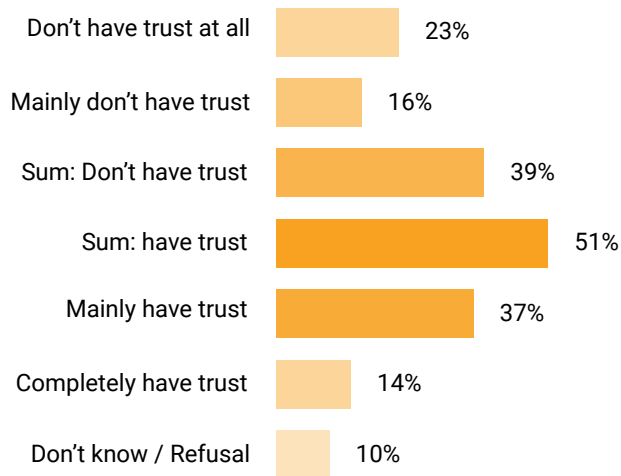
To encourage companies to advertise and thus support the professional media, the Register of Professional Online Media was established by the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia and the Association of Journalists of Macedonia in cooperation with the business community represented by the Economic Chamber of North Macedonia.<sup>21</sup> Although the Register had 140 online media outlets as members by 2021, the companies continue their practice of advertising with media outlets that are close to them, some of which do not respect professional and ethical principles.

#### 4.2.3. Trust in the public service broadcaster – MRT

The respondents have divided trust in the public service broadcaster Macedonian Radio and Television when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly: in total, 51% have trust and 39% do not have trust in the PSB MRT.

Graph 6. *On a scale from 1 to 4, how much trust do you have in the PBS MRT, when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?*

Base: Total target population



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The focus group participants agree that the situation with the PSB is better than it was in the past, although there is still room for improvement.

By 2016, the PSB was coming in for political pressure from the ruling parties, which evidently influenced its editorial policy and the impartiality of the content. After the change of government, the editorial policy and reporting were aligned with professional and ethical standards, the programme offer was improved and new programming services were launched.

<sup>21</sup> Promedia, Register of Professional Online Media. Available at: [ProMedia.mk](http://ProMedia.mk).

*“This [citizens’] perception of MRT was created a long time ago. However, journalists have not been working under pressure recently, they work better now, and the programme content is improved,”* says FG Participant 8.

*“The problem is that the public is guided by the perceptions created when the previous government was in power, when the PSB did not have complete independence, for the primary reason that the managerial structures were installed by some political structure. And in cases like this, the public will always distrust the PSB,”* comments FG Participant 9.

*“The percentages are better compared to other media, but I agree that trust in the PSB should be higher. What concerns me is that only 14% completely have trust, while 23% don’t trust the PSB at all,”* says FG Participant 4.

With the change of the government in 2016, the direction of media regulation changed towards enabling a more impartial and independent manner of nomination and election of the members of the Programming Council of the PSB MRT. Still, in 2021, because of the political parties’ disagreements in the Parliament, the new Programming Council has not yet been established. However, during 2020/2021, the PSB MRT has been preparing a new strategy for the period until 2025 that envisages reforms in its functioning and organization of work.

*“MRT should not compete with private TV stations, but should not lag behind them in terms of viewership either. However, a more serious internal dynamic is needed for establishing a modern system for presenting the programmes because when we watch MTV we still feel as if we have gone 10 years back in time. It should not be like that since the PSB has all the resources needed for high-quality programming. [...] There is room for improvement: MRT could be a promotor of media change and professional journalism in the country, especially in the segment of informative programming, at a time when other media outlets broadcast ‘trash’ and propagandistic programmes,”* comments FG Participant 3.

*“People still do not understand that MRT doesn’t have to compete with other media. The PSB is not only news, but it should serve the interests of all citizens and society as a whole,”* stresses FG Participant 8.

One of the focus group participants expressed surprise about the findings showing that half of the respondents have trust in the PSB when its viewership is relatively low. The opinion poll results that the regulatory body, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, recently released<sup>22</sup> showed that the PSB MTV is in 5<sup>th</sup> place with 16.5% average daily reach among the TV

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22 AVMS. (2021). “Podatoci za dosegot na radiostanicite I za udelot vo vkupnata gledanost na TV stanicite”, Prv kvartal. Skopje: AVMS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3h0Lvuv>. Pg. 61.

stations that broadcast nationally in North Macedonia, after the private commercial TV channels.

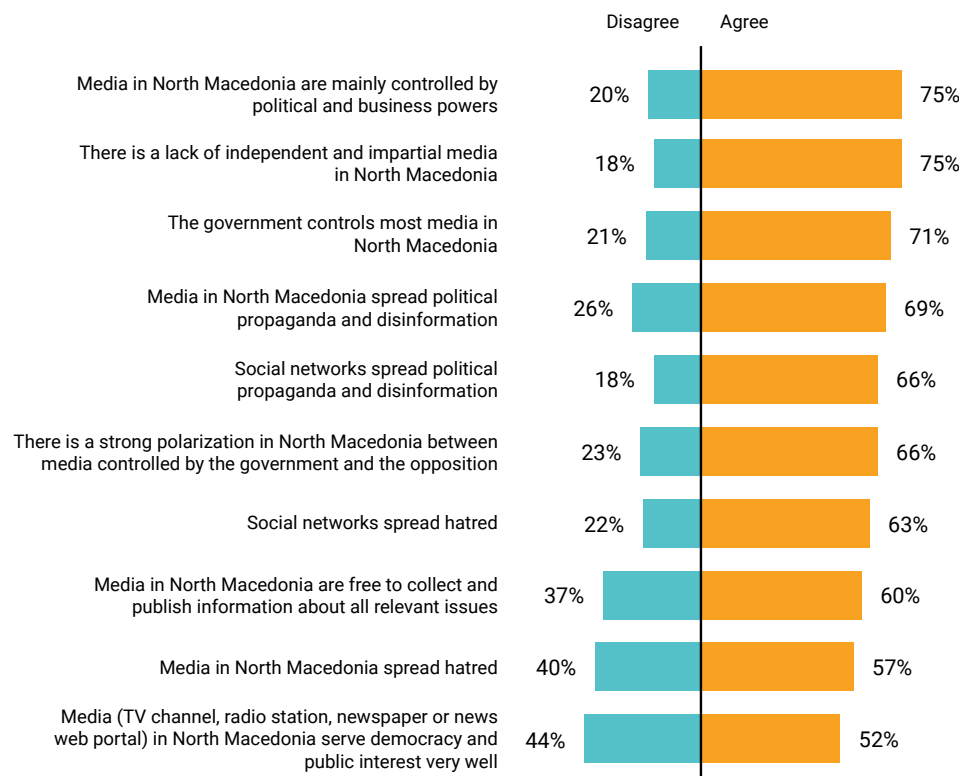
*“Coverage of the topics in the informative programmes is an additional issue. Although seen from the point of infrastructure, technical and human capacities, the PSB MRT is the best equipped media outlet in the country, the use of the opportunities in practice is zero [...] To improve the situation, there is a need for general reset in the PSB”, notes FG Participant 9.*

### 4.3. Attitudes and experiences with the media

#### 4.3.1. Media and democracy

The majority of citizens in North Macedonia share the opinion that the media in the country are not independent and impartial. In total, 75% of citizens agree with the opinion that there is a lack of independent and impartial media, as much as those who said that media are mainly controlled by political and business powers. Two thirds of the respondents think that the government controls most of the media in the country (71%). The perception of the respondents is that the polarization between media controlled by the government and opposition is strong, with which 69% of them agree and 26% disagree.

Graph 7. On a scale from 1 to 4, assess how much you agree with the following statements:



Source: Ipsos, 2021.



The public is somewhat divided in its perception of the media's contribution to democracy in the country. Namely, more than half say that media in North Macedonia serve democracy and the public interest very well (52%), while more than two fifths claim the opposite (44%).

Commenting on the findings that almost half of the citizens consider that the media do not serve the public interest and democracy, the focus group participants see improving the image of journalism as a "tough task". For some of them, nurturing and investing in investigative and analytical journalism genres are ways to showing the citizens that the media and journalists are serving the public good.

*"We should encourage especially the journalists who seriously plan to deal with investigative and analytical journalism, and maybe then can we persuade the citizens that the image of journalism is different, better than this,"* says FG Participant 3.

*"The citizens' perception is concerning. I think that the distancing of the media from the citizens leads to such perceptions. It might be good if we showed citizens how journalists work, the everyday problems the journalists face in order to find the information and make it available to their public. Maybe another way is to enable better inclusion and give space and promotion to citizen journalism,"* suggests FG Participant 9.

Some of the media professionals in the focus group express doubts about newsrooms' readiness to invest in investigative reporting as a way of improving the image of journalism, since it requires finances, and human and technical capacities, as well as time. Many media outlets simply re-take the news and information, often without permission, from other professional media outlets, which opens another problem with the copyrights in the media sphere, but helps these outlets with a cheap and easy way to generate clicks.

*"If you compare the trust in investigative reporting media outlets (36%) and trust in social media (31%) there is only a 5% difference, which is a disaster. This graph shows that people do not inform themselves from serious media and do not sufficiently understand what professional journalism is. No one, if there is no foreign donor, will spend four months producing an investigative story that will have fewer likes than some copy-paste news,"* FG Participant 4 notes.

In relation to media freedom, the opinion poll showed that six out of ten citizens believe that media in North Macedonia are free to collect and publish information about all relevant issues (60%), while almost two fifths would dispute that (37%). Those who trust the media in general more often believe that the media in North Macedonia are free and that they serve democracy and the public interest very well.



#### 4.3.2. Media spreading hatred, disinformation and propaganda

Seven out of ten citizens think that the media in North Macedonia spread political propaganda and disinformation (69%). There is less agreement among citizens when it comes to spreading hatred in the media. Namely, while more than half of citizens agree that the media in Macedonia spread hatred (57%), the opposite attitude is shared by four out of ten (40%).

The situation on social networks is perceived similarly – about two thirds think they spread political propaganda and disinformation, while a smaller percentage think they spread hatred (66% and 63%, respectively). Younger people aged 18–44 agreed more than others that social networks spread political propaganda and disinformation. This could be explained by the more frequent use of social media by these age groups, but it also indicates their awareness of these phenomena.

The previous research and monitoring conducted by the civil sector showed that the traditional media are acting more responsibly: there were no cases of production or spreading of hate speech among traditional media registered by the regulatory authority and the self-regulatory body in 2020/2021.<sup>23</sup>

The focus group participants explain some of the poll's findings with the citizens' misunderstanding of what the media represents and unanimously agree that the public needs to be educated to better understand the media and journalistic work.

*“The public does not discern a difference between social networks and professional media. They say that media outlets spread more propaganda and disinformation than social networks. I do not understand why people think that social networks are places where they should inform themselves, but that may be our [journalists'] fault as well. [...] On the social networks, they can find their neighbours and friends, while in the media, they can find journalists who have invested in their education and careers, and we should explain that to them,”* suggests FG Participant 6.

*“The fact that 57% of citizens consider that the media spread hatred should worry us since I haven't seen a text in a professional media that spreads hatred or similar posts on their pages. Again, this indicates that everything is perceived as the media, and that all the media are put in the same basket just because of five or six that do that. We should teach people how to recognize professional media and what propaganda means,”* concludes FG Participant 7, stressing the importance of introducing media literacy, especially for the young population.

23 AVMS. Available at: [www.avmu.mk](http://www.avmu.mk); CEMM. Available at: [https://complaints.semm.mk/?page\\_id=46](https://complaints.semm.mk/?page_id=46).

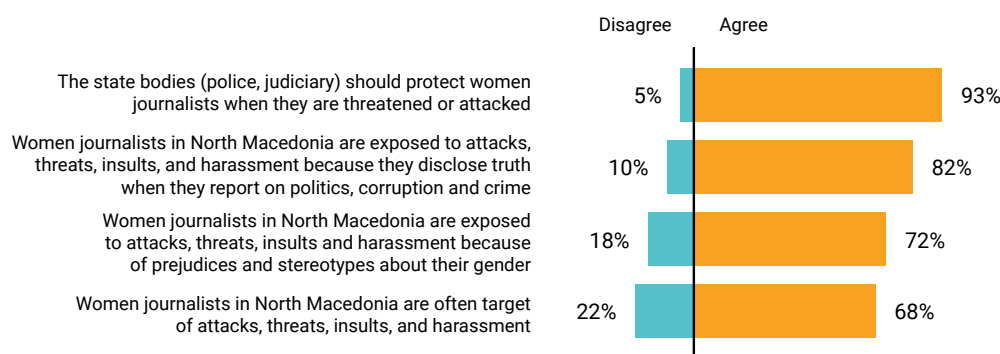
*“Journalism as a profession goes through dramatic changes. The vetting that journalism did before and its role of a gatekeeper does not exist on the social networks. There is a new category of fact-checking that older colleagues do not understand, because – what kind of journalism is that when it is not verified? On the other hand, we cannot increase the level of media literacy because there is no place where people can read high-quality content. These two things go hand in hand,”* says FG Participant 2.

The focus group participants stress that the speed of publishing information at the expense of the verification of the information leads to a decline in trust in the media. The vast majority of citizens (84%) are not aware of the existence of platforms that deal with checking the accuracy of news and information in North Macedonia – 11% of citizens have heard about fact-checkers but have never followed them and only 4% follow their announcements. These findings support the claims that the verification of information should be a basic responsibility of the newsrooms before publishing news stories.

#### 4.3.3. Media-gender issues

The majority of citizens perceive the position of women journalists in Macedonia as unfavourable. More than two thirds of citizens believe that women journalists in Macedonia are often the target of attacks, threats, insults and harassment (68%). For 72% of the respondents, the attacks, threats, insults and harassment stem from gender prejudices and stereotypes, while four fifths think that the attacks are the result of revealing the truth while reporting on politics, corruption and crime (82%). Finally, there is almost unanimous agreement among the citizens that the state bodies (police, judiciary) should protect women journalists when they are threatened or attacked (93%).

Graph 8. *The following statements refer to the position of women journalists in North Macedonia. On a scale from 1 to 4, how much do you agree with each?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Out of 14 registered cases of attacks, insults and threats against journalists and media workers in North Macedonia in 2020, more than half were against women journalists. Only one case was institutionally resolved and the attacker was sentenced to jail.

The focus group participants unanimously agree that the institutional reaction to the attacks on female journalists, as well as on all media professionals, is missing. The relevant institutions, such as the Public Prosecution Office and the Ministry of the Interior, have often been accused of being slow, inert and ineffective in processing cases against journalists.<sup>24</sup> On the other side, the focus group participants express satisfaction that the media community has been more vocal in its reactions against attacks on journalists.

*“However, it is good that, the female journalists, as well as the media community, have raised their voice against attacks recently. But sanctions are missing. We should talk even louder about this!”*, says FG Participant 5.

*“The state should protect female journalists, and that is common sense. Attacks on female journalists are happening constantly on social networks, but only after the associations reacted and the media reported did the public have the opportunity to see this and pay attention to it,”* notes FG Participant 7.

Some of the focus group participants point out that the threats and attacks on journalists mean that the female journalists are afraid to enter the profession, which is especially the case in the Albanian-language media.

*“We have three female journalists, and recently, there have been eight female students completing their practice in the newsroom. When I asked the eight female students where see themselves in journalism in the future, they all mentioned culture or social issues. None of them said politics or criminal affairs. That is due to the insults and attacks they suffer; this has a tremendous influence on female journalists. In recent years, female journalists have not been applying for work since they are afraid,”* explains FG Participant 8.

The research indicated that narratives against female journalists often contain derogatory language, frequently on a gender basis, stereotypical views and perceptions of women’s role in society.<sup>25</sup> The focus group participants believe that, due to stereotypes and prejudices in society, the attackers more easily decide to attack female journalists.

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24 Sekulovski, D. and Sulejman, D. (2019) “Severna Makedonija: Pokazатели za stepenot na sloboda na mediumite i za bezbednost na novinarite 2019”, Skopje: ZNM. Available at: <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/MK-MK-2019.pdf>

25 Nikodinoska, V. and Dimeski, J. (2021). “Hate Narratives and Disinformation in Online Media and on Social Networks”. Skopje: MIM. Available at: <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Resilience-research-publication-2-N-Macedonia-English.pdf>. Pg. 20.

*“Most of the investigative journalists in the country are women and this is the reason they are the targets of these attacks. In live programmes, the comments are always on a gender basis, since the attackers probably see women as more sensitive in relation to these topics,”* said FG Participant 5.

*“It is easier to insult a female journalist than a male journalist. That happens more often with female journalists who are more in the public eye,”* notes FG Participant 7.

*“The general impression is that it is easier to attack a woman than a man. What also bothers the attackers, especially with female journalists who deal with political affairs, is that they have an opinion. And they attack their morals and ethics. It is easier that way! You can see the emotions, the stereotypes [...] in society. We should be loud, even louder!”,* stresses FG Participant 6.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The opinion poll results show that television is the most common source of information for most of the citizens of North Macedonia, while social networks and online portals follow in the second and third place, respectively. Citizens are evenly divided when it comes to trust in the media in general. Television enjoys the most trust among citizens as a reliable source of news and information, while citizens expressed the most distrust in social networks and online media outlets.

These findings are in line with the previous research that showed that traditional media are more responsible in publishing ethical and verified information, since they are regulated by law and obliged to respect professional principles. The media professionals who participated in the focus group in our research disagree that the media spread political propaganda and disinformation more than social media as the opinion polls findings indicate, which is also supported by the CSO reports.

However, despite being second most common source of information, the citizens taking part in the opinion poll expressed the most distrust in social networks and online media. The findings indicate the importance that social networks and online media hold in getting news and information, especially for younger generations aged between 18 and 44 who use them as their primary source of information. The online media, who are most often pointed at for violating the professional and ethical standards, should improve their professional reporting in order to provide citizens with credible news and information. Therefore, the media associations, in cooperation with the business community, established a Register of Professional Online Media. This cooperation was aimed at encouraging companies to advertise primarily with professional online media. Still, the focus group participants stressed that companies do not respect the agreement and continue to advertise on unprofessional internet portals.

As reasons for trust in certain media outlets, the respondents mainly pointed to publishing accurate and verified information, reporting on the latest news and impartial and fair reporting. The main reasons for distrust of the media are political influence on the media, the spread of disinformation and the spread of propaganda, but citizens also mentioned spreading hatred and the promotion of business centres' interests.

These data show that almost half of North Macedonia's citizens can recognize the political influence in media content, while part of them value professional and credible news and information. On the other side, the results indicate the public awareness of the role of the media in the production and spread of disinformation, propaganda and hatred and the promotion of business interests.

The findings also imply a need for better education of the public in order to be able to distinguish the professional information on the social networks from disinformation, manipulation and propaganda. The media professionals in the focus group support this by stressing the problem that citizens do not make a distinction of whether the information comes from a professional media outlet or other content producers on social networks, thus participating in the spread of disinformation and propaganda.

Trust in the public service broadcaster MRT is also narrowly divided. The focus group participants agree that the image MRT has today is “inherited” from previous periods when another government was in power and influenced its editorial policy and independence. The focus group participants suggest that MRT should not compete with other commercial public stations, but should strengthen its role as a promotor of professional journalism, media pluralism and media changes in the country.

It is a matter of major concern that two thirds of the respondents in the opinion poll in North Macedonia perceive the media in the country as not independent and impartial, as mainly controlled by political and business centres of power or that the government controls most of the media. The majority of citizens who took part in the poll are also aware of the strong polarization of the media between the government and opposition parties, which stems from decades-long political and ethnic polarization in the society to which the previous research studies alluded. Regarding the poll data showing narrowly divided opinions of the citizens that the media spread hatred, the editors and journalists in the focus group disagree, explaining these findings with the “confusion” the citizens have around understanding of the notion and role of the media and information circulating on social networks.

The citizens are also divided over the role of media in serving democracy and the public interest in the country. In the previous period, especially before 2016, the media were criticized for diverging from their “watchdog” role and for serving the political and business interests of the centres of power, rather than the public interest. Although the political climate of previous years has relaxed since the change of the government and the pressures towards critical journalism are not harsh and rigid, the media has continued to maintain clientelistic connections with the centres of power. The developments in the sphere of the media freedoms and systemic media reforms are slow, due to the continued dependency of the media on the political structures.

Finally, gender issues in media in North Macedonia have not seen improvements in the position of women journalists in the newsrooms of organisations or in their treatment in the profession. The fact that more than half of the attacks, threats and insults directed at journalists in 2020 happened to women journalists speaks of gender prejudices and stereotypes or maltreatment when they report on politics, crime and corruption only because they are seen as the “weaker” gender. Most of these insults and attacks happened on the social networks. Still, the institutions’ responsibility

is to take more active and engaged action in order to identify and sanction the perpetrators, something that was done only in one case in 2020.

At the end of the series of three research studies conducted within the “Resilience – For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation” project, we can conclude that increased use of online media and social networks as a source of news and information by citizens in North Macedonia calls for additional accountability mechanisms and greater responsibility of the media and the networks, particularly to restrict hate, propaganda and disinformation. In addition to the existing mechanisms of media self-regulation, we need a regulatory or self-regulatory framework and commitment from political and other centres of power to prevent the use of the media for the promotion of political agendas based on propaganda, disinformation and hateful narratives. On the other hand, we need additional effort from the education sector, civil society and the media to empower citizens of all generations for critical analysis of media content and the ability to recognize and value credible media, refusing propaganda and manipulation. The question of how to restore trust in the media therefore depends on various actors in society on both sides of the information flow – on the side of production and on the side of receiving and sharing news and information. In order to counter disinformation, hate and propaganda in the media and public communication in the country, a holistic approach is needed that will be based on the role of all actors that participate in the public sphere, assigning the responsibility to each of them based on their roles and power.



## 6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Political parties and political officials should refrain from using and spreading disinformation and hate narratives, having in mind the responsibility towards the public and their influence on public opinion.
- The Ministry of the Interior, Public Prosecutor's Office and judiciary should demonstrate active engagement in identifying, processing and prosecuting cases related to hate speech. Representatives of these institutions, as well as journalists and editors, should undergo regular training for recognizing hate speech, its processing and effective punishment, both in traditional and online media.
- The business community should encourage its members (local companies) to advertise and thus support the professional online media that respect the ethical and professional standards. To that end, the Register of Professional Online Media was established gathering around 140 online media outlets who abide by the professional standards.
- The public service broadcaster MRT should improve the quality of production and reporting in news programming, the content and variety of programming and introduce a participatory model for communication with citizens, for improving its credibility among the public and becoming a promotor of media reforms and professional journalism in the country.
- Media organizations need to integrate gender equality principles in the structural organization of the newsrooms, but also consider gender-related issues as an indispensable part of inclusive reporting.
- Journalists and the media community should advocate and initiate campaigns for raising awareness among the public against stereotypes, prejudice and all sorts of verbal and physical attacks against female journalists, especially in the online sphere.
- Media organizations need to invest human, technical and financial capacities in investigative journalism that will help improve the understanding and respect for professional journalism and the media working in the public interest and serving democratic values.
- Relevant institutions, the Ministry of the Interior, Public Prosecutor's Office, the judiciary, Ombudsman and other relevant institutions should cooperate with the media regulatory authority, self-regulatory body and media CSOs for awareness-raising and preventing hate speech and derogatory language in the media.



- Civil society organizations and the media community need to initiate and implement joint programmes, campaigns and activities for preventing and combating hate speech on social networks and in the digital sphere, and for recognizing disinformation and propaganda.
- Civil society organizations, the media community and relevant institutions should encourage and support different informal and formal programmes for improving the levels of media literacy and critical understanding of the media for all age groups in various spheres of the society.

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#### **FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS:**

Participant 1: male journalist working for a national online news media outlet.

Participant 2: female journalist working for a national investigative reporting online media outlet.

Participant 3: male journalist working for a national TV station.

Participant 4: male journalist working for a national TV station.

Participant 5: female journalist working for a national TV station.

Participant 6: female journalist working for a radio station broadcasting on the national level.

Participant 7: female journalist working for an internet radio station/online media outlet.

Participant 8: male editor working for a national daily newspaper.

Participant 9: male editor working with a regional TV station.

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**SERBIA**

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**POLARIZED MEDIA –  
POLARIZED AUDIENCE**

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## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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## POLARIZED MEDIA – POLARIZED AUDIENCE

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# POLARIZED MEDIA – POLARIZED AUDIENCE

*Jelena Jovović*  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the process of democratic reform, which included the reconstruction of Serbia's media system, began to achieve the ideal where the media (by encouraging political responsibility and strengthening public participation) should have played a decisive role in promoting democracy (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). In the past twenty years, in an effort to achieve this standard, state-owned media have been privatized, state radio and television have been transformed into a public service broadcaster, a set of media laws was adopted in 2014 that regulate this area in a relatively satisfactory manner, and in 2020, a new Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for 2020–2025 was adopted.

Despite all the measures and reforms, the Serbian media sector is still burdened with numerous problems and weaknesses. At the end of 2020, there were 2508 registered media outlets (Journalist Association of Serbia, 2020) that can hardly sustain themselves with the revenues generated on the market, especially in the year marked by the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The non-transparent ownership and financing of the media make them vulnerable to political and economic pressures. Tabloidization, disinformation and biased reporting increasingly impair the quality of news content, which is often placed in a way that favours the ruling coalition and demonizes political opponents and critical citizens. In 2020, journalists faced physical attacks, one arrest, smear campaigns, punitive tax inspections, and other forms of pressure (Markov and Min, 2020; Freedom House, 2021).

In this context, the project “Resilience: Civil Society for Media Free of Hate and Disinformation” launched a series of research studies. The first two carried out in 2020 were intended to provide better insight into disinformation and hateful propaganda models of the media and communication and determine the main patterns and examples of hate and disinformation narratives in Serbia. Their findings indicate the following:

In recent years in Serbia, in public communication, especially in the online sphere, hate speech significantly outweighs the arguments. Media outlets with national coverage (and related online publications) systematically



deliver content to citizens that propagates power, spreads disinformation, and incites hatred toward dissidents or neighbouring nations. Also, “the Internet has enabled various groups of extreme attitudes to reach directly to citizens, to communicate with them and spread their ideas more efficiently and massively than before” (Valić Nedeljković, Janjatović Jovanović, 2020). However, “hate narratives are also registered in those media traditionally considered socially responsible and critically oriented, as well as independent media.” In all the analyzed cases, the basic ideas and messages that are sent are reduced to the threat posed to “us” by “those” who threaten us, be they migrants, politicians belonging to the opposition or the government, or journalists. The number of messages/narratives calling for action against migrants is worrying. In the case of political opponents, the criticism is being reduced “to discrimination and hatred based on gender or sexual orientation” (Jovović, Valić Nedeljković, 2020).

In this third report, we present the research results to provide an overview of public opinion regarding media trust, including the gender dimensions of the problem.

To address this issue, we conducted an opinion poll and focus group research. IPSOS Strategic Marketing carried out the opinion poll research in Serbia from 24 to 28 February 2021. It was conducted on a two-stage random representative stratified sample with a quota selection of respondents (by gender and age). Stratification was based on the region and type of settlement (urban and rural). The data collection method was CATI (telephone) and CAWI (online) for certain population sections. The questionnaire used in the research was finalized by the IPSOS team based on a draft created by researchers engaged in the Resilience project. It consisted of questions and claims that measured demographic characteristics, media habits, trust in the media, and attitudes and experiences with the media. IPSOS also performed the statistical data analysis.

The focus group was held on 29 March 2021. It was attended by six journalists and editors (four male and two female) aged 31 to 66 working in local and national commercial or public service media.

In the following chapters, we present the findings we reached in this way and the recommendations arising from them.

## 2. JOURNALISTS AND EDITORS ON HATE AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA MODELS AND HATE NARRATIVES

### 2.1. Instrumentalization of hatred in the service of political propaganda

Although a number of media outlets in Serbia still maintain a high level of professional standards, there are several different media groups on our media scene, which systematically place disinformation, hate speech and propaganda. At the forefront are tabloid dailies and some commercial television stations, especially those whose owners openly support the ruling party, and the state significantly financially supports them through various mechanisms (Valić Nedeljković, Janjatović Jovanović, 2020).

Journalists and editors, the focus group (FG) participants are unanimous in their assessment that propaganda and hatred are present in the Serbian media to a significant extent. One of the FG participants noted that the media instrumentalize the hatred rooted in society, “and it is now literally visible as soon as we go to the newsstand in the morning, or as soon as we open some portals” (FG Participant 4). However, it is a phenomenon that is gaining momentum in the media.

*“The way the media reports has become more brutal, the vocabulary used in the last few years has really crossed some boundaries. I am aware that has been the case before, but I have the impression that it has now become so open” (FG Participant 6).*

According to the focus group participants, propaganda—above all, the kind that relies on hatred or hate speech—is either in the service of politics, when it is necessary to impose a new topic or divert attention from important issues, or it is abused in some way by the media to achieve financial profit. As one of the FG participants pointed out, the hate speech employed in the service of politics can easily be recognized “because it will be coordinated in all or almost all tabloids. You can easily see in the media who the target is today, which organization, person, politician, public figure, etc.” However, the media do not refrain from fabricating content abundant with hate speech “just to get clicks” (FG Participant 1).

The impact is devastating on media users who, in the multitude of available information, recognize neither the quality media nor credible information.

*“It’s not a big problem today to create your own media outlet. You can easily go online and create your own portal. The problem is that many*

*of these portals do not adhere to basic professional standards, the code of ethics. On the one hand, they behave like a media outlet, and on the other, they do not perceive themselves as an organization that has certain obligations and which must adhere to certain principles” (FG Participant 2).*

## 2.2. Anyone can be the target of hate speech

As the most common targets of hate speech in the second phase of research within the Resilience project, we identified migrants, political opponents, and journalists (Jovović, Valić Nedeljković, 2020). Comparing these three groups, the editors and journalists participating in the focus group do not perceive that journalists are more endangered than others because “whoever bothers someone will be the next target” (FG Participant 2). However, they recognize migrants as the group towards whom the hate speech is most often abused by the various stakeholders “who want to push some of their interests, and it is easy to ignite passions if you use that theme if you attribute to them various crimes that these people did not commit” (FG Participant 2), or by the media which thus retain the attention of the audience on uneventful days. Targeting journalists (but also other groups such as migrants or politicians) with hate speech increases the risk of attacks on them. Journalists and editors point out that in addition to endangering personal safety, targeting journalists also reduces the level of trust in the specific media outlet in which they are engaged and calls into question their entire work. As one of the journalists participating in the focus group emphasized, “each of my reports is viewed differently, that questions what I do, that I have some ulterior motives, goals, etc.” (FG Participant 2).

To improve the situation in the considered areas, journalists and editors emphasize the need to educate citizens on media literacy. “Citizens need to be trained, the next generations, in media literacy to know how to distinguish what is a lie from accurate news and how they can be properly informed” (FG Participant 1).

In addition to educating citizens, it is necessary to strengthen existing and introduce new measures aimed at journalists and the media. The FG participants pointed out that “there are regulatory bodies that can and should control this situation. (...) There are laws, there is a code of ethics” (FG Participant 2). They also mentioned the examples of the Press Council, “how some things do work and how some bodies that have the significance of operating on the national level do function quite professionally” (FG Participant 5) and individuals who “sit in certain bodies in Serbia to whom these cases are important” and by whose efforts individual cases are resolved in a satisfactory manner (FG Participant 2). However, to be truly effective, they also need to react consistently and regularly.

The FG participants are unanimous in their assessment that true independence of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media, i.e. its Council, needs to be ensured:

*“There are various members under various influences, and they are, ultimately, representatives of the Parliament that elects them, so we can hardly say that they represent the industry, that is, that they care about the development of the media” (FG Participant 5).*

The FG participants also propose stricter sanctions for media and journalists who violate the law and the Code of Ethics as well as the introduction of new (self-)regulatory bodies, such as chambers or associations of editors, which due to the importance of the editorial position in the media “could contribute to raising trust in the media in general” (FG Participant 5).

### 3. MEDIA TRUST – OPINION POLL RESULTS AND THE VIEWS OF JOURNALISTS AND EDITORS

#### 3.1. Media use – TV dominates

The opinion poll results (IPSOS, 2021) show that television stands out as the most frequently used source of information in Serbia, with almost three out of four surveyed citizens claiming to be using it daily (72%). At the same time, for 48% of surveyed citizens, television is the primary source of information. Other “traditional” media, such as radio and print newspapers/magazines, are far behind – a quarter of the respondents listen to the radio daily (24%). In comparison, print newspapers and magazines are read daily by only 10% of citizens.

Following television, online sources stand out according to the frequency of use: 49% of respondents use social networks daily, and online media (such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs) are used by 41% of respondents.

In addition to the media, people from the personal environment still have a significant role as sources of information – over a third of the respondents stated that they receive daily news through personal contacts such as family, friends, and colleagues (37%).

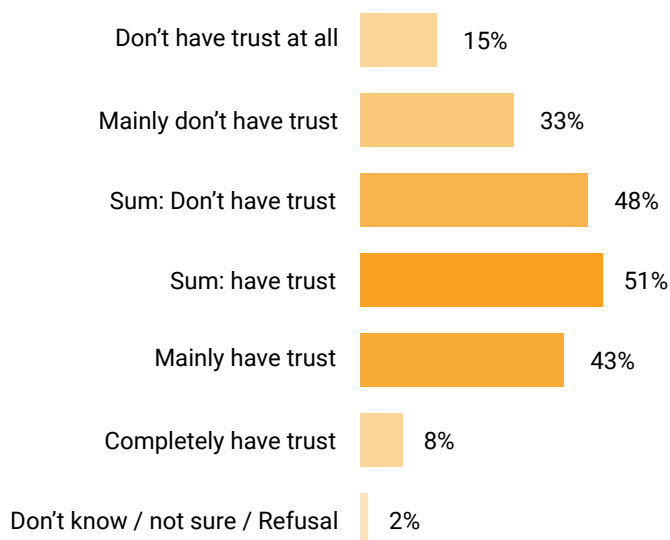
These results are consistent with the findings of another survey conducted by IPSOS during November and December 2019 (In Store, 2020), which showed that information through the television screen dominates among Serbian respondents (82%). Online sources in various forms (sites of major publishers, independent sites and portals, and social networks) are used as sources of information by 46% of the citizens surveyed in that research.

## 3.2. Media trust

### 3.2.1. Polarized audience

Judging by the respondents' answers, the audience in Serbia is divided when it comes to trust in the media such as newspapers, TV, radio, or online news sources to report the news fully, accurately and fairly. While 51% of respondents tend to trust the media, 48% don't.

Graph 1. *Distribution of answers to the question: 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 Serbia?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Given the multidimensionality of the issue of trust and the significance of the contextuality, comparing the results of different studies that measure its level is always risky. However, by recognizing the differences that may arise from different methodological approaches, if we compare the opinion poll results with the results of research conducted annually by the European Broadcasting Union, no significant changes are registered in relation to the results obtained in 2019. At that time, 53% of Serbia's surveyed citizens stated that they had a high or moderate level of trust in the media, and 47% stated that they had a low level or no trust in the media. The difference is registered at the observational level in the percentage of citizens expressing the highest level of trust – in 2019, it was slightly higher at 15%, compared to the 8% that we registered. (European Broadcasting Union, 2020).

### 3.2.2. Television, traditionally the most trusted media

As the most frequently used media, television is also the media that the largest percentage of surveyed citizens trust the most. When asked to rank news and information sources from the one they trust the most to the one they trust least, 39% of respondents singled out television first. When expressing the level of trust in each media type, half of the surveyed citizens claimed they mainly or completely trust television to be a reliable source of information (52%).

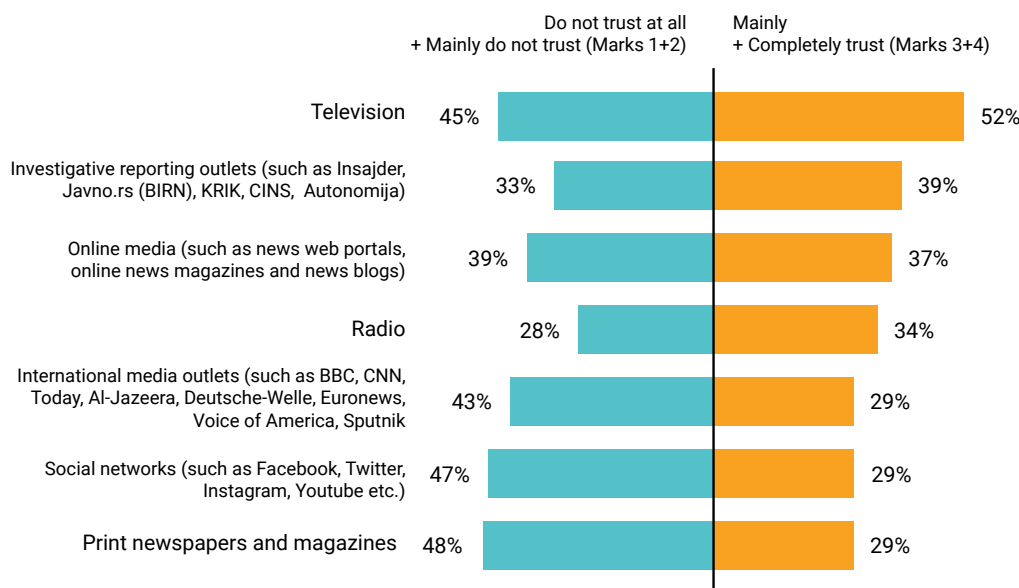
One of the focus group participants attributes this finding to tradition, “this cult of television still exists in the country, it is somehow related to the household” (FG Participant 6). Compared to the previous year, the percentage of citizens who trust television is slightly higher and is in line with the trend that citizens’ trust in television has been growing in recent years (European Broadcasting Union, 2020).

The reasons for this growing trend of trust in television should be sought in the fact that television is a medium that increasingly combines its informative with an entertaining role. Since “the TV is turned on non-stop, you always get some news in commercials during the series, the chyrons go non-stop” (FG Participant 3). Thus, incidental information, into which the viewer does not delve too deeply, is placed before him and results in greater trust than a particular medium deserves. Infotainment and the infomercial as today’s widely present hybrid genres appearing in all types of shows on national television channels in Serbia contribute to these results. Insufficiently literate media citizens find it harder to recognize false information placed in the form of entertainment and advertising (even political) shaped in the form of information in a highly professional way that obscures the essence of a given message, which is always propaganda and aims to increase the rating of political and economic elites.

After television, investigative reporting outlets (16%) and online media (10%) are the sources of information our surveyed citizens trusted most.

This high level of citizens’ trust in investigative media is encouraging, especially given the almost systemic efforts of the government to undermine their credibility. Over a third of surveyed citizens stated that they mainly or completely trust the investigative media (39%).

Graph 2. *Distribution of answers to the question: To what extent do you trust each of the following media is a reliable source of news and information?\**



*\*The remaining percentage up to 100% refers to the answer I do not know / refusal.*

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Radio is still highly rated when it comes to citizens' trust. Every third surveyed citizen reported mainly or completely trusting radio (34%).

Print media, social networks and international media outlets received the lowest scores when citizens were asked to say which media types they have a high degree of trust in (all three are registered at 29%).

### 3.2.3. A collapse of trust in the print media

The percentage of surveyed citizens who said they trusted radio, television, and investigative reporting outlets was higher than the percentage of those who said that they mainly or do not at all trust a given type of media (Graph 2).

Types of media that a far higher percentage of respondents estimated to be a less reliable source of news and information are print newspapers and magazines (48%), social networks (47%) and online media (39%).

For the print media in which "the trust has been crumbling" (FG Participant 5) for years now, the journalists and editors participating in the focus group estimate that the pandemic has also affected the level of citizens' trust. For



two main reasons: Their most loyal audience, retirees, could not even buy a newspaper because of the lockdown. And, tabloids in particular, besides the usual propaganda activities favouring the authorities, approached the reporting on the coronavirus in a sensationalist manner.

*“On the front page, they say you should not be vaccinated; on the third page, they say you must be vaccinated; and on the fifth page, it is best to become infected with the coronavirus. All in the same newspaper.”*  
(FG Participant 3)

The results related to the level of trust in social networks indicate that Serbia is still in the group of countries where the level of trust in this type of media has been declining since it was first measured in 2014 (European Broadcasting Union, 2020). This trend has been particularly noticeable in the last few years, since political actors “discovered” social networks as a means of direct communication with citizens and use them “for networked propaganda, by directing traffic or a network of astroturfers to influence the formation of public opinion in accordance with its agenda under the guise of spontaneous communication” (Milivojević et al., 2020).

The international media outlets have not yet regained the trust damaged during the wars of the 1990s (Albany associates, 2021): 43% of surveyed citizens do not trust international media outlets.

The journalists and editors participating in the focus group notice that online media “didn’t reach the power of traditional media.” Part of the cause lies in the “instability” of a number of portals that are unable to provide a continuous existence, while others “are being used as disposable media. Today we are going to attack someone from this website, when the people rebel and say it’s wrong, that website will be shut down, and we will move on” (FG Participant 3).

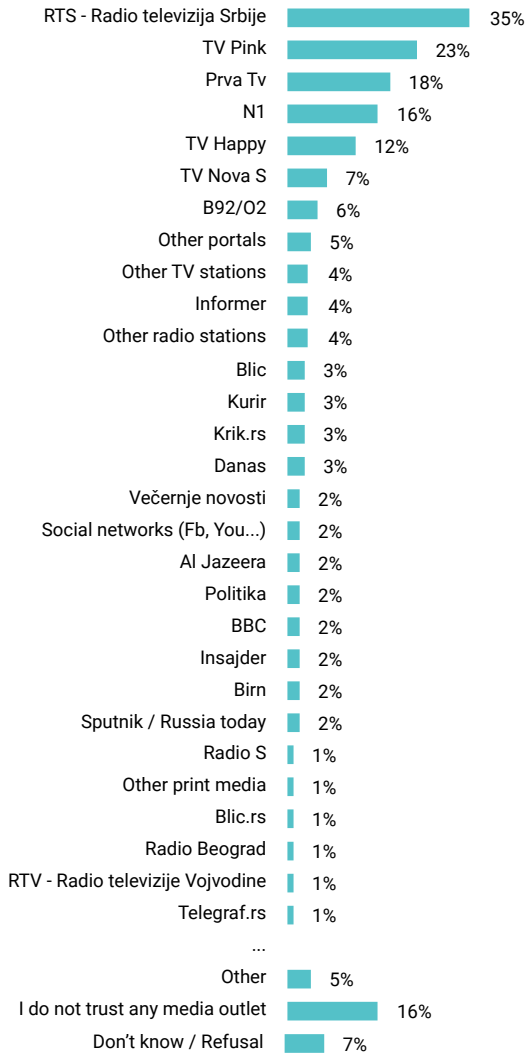
### 3.2.4. The trusted and distrusted media outlets – the same media on both poles

The specific media outlets that respondents singled out as the most trustworthy are RTS (Radio Television of Serbia) (35%), TV Pink (23%), Prva TV (18%), N1 (16%), TV Happy (12%). Other media outlets were chosen by less than 10% of the surveyed citizens (Graph 3).

At the same time, the media outlet that the highest percentage of respondents chose as the least trusted is TV Pink (31%). It is followed by N1 (15%), RTS (Radio Television of Serbia) (14%), Informer (13%), and TV Happy (12%). Respondents opted for other media outlets in a percentage of less than 10% (Graph 4).

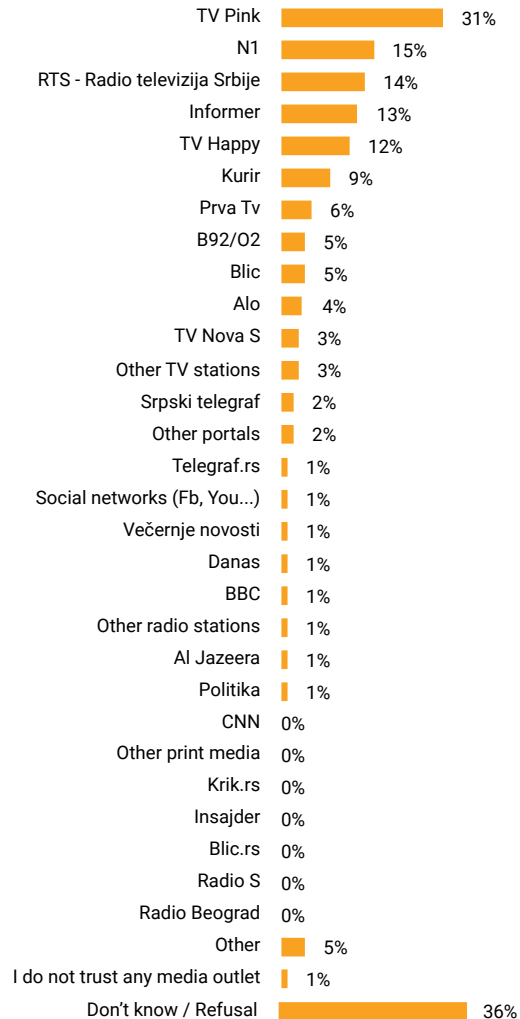


Graph 3. *Distribution of answers to the question: Which specific media outlets (TV channel, radio station, newspaper or news web portal) do you trust the most when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Graph 4. *Distribution of answers to the question: And what specific media outlets (TV channel, radio station, newspaper or news web portal) do you distrust the most?*



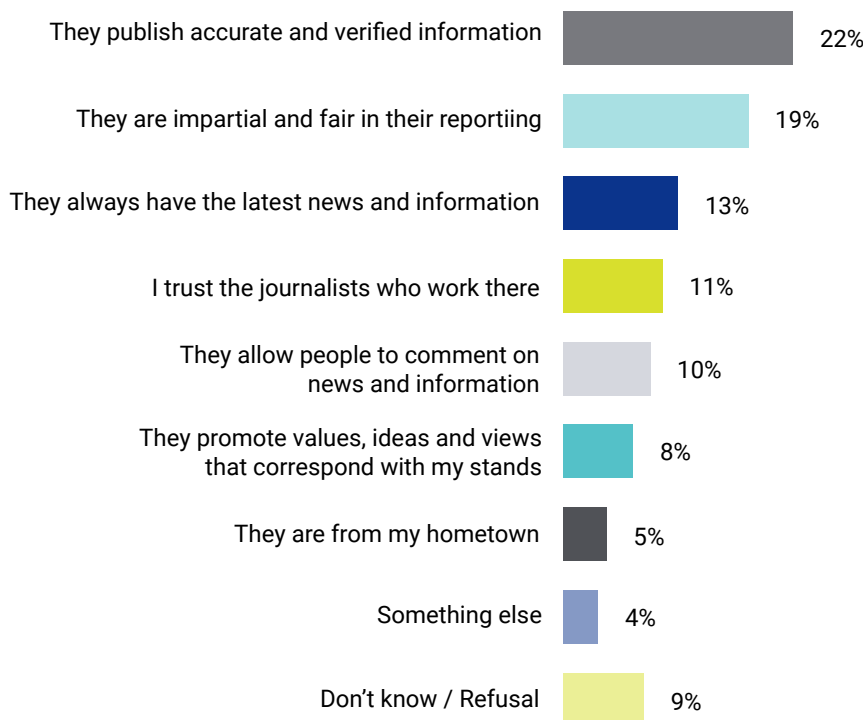
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The focus group participants, journalists, and editors, see these results, which indicate the degree of trust and distrust of the audience in specific media outlets, as a reflection of the Serbian reality.

*“It is evident from these results that trust in the media is divided approximately in half, just as society is divided on the political axis. People simply have this tendency if they trust some politicians, they will also trust the media in which these politicians are frequently found” (FG Participant 1).*

However, the surveyed citizens rarely recognized their political and ideological orientation as the reason for trust in specific media outlets. One part of the questionnaire used in the survey contained a set of statements relating to possible reasons why respondents trust the media they consider most trustworthy. The respondents’ task was to single out three statements with which they agree, and as their first choice, the statement with which they have the highest degree of agreement. Only eight per cent of the surveyed citizens stated that the most important reason for trust is that the media in question promote the values, ideas and views that correspond with their stands.

Graph 5. *Distribution of answers to the question: You may trust some media outlets more than others. Thinking about the media you consider the most trustworthy, what are the main reasons you trust them? - First answer.*



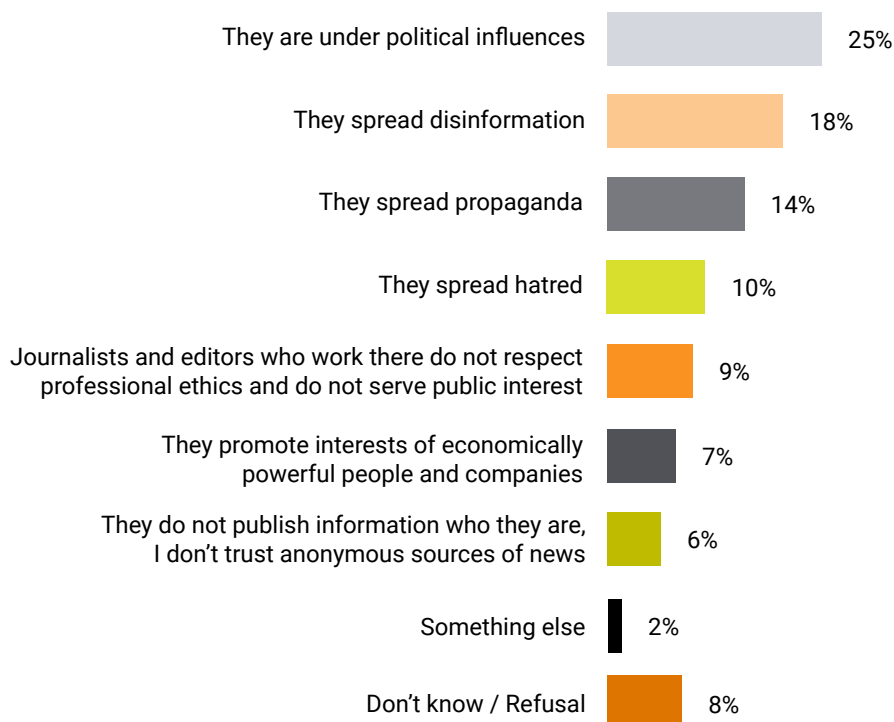
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The results show that as the most important reason why they trust a particular media outlet, the majority of respondents selected the reliability of the information they publish (22%), their impartiality (19%), topicality (13%), trust in the journalists work there (11%) and openness to active audience participation (10%).

However, one of the focus group participants indicated the effect of an additional factor influencing the choice of specific media – when the public trust the media, they are rarely able to separate its informative function from the others, “they accept the whole sphere around that media, lifestyle and so on. And that’s it, that’s the most important thing to them” (FG Participant 1).

By expressing their agreement with the statements describing the reasons they do not trust the media (which are considered the least trustworthy), the highest percentage of surveyed citizens put the influence of politics in first place (25%), followed by the spread of disinformation (18%), propaganda (14%) and hate (10%).

Graph 6. *Distribution of answers to the question: And thinking about the media you consider the least trustworthy, what are the main reasons you do not trust them? - First answer.*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

However, the focus group participants are unanimous in their assessment that the audience, in most cases, does not know how to recognize the influence of politics on the media or the propaganda and disinformation in the media.

*“For me, the data about Pink is interesting. 23% believe them, and 31% do not believe what Pink reports. That’s roughly what the reality looks like. That the same media outlet has a massive percentage of people who do not trust it at all because they see it as propaganda and a large number of people do not even recognize that we have propaganda on that outlet” (FG Participant 3).*

*“How citizens perceive free media, that is, what is the role of the media, what should the media offer them? I think that a good portion of the population here never knew that, and they don’t know that today” (FG Participant 1).*

In the last few years, several fact-checking media portals and organizations have been established in Serbia. Judging by the number of surveyed citizens who said they follow them (10%), they are still making a modest but undoubtedly significant contribution to the fight against disinformation.

### 3.2.5. RTS – always loyal

The law and the method of financing oblige the public service to meet the information needs of all (or at least the vast majority) of Serbian citizens. Judging by the results of the opinion poll research, RTS only half fulfils this task.

A little more than half (56%) of the surveyed citizens say they trust RTS (completely have trust 16%, mainly have trust 40%), while four out of ten claim the opposite 40% (mainly don’t have trust 23%, don’t have trust at all 17%).

According to the focus group participants, given the principles on which RTS’s work is based and the significant share in its news programme’s viewership, this percentage should be even higher. “[The news bulletin] Dnevnik at half-past seven on RTS is still the most-watched news programme” (FG Participant 2). In addition to the fact that viewers have a “habit” of watching RTS, the public service

*“has good programming. RTS 2, for example. RTS 3 has TV shows that are well-produced and rich in content. Even on RTS 1 during the weekend, we can watch shows about health, we can watch well-hosted TV shows, it is not so bad” (FG Participant 4).*

*“Unlike Pink and some other television stations, it looks decent. And clean. And it is completely irrelevant what information it brings compared to other media, that is, other tabloid media, it looks*

*professional, people are neat and that looks good. Their features look like they are well done. And that is obviously enough for this society, for someone to have confidence in the media. So little is enough” (FG Participant 1).*

In the opinion of the focus group participants, what was recognized by the 40% of respondents who stated that they don't trust RTS is

*“the constant that RTS (...) is always on the side of those who are currently in power. Whoever is in power, RTS simply behaves in the same way. We have never seen them turn to the other side or report differently” (FG Participant 2).*

To restore and improve citizens' trust, RTS should expand the range of topics it covers and put the interest of the public first instead of the interests of those in power.

### 3.3. Attitudes and experiences with the media

#### 3.3.1. Obedient servants of their masters

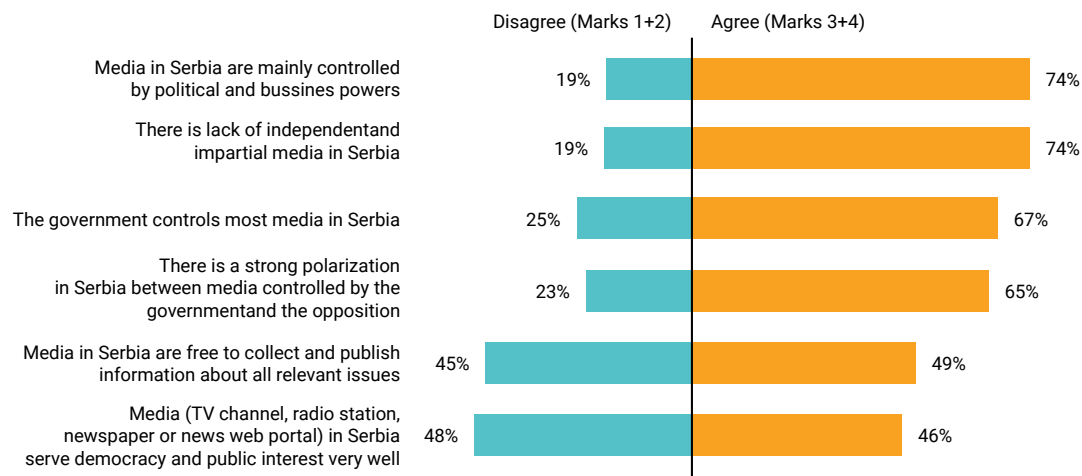
In the set of statements describing attitudes and experiences with the media, the highest percentage of surveyed citizens (74% of respondents) agreed with the statements that there is a lack of independent and impartial media in Serbia (52% strongly agree, 22% somewhat agree) and that media outlets are mainly controlled by political and business powers (46% strongly agree, 28% somewhat agree).

Two thirds of surveyed citizens agree that the government controls most of the media in Serbia (67%) and that there is a strong polarization between media controlled by the government and the opposition (65%).

The focus group participants are encouraged by the fact that such a high percentage of the population recognizes problems that limit media freedom and media independence.

According to one of the focus group participants, since the information on manipulating the allocation of project funds to the media was intensified at the local level, citizens have become more aware that the media are “under the control of either politicians or economic centres. (...) And that media outlets do not protect their interests, rather they are protecting the interests of their employers” (FG Participant 3).

Graph 7. *Distribution of answers to the question: On a scale from 1 to 4, assess how much you agree with the following statements.*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Respondents are divided in their perception of media freedom and media contribution to democracy in the country. Namely, slightly less than half of the surveyed citizens agree that media outlets in Serbia are free to collect and publish information about all the relevant issues (49%), as well as that they serve democracy and the public interest very well (46%), while a similar proportion of respondents claims the opposite (45% and 48%, respectively).

In addition to pointing out the different attitudes of the respondents, for the focus group participants, this distribution of answers also indicates the lack of media literacy of citizens.

*“Because if we look at the fact that 67% [of the surveyed citizens] stated that the media are under the control of the state, and 46% say that they serve democracy, the question arises to which media does this apply? Who do they think serves democracy if they are, for the most part, under control?” (FG Participant 3).*

For the focus group participants, the solution is in education – more thorough education of journalists and the general education of citizens. As the improvement of the media’s economic status leads to the advancement of the position of the media in our political and social life, a part of that education of citizens should be directed towards strengthening the civic awareness that information cannot be free of charge. According to one focus group participant, the lack of that awareness is evidenced, for example, by the decline in the circulation of the print media. The media that are not financially supported by the audience are “subject to all possible pressure types. It’s

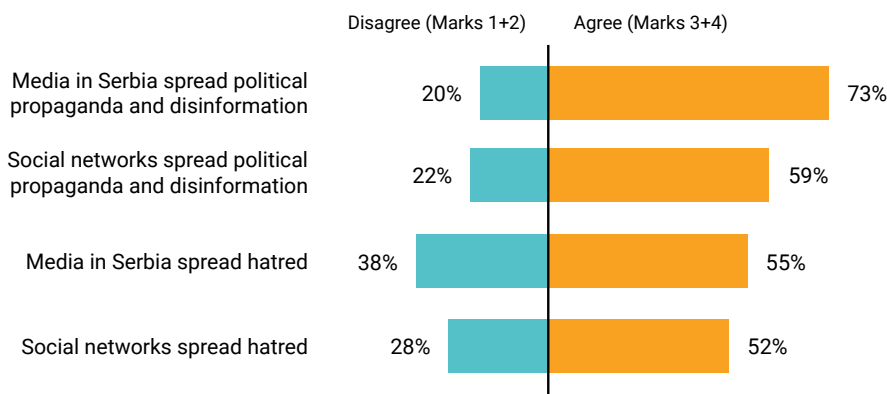
not just political pressure.” Since the 1990s, economic centres have also recognized the media as a means by which it is possible to “achieve a certain influence,” and

*“anyone who has enough money is considering how to buy a media outlet. (...) We just need to develop the awareness that media content is just as important as other necessities that we need for a civilized modern life in the 21st century” (FG Participant 5).*

### 3.3.2. Media spreading hatred, disinformation and propaganda

The majority of surveyed citizens agree that the media and social networks spread political propaganda and disinformation, with the share of those who recognize this phenomenon in the media being much higher (73%) than is the case with social networks (59%).

Graph 8. *Distribution of answers to the question: On a scale from 1 to 4, assess how much you agree with the following statements.*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

More than half of the respondents agree that media and social networks are spreading hatred (55% and 52%, respectively).

The answers of the surveyed citizens within this group of questions caused the most concern among the editors and journalists in the focus group, especially the results related to the spread of political propaganda and disinformation in the media.

*“That a larger number of people see the media as those who spread political propaganda and disinformation in contrast to social networks. But 73% of respondents is a large percentage. So many of them. That so many people perceive the media as a propaganda machine, that is problematic. (...) And to all of us working in the media, that is something that makes us think” (FG Participant 2).*

Another notable problem is that citizens are aware that the media spreads propaganda, disinformation, and hatred, “but they are ready to trust the media if they say what they really think and even if they repeat the kind of hatred and propaganda and misinformation that suits them” (FG Participant 1).

By connecting these with the results that indicate the level of trust of citizens in the media in general, in specific types of media and specific media outlets, but also with the reasons why they trust or distrust certain media, the focus group participants point out that the causes of such assessments lie in social and media polarization.

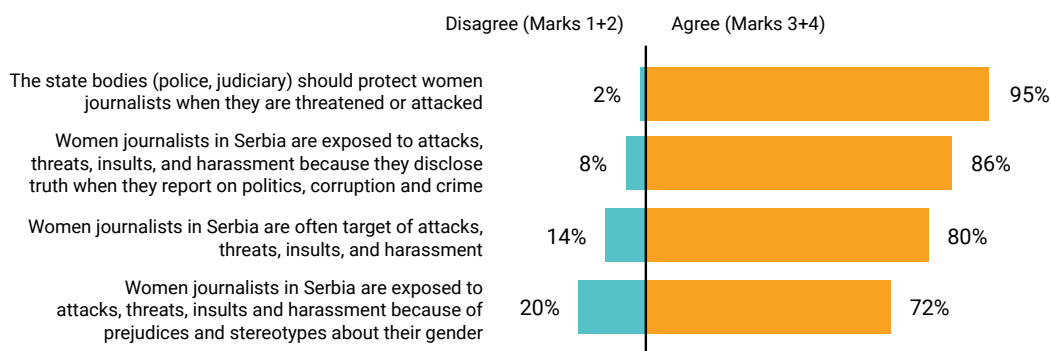
*“Some [citizens] are more with one option, others with another. In essence, I think that both recognize the other side as propaganda, which is why that percentage is so high. Because what we agree with, we do not see as propaganda. But what the other side publishes in their media, we perceive as propaganda” (FG Participant 3).*

*“It is clear that there is that division in society, political division, ideological division; however we want to look at it, and it is clear that people also perceive media as if they were two poles. Opposite. (...) And then I wonder where the remaining 27% of people are who do not perceive the media as political propaganda. Do they also see such a great division between the media in Serbia? Because if there is a division, because if we look at the media as if some are at one end, others at the other, that there is nothing in between that we can hold onto, then that is a really big problem” (FG Participant 2).*

### 3.3.3. Unfavourable position of female journalists

The majority of the surveyed citizens perceive the position of women journalists in Serbia as very unfavourable. More precisely, four in five of them agree that women journalists in Serbia are often the targets of attacks, threats, insults, and harassment (80%).

Graph 9. *Distribution of answers to the question: The following statements refer to the position of women journalists in Serbia. On a scale from 1 to 4, assess how much you agree with the following statements.*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.



In the questionnaire used in this research, we singled out some possible reasons for the position of female journalists with which the surveyed citizens completely or mostly agreed in the following percentages: nearly three-quarters of surveyed citizens agree that attacks, threats, insults, and harassment stem from gender prejudices and stereotypes (72%), while 86% think that the attacks are the result of revealing the truth while reporting on politics, corruption, and crime. Finally, there is almost unanimous agreement among the surveyed citizens that the state bodies (police, judiciary) should protect women journalists when threatened or attacked (95%).

All focus group participants agree with the respondents that there is a problem concerning women journalists' position in Serbia. They believe that they are a frequent target of attacks, threats, insults and harassment precisely because they reveal the truth in their work, and the state has and should have an obligation to protect them.

However, journalists and editors do not perceive gender prejudices as a cause of attacks on women journalists but as a means used to discredit them.

*“Their work is the least attacked. This is roughly the most difficult to attack. But that is why their appearance, preferences, habits, places where they were, the people with whom they socialize... are attacked. Because misogyny here is somehow one of those isms that have the deepest foundation” (FG Participant 1).*

Gender prejudices used in attacks on women journalists are also seen as an instrument used to deter future journalists from choosing the profession.

*“All the attacks on women journalists actually send a message to the younger generations. Don't do this job. It's hard there. Everyone will talk about your private life. Don't go there; it is a dirty profession you should not be in. I think the idea is that the attacks aim to prevent entrants, women, from getting into this business. And that the system would prefer them to continue to be presenters of crocheting shows, or the women's page, or a Saturday afternoon show, without tackling serious topics. Because so far, we have seen that women journalists are much braver than men. So I think that the current system sees women as a great threat, which breaks their monopoly of force and power and authority” (FG Participant 3).*

According to journalists and editors in the focus group, attacks on women journalists

*“(...) primarily affect women journalists who work in the media. Not so much the outlets themselves. (...) I would say that for some media outlets, it can raise viewership, listenership and visibility if there is a buzz about one of their female journalists having been attacked. On the other hand, I think that it mostly affects women who are the*

*target of such attacks. For any reason. Therefore, [it affects] both her professional and private life” (FG Participant 2).*

According to the focus group participants, the fact that such a large share of the surveyed population recognizes the problem and its possible causes and sees a part of the solution in the systemic protection of female journalists is not of great importance for improving the position of female journalists in Serbia.

*“Apart from seeing that citizens perceive this in the right way, it does not have much to contribute to change. I even think it is the same as with the significant perception of corruption, because we all know that we are bribe-takers and ready to give a bribe, more or less. So we are simply aware of that. It is the same with this thing that women journalists are an easy target (...) and no one is seriously thinking about it” (FG Participant 5).*

*“I am glad that people recognize that, but on the other hand, I wonder if people recognize that, and we still have a problem. Then it is definitely not right. It is just that the whole system is actually in trouble” (FG Participant 6).*

What needs to be done to improve the situation? In addition to media literacy, the journalists and editors believe that it is necessary to strengthen existing mechanisms to protect journalists and ensure their consistent application.

*“Some state bodies, which are supposed to deal with the issue, (...) have even raised their voices when there were attacks on women journalists. Of course, that is unconvincing and implausible if it is not followed by the measures that only the state has at its disposal.” (FG Participant 5)*

The focus group participants also point out the lack of “guild solidarity,” where the reaction of colleagues and media that could have an impact is often lacking. “Because if a female colleague is attacked and all the media decide not to attend press conferences [as a gesture of solidarity and protest], that would really influence the state to deal with the attacks seriously. And to regulate them” (FG Participant 3).

As one way to improve the protection of journalists in general and women journalists in particular, the focus group participants support the initiative to grant journalists the status of an official.

*“To grant the status of an official to journalists and try to see if that can influence things to improve. I think that for the female colleagues who deal with such serious issues that could improve the situation a bit” (FG Participant 1).*

According to one of the focus group participants, women editors should play an essential role in the changes, given their position within the media. Although rare (and we should work on encouraging female journalists to train and strive for editorial positions), the female editors are those who could

*“(...) actualize this topic to a much greater extent even when there is no immediate cause. (...) The media is an important factor of change, and journalists are the ones who can force the issue. The only ones besides politicians who have the tools, who have the infrastructure, and who have some media power to actualize certain issues and through that sequence meaning editors – some new media, conceived in a new way, could change this story in the right direction. Then all these bodies would react, and the political will, then that will would become the will of a much wider circle of people” (FG Participant 5).*

In the end, journalists and editors in the focus groups are unanimous in concluding that political will is necessary to implement the existing mechanisms and introduce of new solutions.

*“If there is the political will to stand in the way of attacks on journalists for any reason, then I think this is how it works in Serbia; it could be implemented or at least accelerated. And if there is no such political will, which I think is the case at the moment, then we will have this situation for a long time to come” (FG Participant 2).*

## 4. CONCLUSION

The media system of the Serbian (not so) young democracy is in a difficult position. In addition to highly polarized media, where the basis of their polarization is unequivocally established in their different political and ideological orientations (Valić Nedeljković et al., 2021), the results of the opinion poll and the focus group research indicate that the local media scene is also characterized by a polarized audience.

The percentage of surveyed citizens in Serbia who stated that they mainly or completely trust the media (when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly) only slightly exceeds the percentage of surveyed citizens who say they do not trust the media.

Traditionally, television stands out as the medium with the highest percentage of trust among the surveyed citizens. At the same time, tabloidization and a sensationalist approach to reporting on the coronavirus have left their mark on trust in the print media (a sector dominated by tabloid print media), whom the highest percentage of respondents do not trust. What is encouraging, in a way, is the relatively high level of trust in the investigative media and the still modest but not negligible reach of the fact-checking portals.

The choice of specific media outlets that respondents singled out as the most or least trustworthy clearly illustrates the polarization of the audience. The same media are found at the top of both lists: The largest number of respondents singled out RTS (Radio Television of Serbia), TV Pink, Prva TV, N1, TV Happy as the media they trust the most because they publish accurate and verified information, due to impartiality in reporting, topicality of information, trust in the journalists who work there and openness to active audience participation.

TV Pink, N1, RTS (Radio Television of Serbia), Informer and TV Happy are the media that the largest number of the surveyed citizens singled out as the most distrusted because they are under political influence and spread disinformation, propaganda and hatred.

Resilience`s researchers also identified the same media as generators of propaganda, disinformation and hate in the research on disinformation and hateful propaganda models of media and communication (Valić Nedeljković and Janjatović Jovanović, 2020) and in the research on the main patterns and examples of hate and disinformation narratives in Serbia (Jovović and Valić Nedeljković, 2020). At the same time, the focus group participants – journalists and editors – see the tabloid media in Serbia as the main source of disinformation, propaganda and hatred.

Even a polarized audience recognizes that the media in Serbia are not good promoters of democracy and public interest.

The public media service RTS only partially fulfils its legal obligations because, for quite some time, in its news programme, it equates the public interest with the interest of the political groups in power. The majority of the surveyed citizens think that there is a lack of independent and impartial media in Serbia and that the existing media are mainly under the control of political and economic powers, primarily the government.

A significant number of the surveyed citizens consider the media in Serbia under the control of political groups at both ends of the spectrum. At the same time, many of the surveyed citizens think that the media is free to collect and publish information on all the relevant issues. These findings reflect the media reality in Serbia: after twenty years of reforms, the country has managed to create a system in which the freedom of the media implies (only) that our media freely report on issues relevant to the option whose interests they represent.

Both the media workers in the focus group and the surveyed citizens agree that propaganda and hatred are ubiquitous in the media. The media instrumentalizes hatred based on gender, national and other stereotypes in order to realize the particular interests of the groups to which they are loyal for ideological or financial reasons. But as the media workers warn, the media is also abusing the hatred rooted in society to increase circulation, viewership, or reach, and again, in the end, to make a profit.

The position of women journalists in Serbia is especially difficult. As many as 95% of the surveyed citizens agree that women journalists are exposed to attacks, threats, insults and harassment because they do their job well. The journalists and editors in the focus group do not see gender prejudices and stereotypes as a cause of attacks but rather as a tool to discredit female journalists. Not their work—because that is difficult to discredit—but rather female journalists personally, where attacks are dominated by discourse strategies stemming from classic misogyny.

## 7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- With the support of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and the Ministry of Culture and Information, to introduce mandatory educational programmes in the field of media literacy at all levels of education.
- To strengthen organizations and institutions that implement media literacy programmes for citizens, both those in the formal educational process and informal programmes with significant (preferable synchronized, joint) financial support from the competent ministries (Ministry of Culture and Information, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development), European Union programmes and other donor support.
- The Ministry of Culture and Information, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, European Union programmes and other donor media development programmes to provide financial support to civil society organizations and professional associations dealing with journalists and editors' continuing professional education, especially for the implementation of educational programmes on professional standards and fact-checking. To provide the public with free access to transparent, regular, credible and independent media research and auditing (media market data, audience research, etc.).
- The Ministry of Culture and Information to initiate and support regular public debates and dialogue on the media between citizens and media representatives, and to develop programmes and campaigns to promote and nurture professional, accountable and unbiased media, contributing to media literacy and also to trust in the media.
- The European Union programmes and media programmes of other donors to provide continuous support to civil society organizations and media and journalists' professional associations whose activities aim to improve existing and introducing new self-regulatory mechanisms, as well as mechanisms for protecting journalists and for safeguarding civil rights in general.
- The National Assembly to amend the Law on Public Information and Media in order to avoid the possibility of political influence when electing members of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media.
- The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media to accurately enforce the law and work precisely against conflicts of interest and media concentration, and thoroughly review acquisitions, i.e. the purchase of media outlets.
- The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media to ensure that the appointment of governing bodies of public service media is carried out without political interference and influence of other interest groups, in order to achieve the

public service media's full institutional autonomy and editorial independence in accordance with the Law on Public Media Services.

- Journalists' associations to conduct a broad information campaign on the position of journalists, especially female journalists, and to intensify pressure on decision-makers in order to enable consistent implementation of the existing mechanisms for their protection, and to advocate for the introduction of new protection mechanisms, such as, possibly, granting the status of an official for journalists.
- Journalists' associations to promote solidarity among journalists and media workers within their efforts to improve the protection of journalists.

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**FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS:**

FG Participant 1, male, journalist/editor of a national online media.

FG Participant 2, female, journalist of national TV media.

FG Participant 3, male, journalist of local online media.

FG Participant 4, male, editor of national online media.

FG Participant 5, male, editor of national TV media.

FG Participant 6, female, journalist of national print media.

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