

# Media trust in Serbia: polarized media, polarized audience



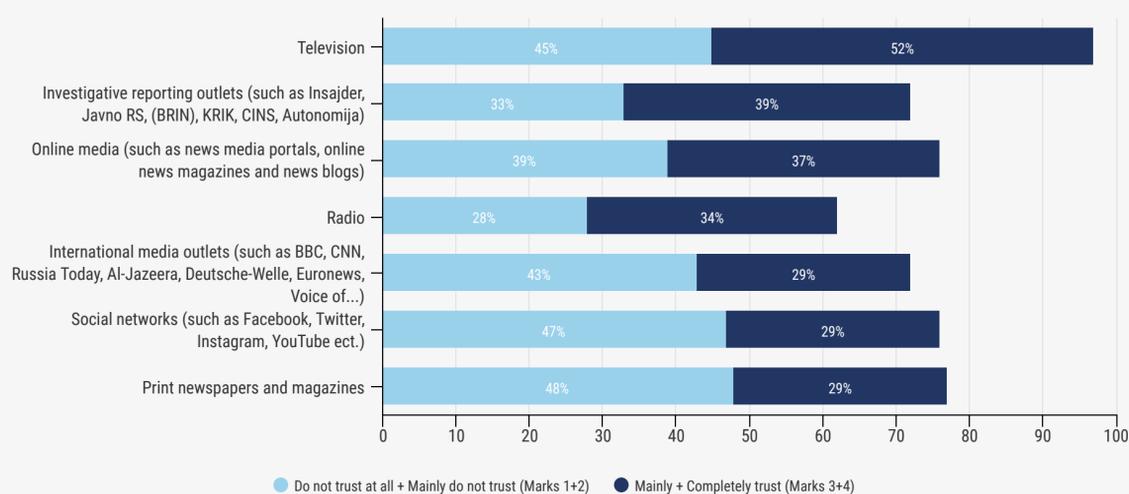
Propaganda, particularly hateful propaganda, serves political interests, but it is also used by the media to achieve financial profit. The impact is devastating on citizens as media users who, in the multitude of available information, neither distinguish nor value quality media and credible information.

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.

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.

Traditionally, television stands out as the media type 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, is the relatively high level of trust in the investigative media.

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).



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:

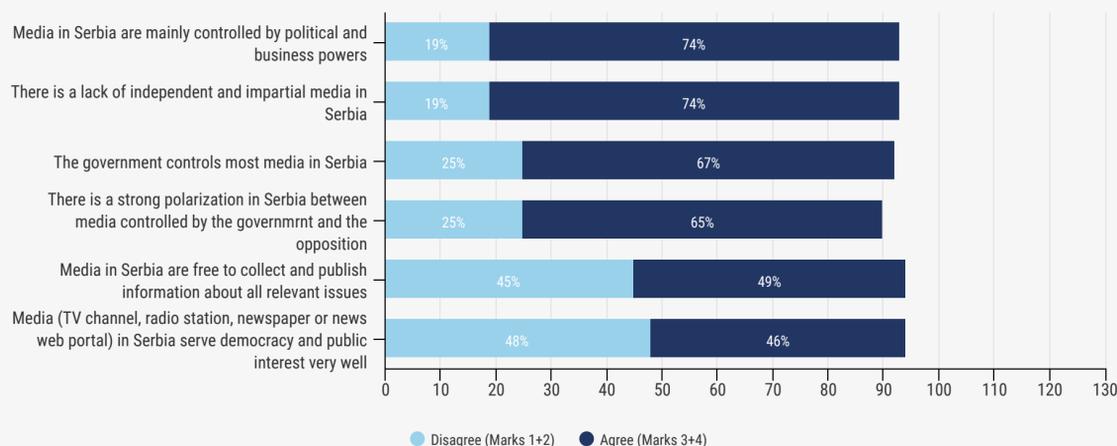
The largest number of respondents singled out RTS (Radio Television of Serbia), TV Pink, Prva TV, N1, TV Happy as the media they trust the most because they publish accurate and verified information, due to impartiality in reporting, topicality of information, trust in the journalists who work there and openness to active audience participation.

At the same time, 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.

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.

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



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%).

The media instrumentalize 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 are also abusing the hatred rooted in society to increase circulation, viewership or reach, and to make a profit.

Nearly three-quarters of surveyed citizens agree that attacks, threats, insults, and harassment to female journalists 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. There is almost unanimous agreement among the surveyed citizens that the state bodies (police, judiciary) should protect women journalists when threatened or attacked (95%).

## Policy recommendations:

The National Assembly should 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 government should legally prescribe a mandatory media register with purpose to provide transparency of media ownership, revenues, expenditures and ways of financing the registered media.

Editors of online media shall be provided with educational and other programs with the support of the responsible ministries (for media and education) fostering them to address problems of hate speech in user generated content and to take editorial responsibility for all content in their online media outlets, including those published on social networks. Resources should be provided by publishers to enable the media to introduce appropriate moderation of user generated content, to provide training of moderators and to compile and regularly update guidelines for users.

With the support of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, and the Ministry of Culture and Information, mandatory educational programs in the field of media literacy should be introduced at all levels of education.

Financial support by the competent ministries (Ministry of Culture and Information, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development), the European Union programs and other donor organisations should be provided in order to strengthen organizations and institutions that implement media literacy programs for citizens, both those in the formal educational process and informal programs.

The Ministry of Culture and Information, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, the European Union programs and media development programs by donor organizations should provide financial support to civil society organizations and professional associations involved in journalists' and editors' professional education, especially for the implementation of educational programs on professional standards and fact-checking.

The Ministry of Culture and Information should initiate and support regular public debates and dialogue between citizens and media representatives, and develop programs and campaigns to promote and nurture professional, accountable and unbiased media, contributing to media literacy and also to trust in the media.

Media development programs of the European Union and donor organizations should provide continuous support to civil society organizations, particularly to professional associations of media and journalists whose activities aim to improve existing and introduce new self-regulatory mechanisms, as well as mechanisms for protecting journalists and for safeguarding civil rights in general.

Journalists' associations should conduct a public awareness campaign presenting the position of journalists, especially female journalists. They should intensify efforts to influence decision-makers in order to achieve consistent implementation of the existing mechanisms for their protection.

Journalists' associations should promote solidarity among journalists and media workers within their efforts to improve the protection of journalists.

These are the findings of the research on media trust in Serbia conducted in 2021 within the project "Resilience – Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey" in seven countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.