RESILIENCE:
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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

Vesna Nikodinoska

NORTH MACEDONIA

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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.[1]

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.[2] 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.[3] All these served to reinforce the well-entrenched culture of impunity,[4] 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.[5] 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.[6]

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.[7] 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.[8] 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). "Utvrduvanje na vlijanieto na novite mediumi vrz formiranjeto na javnoto mislenje i vrz rabotenjeto 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[9] 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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9   *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.[10] 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.[11]

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.[12] 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*".[13]

> "*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 mislenje 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 mislenje I vrz rabotenjeto na tradicionalnite mediumi"*. *Skopje: AVMS. Available at: https://bit.ly/3emvH0G*

13   *Ibid. Pg. 37.*

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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.[14]

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.[15] 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.[16]

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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/3nKvnz7

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.[17] 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.

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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,[18] while social networks are the second most commonly consumed news source, the Ipsos Strategic Marketing opinion poll results show.[19] 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.[20]

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 informairame 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%d1%9ce-se-informirame-onla%d1%98n-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*
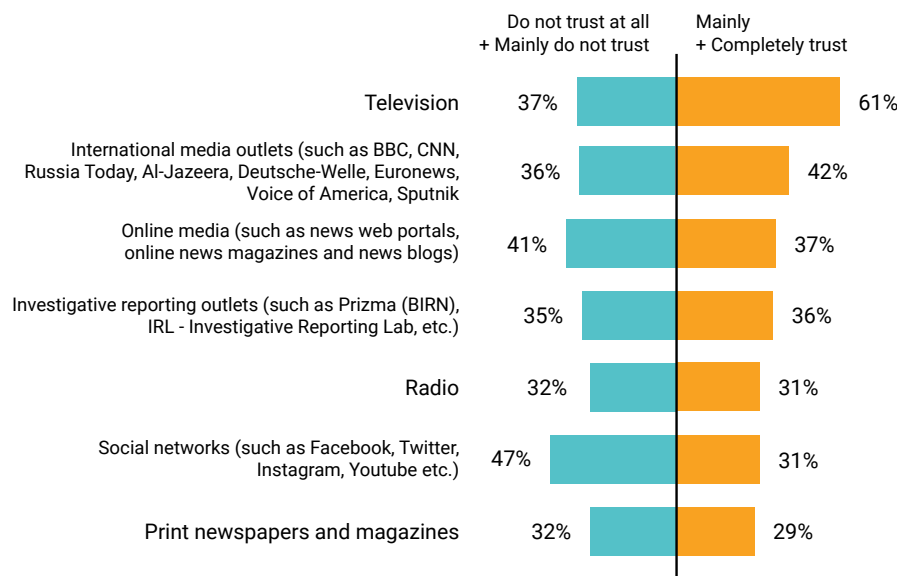
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

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

Television	61%
International media outlets (such as BBC, CNN, Russia Today, Al-Jazeera, Deutsche-Welle, Euronews, Voice of America, Sputnik	42%
Online media (such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs)	37%
Investigative reporting outlets (such as Prizma (BIRN), IRL - Investigative Reporting Lab, etc.)	36%
Radio	31%
Social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.)	31%
Print newspapers and magazines	29%

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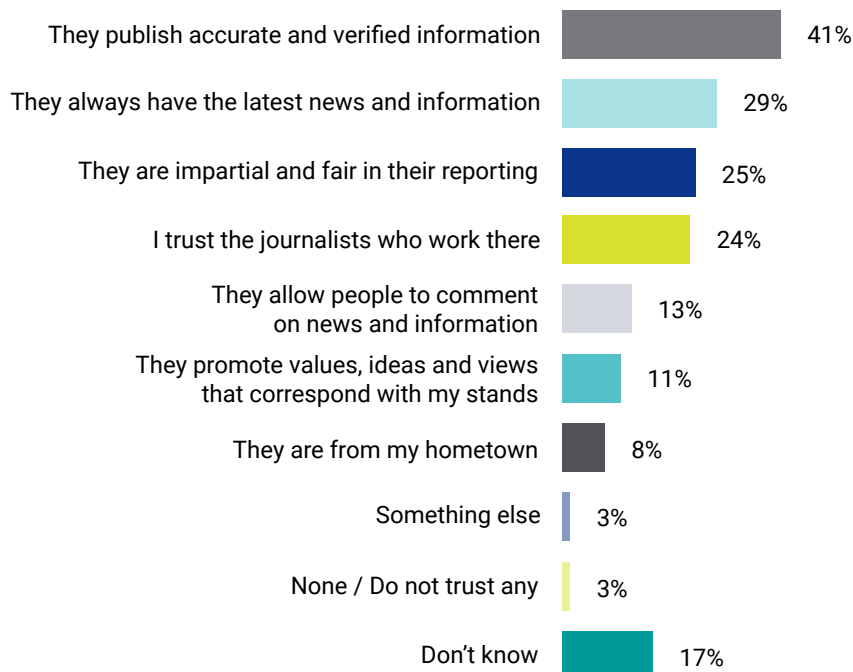
The focus group participants agree that considering the media and society in North Macedonia, the results are better than expected:

> "*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)*

Reason	Percentage
They publish accurate and verified information	41%
They always have the latest news and information	29%
They are impartial and fair in their reporting	25%
I trust the journalists who work there	24%
They allow people to comment on news and information	13%
They promote values, ideas and views that correspond with my stands	11%
They are from my hometown	8%
Something else	3%
None / Do not trust any	3%
Don't know	17%

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

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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.
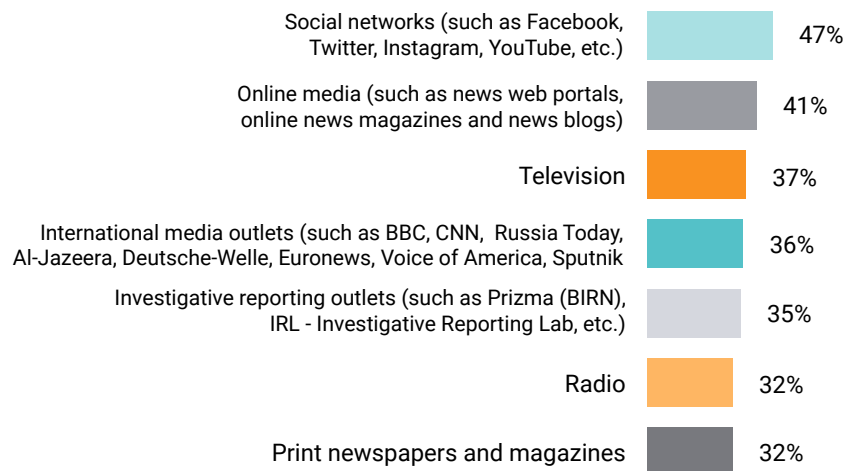
People with higher education find it more important than others that media outlets are impartial and fair in their reporting and that they promote values, ideas and views that correspond with their standpoints. Citizens of Albanian ethnic background trust a particular media outlet more because they trust 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)*
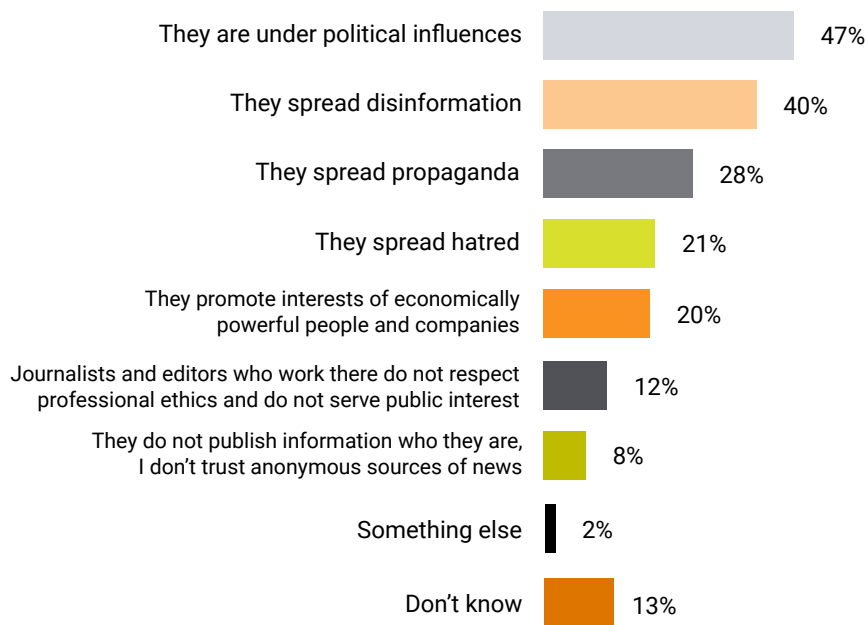
Base: Total target population

Social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.)	47%
Online media (such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs)	41%
Television	37%
International media outlets (such as BBC, CNN, Russia Today, Al-Jazeera, Deutsche-Welle, Euronews, Voice of America, Sputnik	36%
Investigative reporting outlets (such as Prizma (BIRN), IRL - Investigative Reporting Lab, etc.)	35%
Radio	32%
Print newspapers and magazines	32%

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

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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)*

Category	Percentage
They are under political influences	47%
They spread disinformation	40%
They spread propaganda	28%
They spread hatred	21%
They promote interests of economically powerful people and companies	20%
Journalists and editors who work there do not respect professional ethics and do not serve public interest	12%
They do not publish information who they are, I don't trust anonymous sources of news	8%
Something else	2%
Don't know	13%

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.

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> "*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.
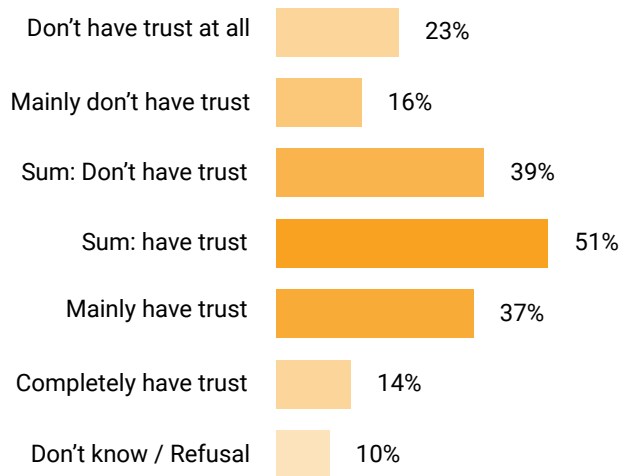
To encourage companies to advertise and thus support the professional media, the Register of Professional Online Media was established by the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia and the Association of Journalists of Macedonia in cooperation with the business community represented by the Economic Chamber of North Macedonia.[21] 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

Don't have trust at all	23%
Mainly don't have trust	16%
Sum: Don't have trust	39%
Sum: have trust	51%
Mainly have trust	37%
Completely have trust	14%
Don't know / Refusal	10%

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.

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21   *Promedia, Register of Professional Online Media. Available at: ProMedia.mk.*

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"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[22] showed that the PSB MTV is in 5th 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:*
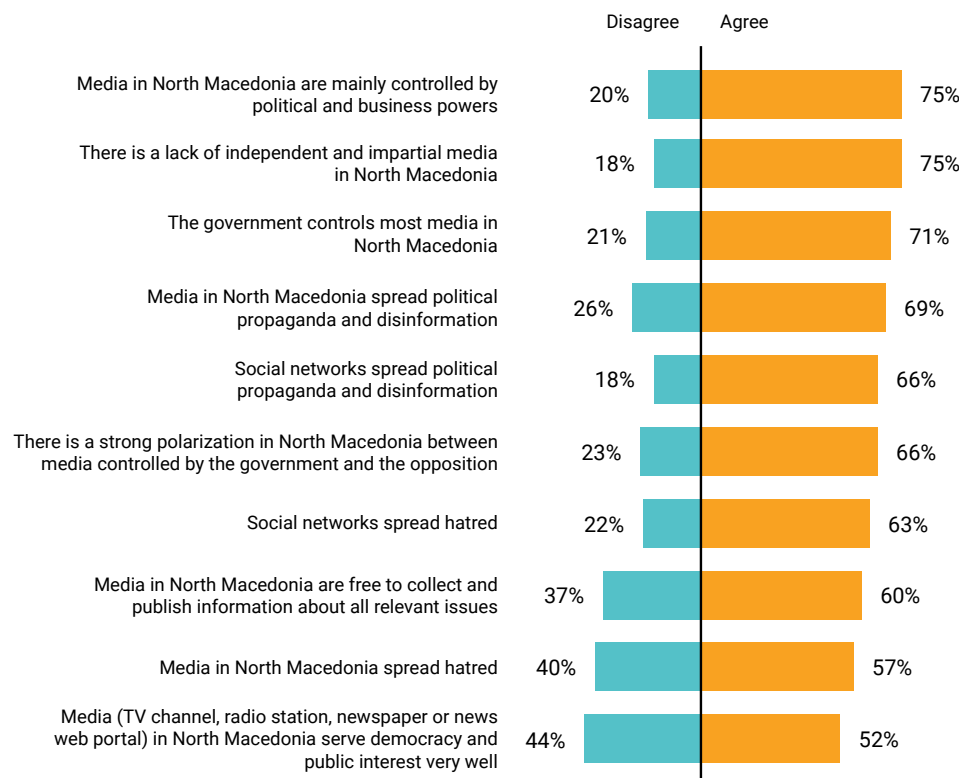
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

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.

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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.[23]

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.

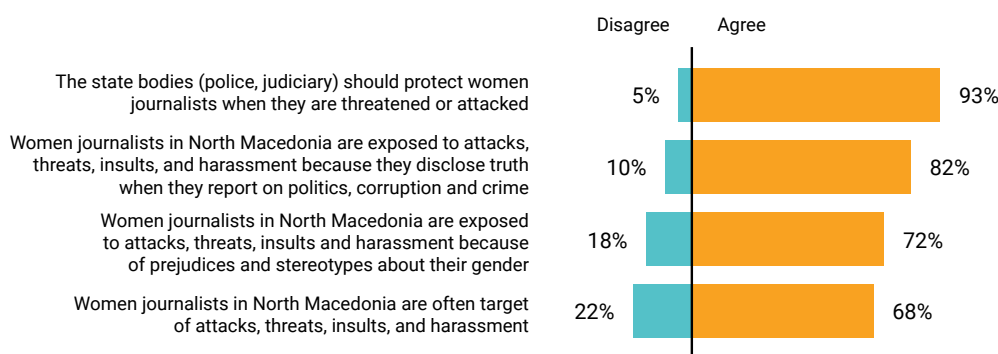23   *AVMS. Available at: www.avmu.mk; CEMM. Available at: https://complaints.semm.mk/?page_id=46.*

"*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?*

	Disagree	Agree
The state bodies (police, judiciary) should protect women journalists when they are threatened or attacked	5%	93%
Women journalists in North Macedonia are exposed to attacks, threats, insults, and harassment because they disclose truth when they report on politics, corruption and crime	10%	82%
Women journalists in North Macedonia are exposed to attacks, threats, insults and harassment because of prejudices and stereotypes about their gender	18%	72%
Women journalists in North Macedonia are often target of attacks, threats, insults, and harassment	22%	68%

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

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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 as accused of being slow, inert and ineffective in processing cases against journalists.[24] 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.[25] 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: Pokazateli za stepenot na sloboda na mediumite i za bezbednosta 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

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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.

About the author

Vesna Nikodinoska holds an MA in Global Communications from the American University of Paris. She is a Programme Manager and a researcher at the Macedonian Institute for Media in Skopje.

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