RESILIENCE:
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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MEDIA TRUST IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: TOGETHER APART

Sandra B. Hrvatin, Brankica Petković and Sanela Hodžić

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

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CONTENTS

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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

7

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.

10

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.

13

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.[1] 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.[2] 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

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1   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.

2   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.

14

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.

15

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 od 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

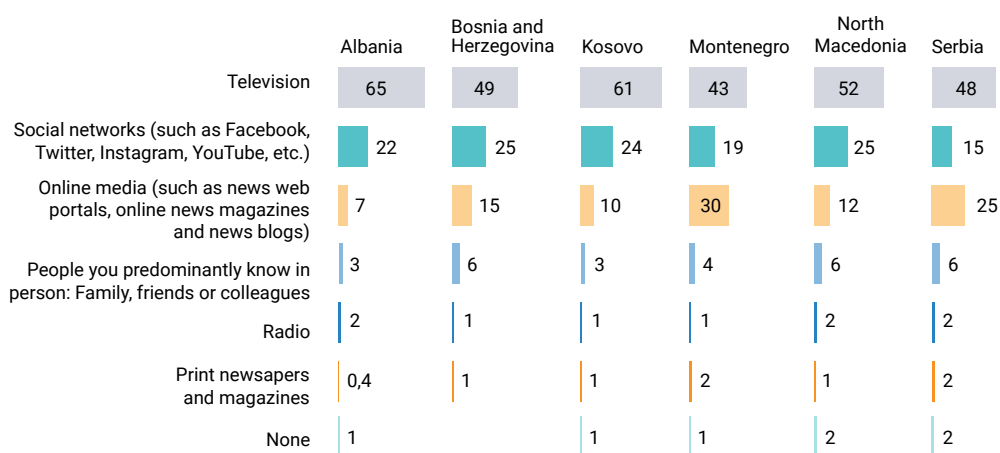|	Number of media professionals and media experts participating in focus group or number of interviews
Albania	6 participants in the focus group
Bosnia and Herzegovina	7 participants in the focus group
Kosovo	6 interviews
Montenegro	7 participants in the focus group
North Macedonia	9 participants in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

16

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.[3] 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?)*

	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Television	65	49	61	43	52	48
Social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.)	22	25	24	19	25	15
Online media (such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs)	7	15	10	30	12	25
People you predominantly know in person: Family, friends or colleagues	3	6	3	4	6	6
Radio	2	1	1	1	2	2
Print newsapers and magazines	0,4	1	1	2	1	2
None	1	1	1	2	2	2

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

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3   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**.[4]

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.[5]
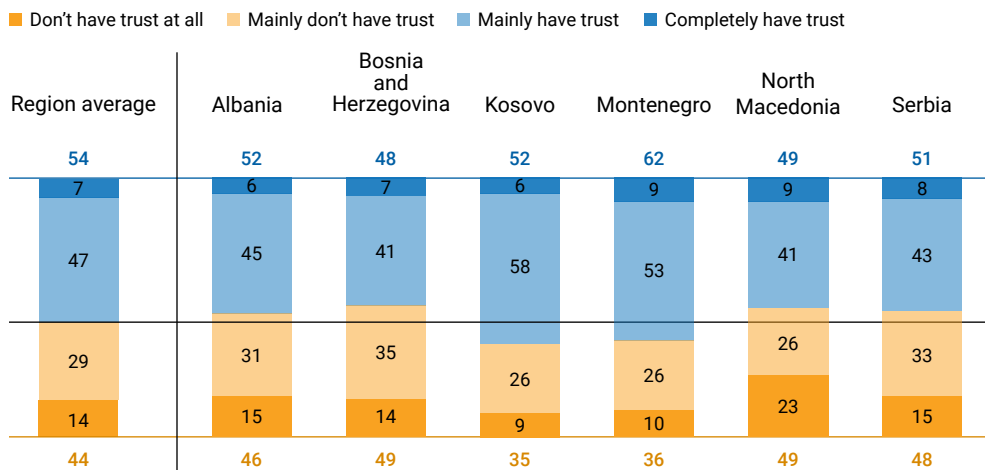
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4   *Only 9% of citizens in Kosovo use radio as a daily source of information and up to one fifth of citizens in Serbia, BiH and Montenegro (24%, 21% and 21%, respectively). Among the countries of the region, the press is most used in Montenegro, where 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).*

5   *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?)*

	Don't have trust at all	Mainly don't have trust	Mainly have trust	Completely have trust

	Region average	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
	54	**52**	**48**	**52**	**62**	**49**	**51**
Completely have trust	7	6	7	6	9	9	8
Mainly have trust	47	45	41	58	53	41	43
Mainly don't have trust	29	31	35	26	26	26	33
Don't have trust at all	14	15	14	9	10	23	15
	44	**46**	**49**	**35**	**36**	**49**	**48**

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).[6]

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?)*
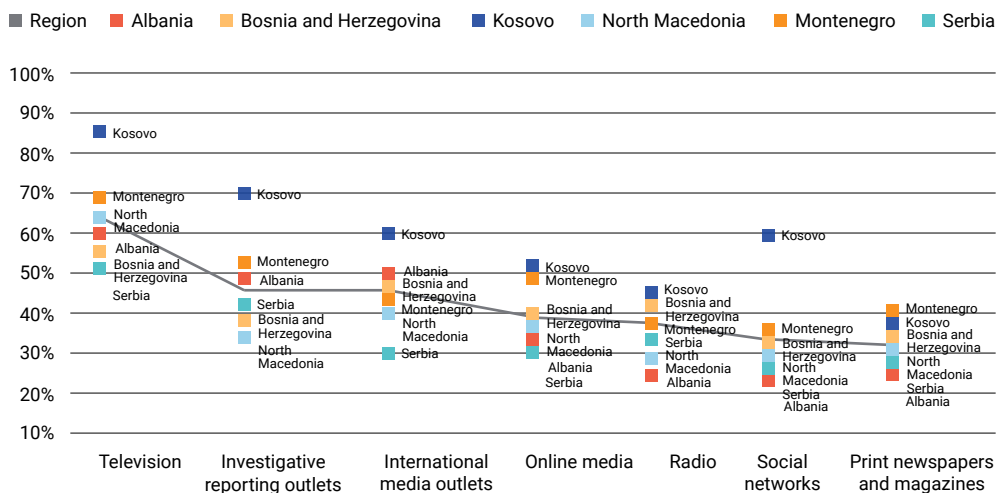
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

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).[7]

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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.[8] 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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8   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.)*
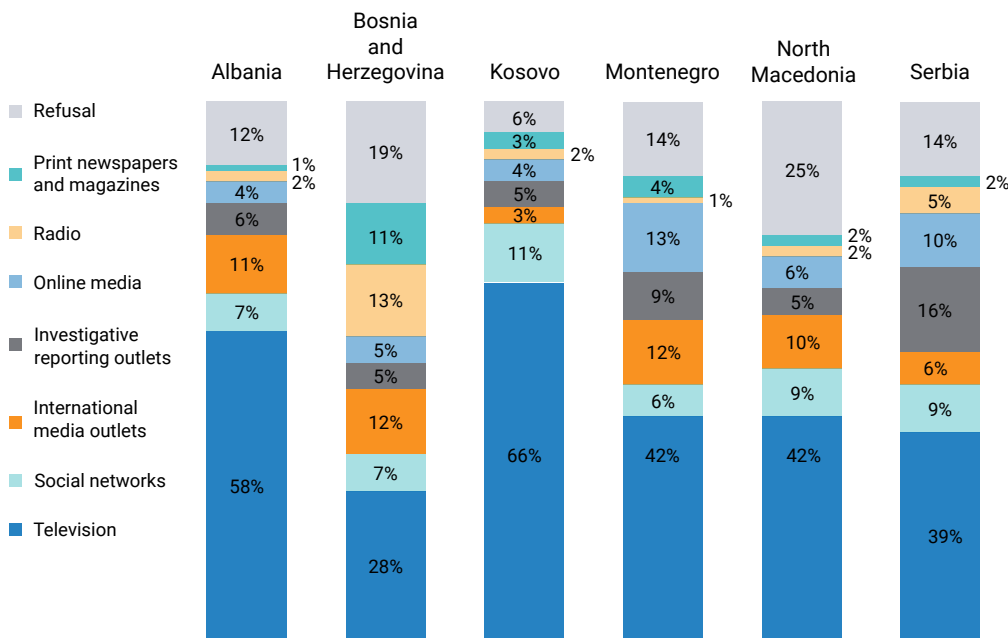
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

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**.[9] 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

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9   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,[10] while much lower in BiH,[11] Montenegro,[12] 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%).[13]

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,[14] or noting they do not trust any media outlet.[15] 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.[16] 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%).

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10   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.

11   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

12   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.

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

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

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

16   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.

23

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).[17] 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.[18]

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.
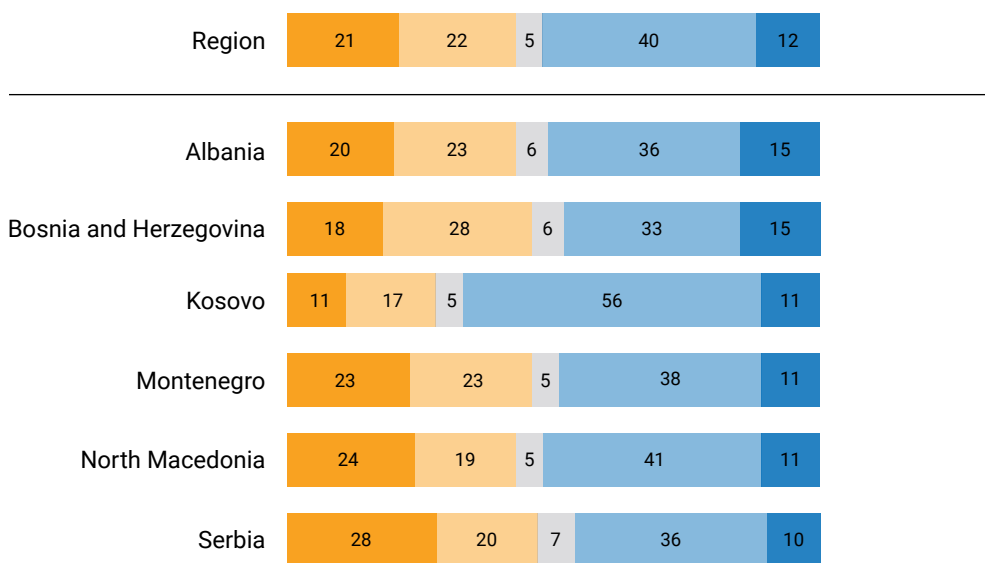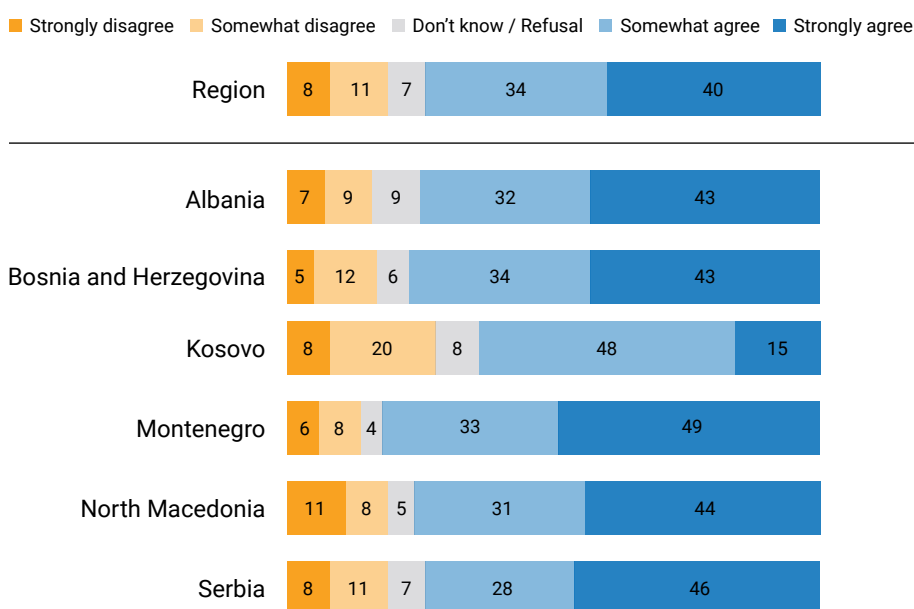

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

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17 *This share rises to two thirds in Kosovo, while in Serbia, it falls significantly below the regional average (46%).*
18 *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),[19] that the government controls most of the media in the country,[20] that there is a lack of independent and impartial media,[21] and that there is a strong polarization between media outlets controlled by the government and by the opposition.[22] 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.

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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%).

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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%.[23]

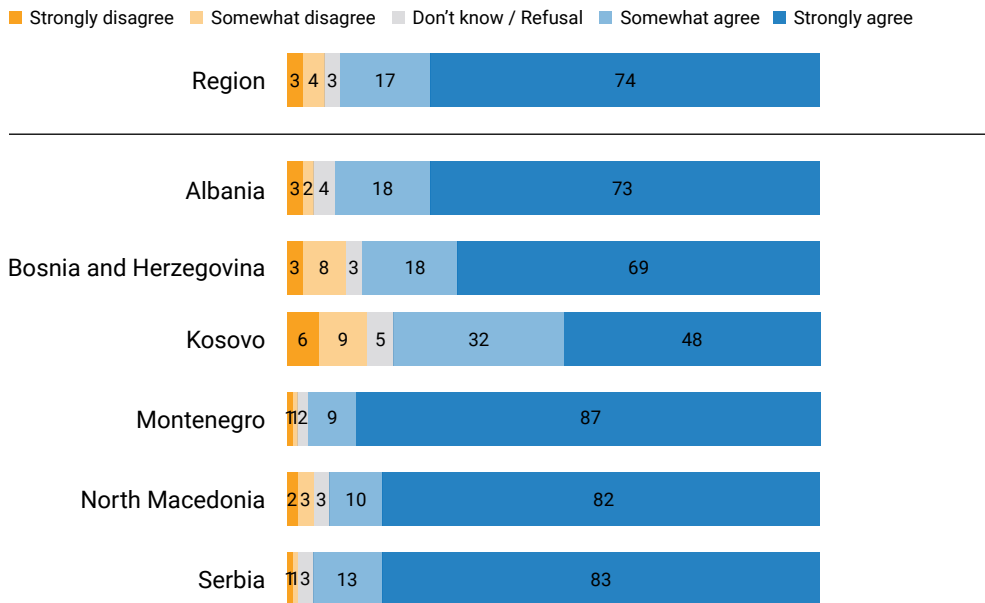23   49% in Albania, 52% in Serbia and 54% in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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.[24] 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*

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

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Don't know / Refusal	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Region	3	4	3	17	74
Albania	3	2	4	18	73
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3	8	3	18	69
Kosovo	6	9	5	32	48
Montenegro	1	1	2	9	87
North Macedonia	2	3	3	10	82
Serbia	1	1	3	13	83

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

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24 *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

28

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,[25] 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

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25   *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 l**ack 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 guarantees 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.

32

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