

Media Trust in the Western Balkans: Together Apart

Key research findings Part 1



One of the key characteristics of the propaganda media system's modus operandi is the constant production of distrust in the media. The architecture of the propaganda media 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.

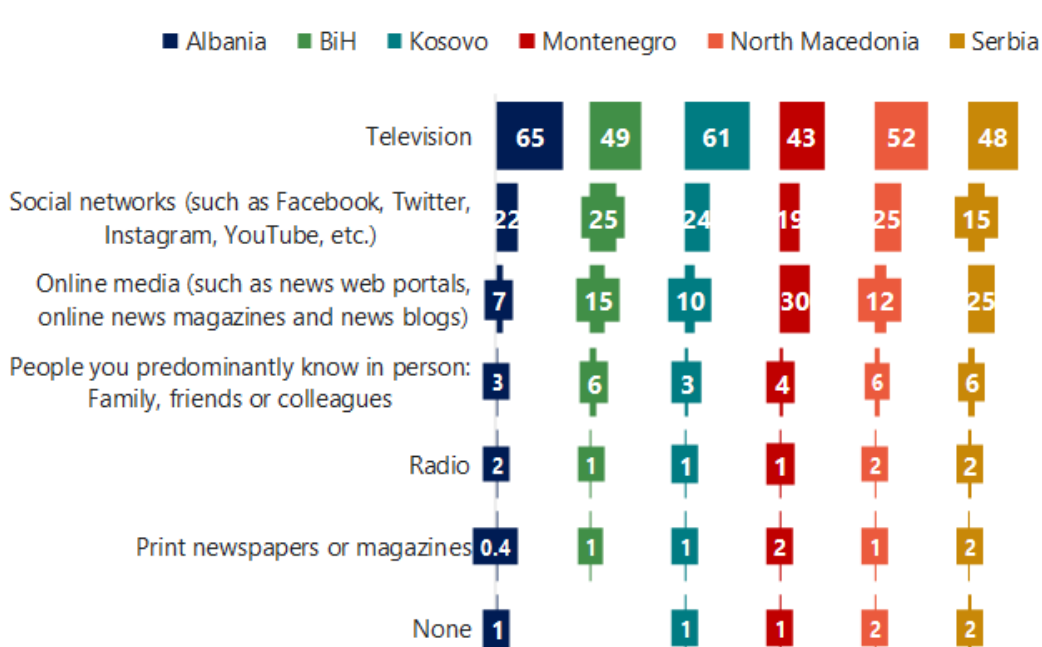


The results of the opinion poll carried out in six countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) indicate strong polarization of the public concerning the information sources they use and trust. This means that citizens' preferences are hardly a corrective mechanism against hate and propaganda narratives in the region.



Television dominates as the main and most frequently used source of information across the region. 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. Social networks, where hate narratives are the most present, are the second most used source of information in the region.

Graph 1: Main source of information
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

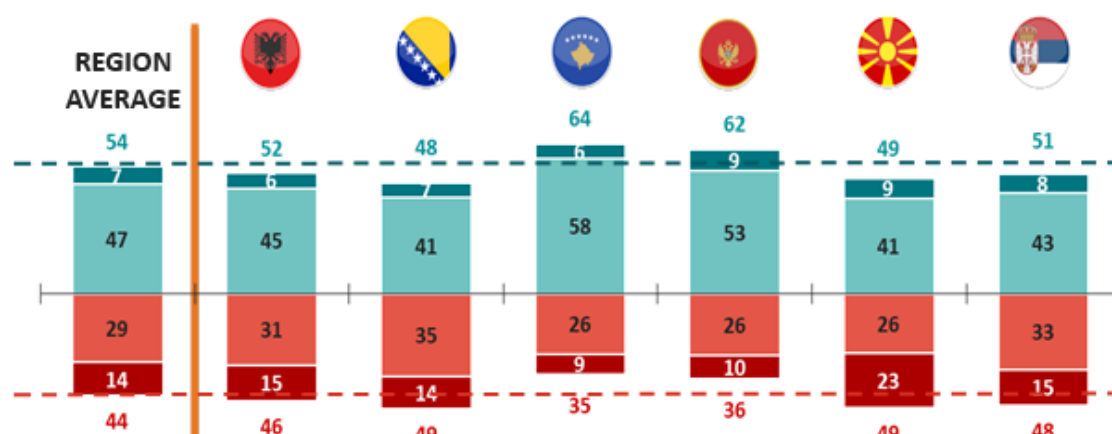


Trust in the media varies across the region, with citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and North Macedonia divided in around half of those that trust and half of those that distrust the media, and a higher number of citizens in Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania having trust in the media. The highest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

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

Graph 2: Public's trust in the media
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

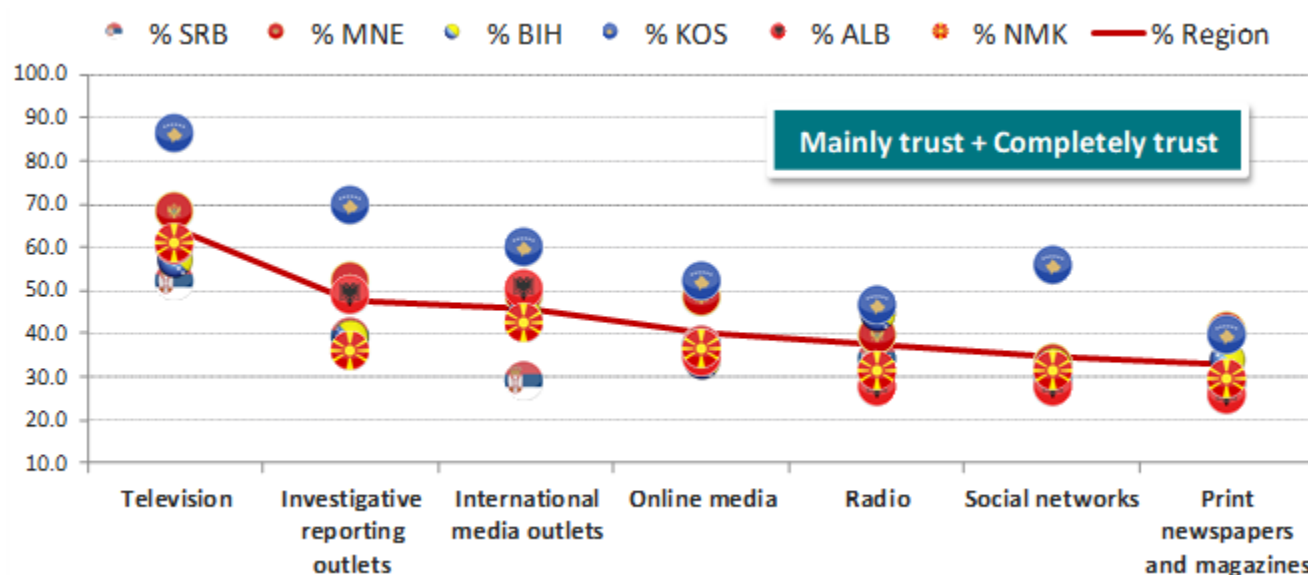
The half-trust in the media among citizens of the region is no surprise in the circumstances where financial and political interference, as well as lack of media resources, mar the trustworthiness and quality of media reporting.



Trust towards television as source of news and 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).

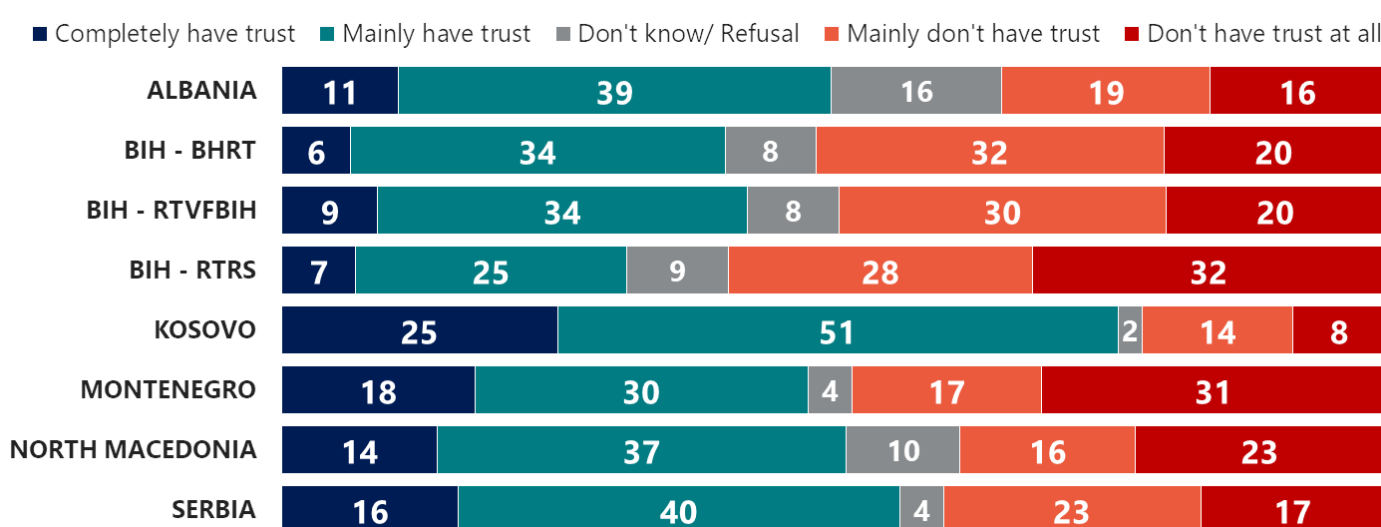
Graph 3: Trust in news sources
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Television is the most used and most trusted source of news and information in the Western Balkans. At the same time, many of the most-watched television channels in the region are full of political bias and propaganda.



Trust in the public service broadcaster varies across the region, being the highest in Kosovo (76%) and the lowest in Bosnia and Herzegovina 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.

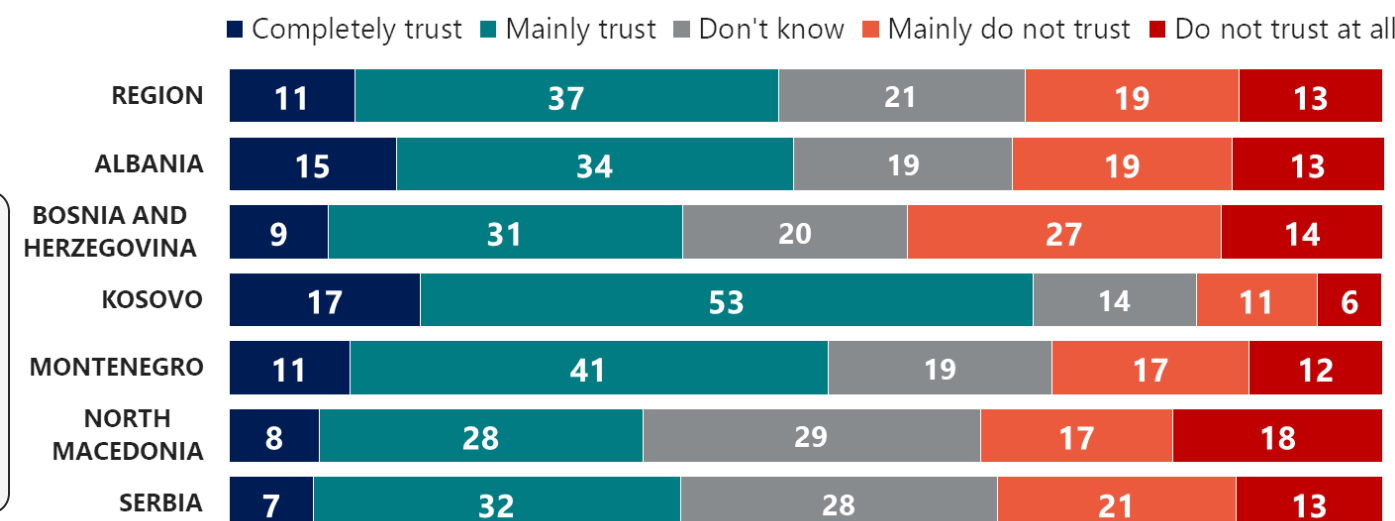
Graph 4: Trust in public service broadcaster
Source: Ipsos, 2021.



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.

Graph 5: Trust in investigative reporting outlets
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

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.



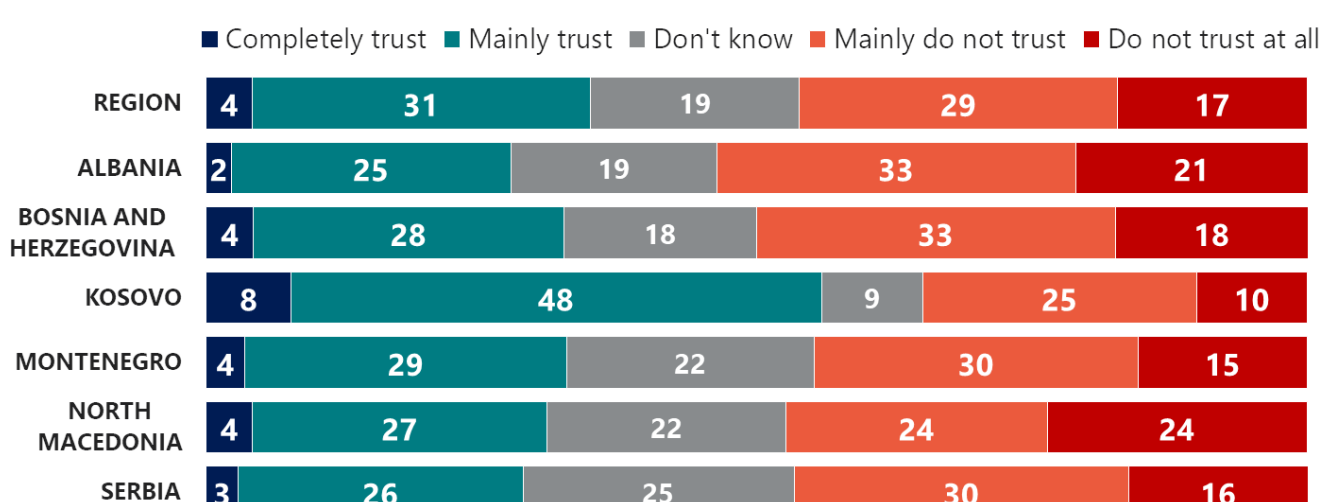
Between two fifths and three-fifths of citizens in the region say they mainly or completely trust the international media (such as BBC, CNN, Russia Today, Al-Jazeera, Deutsche-Welle, Euronews, Voice of America, Sputnik), with the level of trust in the international media being the highest in Kosovo (60%) and the lowest in Serbia (29%).



The share of citizens who trust social networks is fairly uniform across the region (approximately one out of three citizens in all countries), with exception of Kosovo, where more than a half of the population say they trust this type of information source (56%).

Graph 6: Trust in social networks
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

At the same time, the opinion poll results indicate high distrust in the information shared on social networks. 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 seems that other reasons, such as the need for belonging, entertainment and networking, prevail.



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