

Media Trust in the Western Balkans: Together Apart

Key research findings Part 2

There is poor consensus on the most trustworthy and least trustworthy media outlets in the region. The opinion poll results suggest that news and information sources are used and trusted by citizens based on the fact that they reinforce their attitudes and present their social group in a positive light.

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, while much lower in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia.

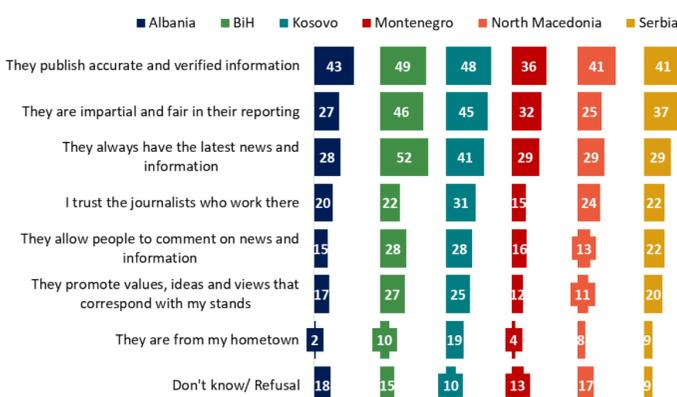
A significant proportion of citizens in the region did not list the media that they trust, either answering with "I do not know" or refusing to answer, or noting they do not trust any media outlet. The proportion of people who did not list media outlets they distrust is even higher, from 36% in Serbia to 84% in Albania.

Such results might indicate the rejection or inability of a large portion of respondents to identify specific media outlets that they trust and those that they distrust, which may point to the lack of the reflection and skills needed to assess the trustworthiness of media outlets, but also to an overtly generalized distrust towards the media, where each media outlet and every piece of information is regarded as specious.

When asked about the reasons for trust in the media, citizens in the region most often indicate accuracy, impartiality and fair reporting.

Graph 1: Factors related to the trust in media
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

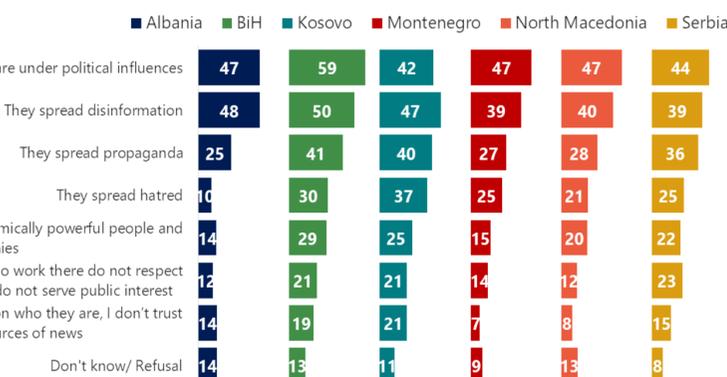
Interestingly, one of the reasons for trust frequently selected by the respondents was publishing the latest news and information. Other reasons involve the opportunity for user comments, promotion of values, ideas and views that correspond to their stands, etc.



Among the main reasons for distrust, there are perceived political influence and spreading disinformation and propaganda.

Graph 2: Factors related to the distrust in media
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

They are under political influences
They spread disinformation
They spread propaganda
They spread hatred
They promote interests of economically powerful people and companies
Journalists and editors who work there do not respect professional ethics and do not serve public interest
They do not publish information who they are, I don't trust anonymous sources of news
Don't know/ Refusal

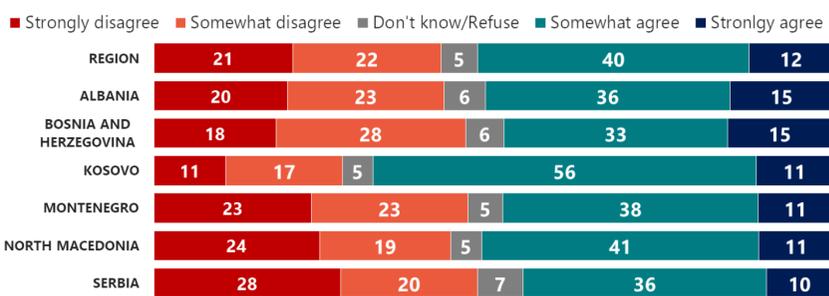


Citizens' preferences and trust are steered by a variety of factors, including the existing political and ethnic affiliations of citizens, used by the ruling class as a currency of power. Rational judgement about the quality and trustworthiness of information seems to be falling behind.

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 (fact-checking).

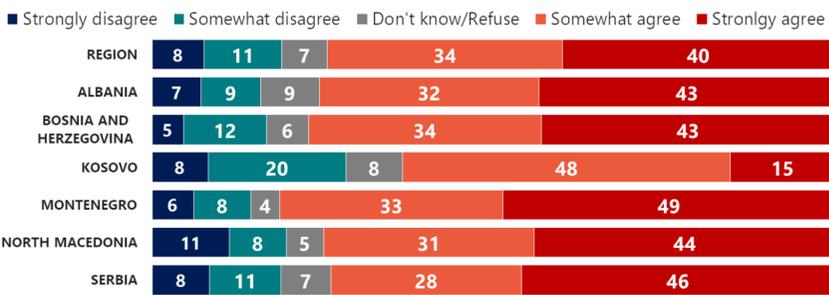
About half of the citizens in all six countries of the Western Balkans agree that the media in their country (TV channels, radio stations, newspapers or news web portals) serve democracy and the public interest very well. Slightly more than half of the citizens in most countries of the region believe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

Graph 3: Citizens' attitude towards the statement "Media in the country serve democracy and the public interest very well."
Source: Ipsos, 2021.



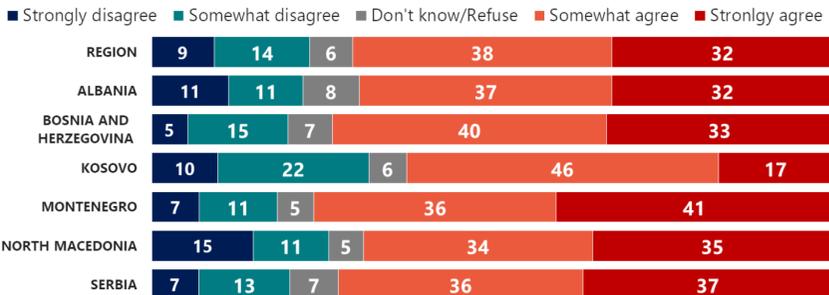
At the same time, the vast majority agree that the media is mainly controlled by political and business powers, that the government controls most of the media in the country, that there is a lack of independent and impartial media, and that there is a strong polarization between media outlets controlled by the government and by the opposition.

Graph 4: Citizens' attitude towards the statement "Media in the country are mainly controlled by political and business powers."
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

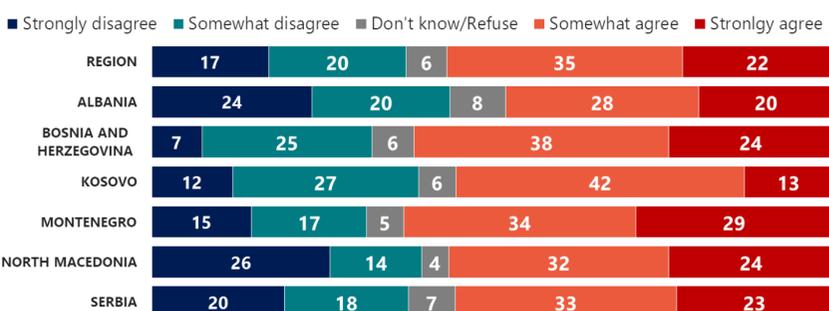


The majority of citizens in the countries of the Western Balkans believe that the media spread political propaganda and disinformation, and around half of citizens believe that they spread hatred.

Graph 5: Citizens' attitude towards the statement "Media spread political propaganda and disinformation"
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

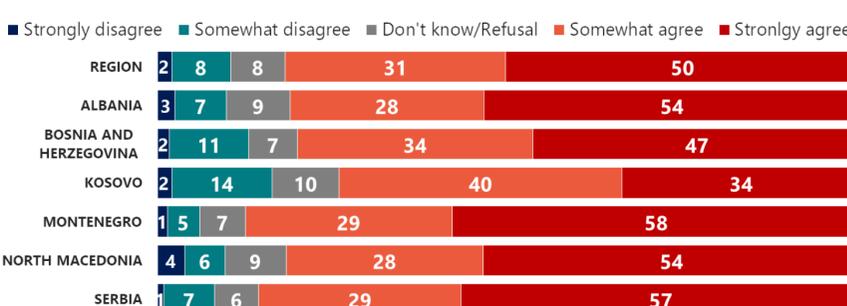


Graph 6: Citizens' attitude towards the statement "Media spread hatred"
Source: Ipsos, 2021.



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.

Graph 7: Citizens attitude towards the statement "Women journalists are often targets of attacks, threats, insults, and harassment."
Source: Ipsos, 2021.



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.

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, but rather numerous media outlets defending professional journalism and ensuring verifiable information. Their strength and ability to spread good quality journalism stories through communication platforms is not negligible.

The discrepancies in the results of the survey on media trust in the Western Balkans 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.

The preferences in the use of media and trust in the media are closely related to the capacities of the media for quality and independent media production. Media policies should be actively promoting those capacities. The state authorities should limit the political influence on media outlets, adopt and 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.

Media literacy education is 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. Will continue to use of the acquired media literacy skills will continue to depend on the ability of citizens to step out of their "echo chambers" 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 dominant nationalistic ideologies and promote the values of pluralism and critical thinking.

These are the main findings of the research on media trust conducted within the project "Resilience – Civil society action to reaffirm freedom of research 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.