

Rebuilding trust and countering polarization in (post)pandemic times

Recommendations for media policies
and journalistic practices
from The Illiberal Turn project

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Introduction

This report builds on new empirical evidence stemming from population surveys, in-depth interviews and other methods of data collection carried out between November 2019 and May 2020, as part of The Illiberal Turn project. The report aims to contribute towards the development of media policies and journalistic practices designed to overcome the negative consequences of polarization and populism, while also enhancing media pluralism and rebuilding trust in journalism within a rapidly changing information environment. The results and recommendations presented in this report are focused primarily on the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Serbia – but they will also be of interest to anyone concerned about the role of the media in the challenges faced by contemporary democracies.

The countries examined in this report have been going through an unprecedented decline in media freedom in recent years, which partly reversed the progress made during the earlier stages of democratic transition since the end of communist rule. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought even more challenges for the media, both in terms of their economic situation as well as in terms of additional restrictions on the press imposed by the governments. All this is happening during a time when independent, professional and trustworthy media are arguably needed more than ever, to help fight the “infodemic”

of misinformation, and to serve as reliable information sources during an unprecedented public health crisis.

Developed in collaboration with key stakeholders from the region and beyond, this report sets out practical recommendations for policy makers, regulators, media professionals and media-related NGOs. These recommendations, which are driven by our data and thereby only encompass a limited number of issues, are intended to inform the practices of different stakeholders, as well as to improve their understanding of the needs, experiences and opinions of news media audiences. The report is meant to complement, rather than to compete with, the existing body of work produced by various organizations in the areas of media literacy, disinformation, editorial freedom, journalistic ethics or related subjects that our report deals with.

The following pages summarize the recommendations based on the most significant findings from our comparative data set. They are supported by illustrative quotes from qualitative interviews, while relevant empirical findings from surveys are attached in the Appendix, together with more detail about our data sets and methodology of data collection.

Executive summary of key recommendations

1. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Political independence and impartiality of public service media need to be protected and safeguarded. This extends to the safeguarding of the independence of their regulators.
- PSM organizations should enhance their presence in the online domain (including on social media) and invest in the development of state-of-the-art news apps.
- Efforts to combat misinformation and harmful content online should prioritize self-regulatory approaches before statutory regulation of digital platforms on a national level. Implementation of the relevant EU legislation, such as the Digital Services Act, should contain safeguards against potential abuse of regulatory oversight of online platforms by government authorities.
- Media literacy programmes and policies should focus on previously neglected populations that are most vulnerable to disinformation, particularly the elderly and those with lower education. They should also aim at improving people's knowledge about the role of the media in democracy, as well as enhancing their skills to better cope with the risks of the online environment.
- Public funding should be provided for research that can help address the risks of misinformation and polarization.
- Regulatory authorities should strive to uphold the principle of political impartiality of broadcast media, wherever applicable and achievable within a framework of democratic, independent media regulation, and while safeguarding the ability of media to produce critical reporting on issues of public interest.
- Governments as well as the EU should foster an economically enabling environment for independent media, including transparent programmes for their economic support.
- National media policies should include mechanisms for support of quality local/regional media, as well as strategies for increasing local/regional content in national media outlets.
- Regulatory authorities should develop health crisis support and guidance for media organisations, incorporating measures that proved effective in ensuring the dissemination of trustworthy, clear, and accurate information during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Media organizations, journalistic associations and other professional bodies should develop internal codes of practice and/or guidance on how best to avoid fuelling polarization.
- Journalists should strive to separate facts from opinions, and to uphold the values of impartiality, fairness and accuracy in their reports.
- Despite difficult circumstances, news organizations should maintain and, wherever possible, expand the amount of professional, high-quality investigative reporting.
- Individual media organisations as well as journalistic associations should also develop recommendations for journalists' conduct during a public health crisis, paying particular attention to guidance for reporting on divisive issues, and provision of information on expert views and protective measures.

1. Policy recommendations

The current public focus on the dangers of social media and misinformation can distract from the more fundamental need for safeguarding quality news and media independence. Investment in regulation aimed at digital service providers should not detract from continued investment and development of other aspects of media regulation. Our policy recommendations therefore combine suggestions for digital media regulation and suggestions for the regulation of legacy media and public service media.

1.1 Public service media

Independent public service media constitute an important part of the democratic news media ecosystem. While they find themselves under increasing political and market pressure in many countries of Central and Eastern Europe (and beyond), and in some countries they have been effectively transformed into state media, our research demonstrates that people appreciate independent and politically neutral public service broadcasting. There is a clear positive association between trust in PSB channels and those channels being considered independent by both audiences and experts (see Fig. 1.1-1.8. in the appendix for evidence). Our interviews also show that people are more likely to avoid PSB channels if they perceive them as biased or lacking in independence – as several of our participants in Poland, Hungary and Serbia do (Q1.1, Q1.2). Furthermore, people who are concerned about the lack of balance and objectivity in PSM are also more likely to object to public funding for PSM (Q1.3). In addition, the data indicate that audiences of politically more independent PSB channels (as in the Czech Republic) are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories, and have more favourable attitudes towards democracy, while in the other countries the pro-democracy attitudes are more likely to be held by audiences of commercial broadcast media (Fig. 1.9).

Q1.1

“I feel like TVP is showing what they have to, it’s some kind of political propaganda. I’m not that much against political activity of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość but I think what they are doing is wrong. That’s why I don’t want to watch TVP because they are lying in many respects.”

(Pol-07, female, 46, rural)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In the interest of maintaining audience ratings and support for public funding of PSM, as well as to avoid audience polarization and audiences becoming accustomed to relying on low quality, untrustworthy media, it is necessary to **safeguard political independence and impartiality of public service media**, including independence of their statutory regulators.

This should be achieved via

- a) upholding and strengthening relevant national and EU legislation;
- b) intensified pressures by international organizations and professional bodies on those broadcasters who do not comply with the goals and mission of public service broadcasting;
- c) strengthening PSM's accountability and social transparency, e.g. by implementing regular performance monitoring procedures.

Q1.2

"Those [on RTS1] are filtered news. I can't say that all of them are propaganda /.../ but I do believe that they are very much modified, let's say so. That they're not the way they're supposed to be, especially the way they should be on the public service /.../ We're all paying for that and we deserve, umm, we deserve to get the information that we don't have."

(Srb-06, female, 31, urban)

Our findings also lend support for the argument that the existence of a strong and impartial PSB helps limit audience polarization. This is something we can infer from comparing the Czech media system, where polarization remains relatively limited, with Hungarian and Serbian media systems, where polarization is significantly more extensive, as the political/ideological "centre" of the media map is virtually absent (Fig. 1.10 – 1.11).

Political pressures or the sustainability of the funding model are not the only issues public service broadcasters in the region (and beyond) have to deal with. Other challenges stem from the new technological environment and changing audience demographics, particularly losing touch with the younger generation (Fig. 1.12). Our interviews and media diaries point to the growing importance of digital platforms as sources of news for younger citizens, but also to the significance of accessible, state of the art websites and apps linked with legacy media brands (Q1.4, Q1.5, Q1.6). It is indicative that there have been no references specifically to PSM websites or apps in this context, which suggests that commercial media are currently outperforming PSM in this area.

Q1.3

"It's not a problem that we're financing them. But man, be objective then. Say that there's two sides of the coin, not just one. Three sides, sometimes five sides. Give everyone a chance to say what they think ..."

(Srb-17, male, 38, rural)

Q1.4

“Financial Times, I have it on my phone. So that’s what matters, what I have on my phone. So I receive notifications from there, and I open up the article, I don’t read all of it either, but I make sure to read the headline and maybe a few words.”

(Hun-22, female, 36, urban)

Improving the online presence of PSM will also be a crucial prerequisite for enhancing their ability to reach younger audiences during major crises. As evident from our research, younger audiences were much more likely to rely on digital media to follow government briefings and press conferences, and often accessed them through live feeds through government’s social media accounts.

Q1.6

“I like Kurir because I have their app on my phone so I read it all the time”

(Srb-26, female, 37, urban)

Q1.5

“I must say I visit some webs more often because it is easy to open them; they have simple application or so. It is just convenient. I would follow some media more often, but their web may be disorganised, unclear.”

(Cze-06, male, 19, rural)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In order to reach younger audiences, as well as to remain competitive in the digital news media market, public service media should **step up their presence and visibility in the online domain** (especially on social media) and **invest in the development of state-of-the-art apps** (including news apps). Custom made studies could be designed to help with the development and marketing of such apps, developed through collaboration between researchers and public service media providers.

1.2 Digital platforms and harmful content

Regulation of digital platforms, especially with regards to harmful and/or illegal content, counts towards the biggest challenges that countries are facing in the contemporary information environment. However, while current policy debates in the EU and beyond are dominated by attempts to bring platforms under stricter regulatory control, our findings caution against policies that would potentially open doors for abuses of regulatory oversight by illiberal governments.

Q1.7

"I watched the videos of Zállatorvos and Dr. Gödény on this topic."

Interviewer: So you think scientists' opinion about the coronavirus are important?

"Yes, because artificial fearmongering has become so rampant, that I think it is important to know the opinion of independent, really independent - at least in my opinion – experts about this."

(Hun-15, male, 38, urban)

As evident from our data, an important part of attraction of digital media platforms lies in the perception of authenticity and absence of censorship. This became obvious for example in our analysis of people's information seeking strategies during the pandemic, when they were searching for expert information online. Several of our participants in Serbia and Hungary distrusted expert advice provided by officially appointed experts through mainstream news channels, and instead turned to social media – typically Facebook or YouTube – for alternative sources of expert information, which were perceived as more

authentic and reliable (Q1.7, Q1.8). While expert information found online often came from trustworthy sources, some of our participants also ended up trusting self-professed experts who offered dubious advice – such as for instance Dr Gödény, a Hungarian pharmacist and fitness celebrity who advocated against lockdown measures and mask wearing (Q1.7).

It is also clear that perceptions of bias, censorship and misinformation vary significantly with one's political and ideological preferences. Due to this, regulation should focus on measures that minimise the need for direct removal of potentially harmful content, as this can enhance suspicion and act to attract people to content that was removed, and also removes the need to distinguish between disinformation, misinformation and biased content.

Another reason why digital platforms policies should steer clear of giving national governments the power to enforce removal of undesirable online content is the lack of safeguards that such power will be exercised under proper democratic control.

Q1.8

"I didn't trust them [government officials] that much. I also watched certain TV shows which I found on YouTube, and which dealt with what certain virologists and epidemiologists, who weren't prominent in the media, had to say about the coronavirus. I trusted them more than the doctors from the crisis headquarters."

(Srb-06, female, 31, urban)

Data from our survey demonstrate that users of social media and messenger apps in Poland, Hungary and Serbia tend to display more liberal and pro-democracy attitudes than non-users (see Fig. 2.1.-2.3.), which indicates that in these countries, digital platforms might serve as a counter-balance to the government-controlled part of the news media ecosystem. This lends further support to arguments for keeping the digital space in principle open and without unnecessary government intervention, and instead emphasize self-regulatory and co-regulatory measures to combat hate speech and disinformation. The draft of the Digital Service Act, which is currently being discussed in the EU,¹ offers some promising solutions for tackling the regulation of digital platforms that are aligned with our recommendations. At the same time, any self- or co-regulatory mechanisms should involve and apply to all relevant actors, not just the global platforms but also the domestic market players.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In the interest of safeguarding an open communication environment and minimizing the risk of politically-motivated censorship, especially in countries where an increasing proportion of media are under government's control or influence, **efforts to combat misinformation and harmful content online should prioritize self-regulatory and/or co-regulatory approaches** before statutory regulation of digital platforms on a national level.²

In addition, **public funding should be provided for research that can help address the risk of misinformation and polarization**, and enhance media pluralism: (a) research aimed at assessing the effectiveness of risk mitigation strategies implemented by digital platforms, (b) research investigating news habits and attitudes among parts of the population that have been identified as particularly vulnerable to misinformation (e.g. older audiences, conspiracy theory believers, audiences of known misinformation outlets), (c) action-oriented research, developed in collaboration with public service media and aimed at developing and testing effective strategies for reaching young audiences with quality news content.

1.3. Media literacy

While there is a general agreement among policy makers, NGOs and other actors that enhancing digital skills and media literacy of the population should count towards the priorities of media and communication policies both on a national and European level, there are still significant gaps in the implementation of such policies, as well as in the specific groups and platforms that are targeted by them.

Q1.10 "Those NGOs that [Soros] finances try to enforce values on society that the majority of people do not agree with. For example... how they treated migrants and they should be paid compensation... [...] I hear about this every day."

Interviewer: In HírTV and M1?

"I hear it in M1 as well...On M1, this is always mentioned in the news."

(Hun-14, female, 56, urban)

Our data confirm high incidence of encountering disinformation by citizens across all four CEE countries, with an average 80% of our respondents reporting to have come across false information online in the past month (Fig. 3.1). Ability to recognize disinformation is negatively correlated with age (Fig. 3.2.) and education (Fig. 3.3.), indicating that it is the lower educated and elderly citizens who are potentially the most vulnerable when accessing online news. The need for paying more attention to information needs, routines and skills of seniors is further supported by our findings concerning political chain emails – an often neglected but clearly important channel of disinformation which is specifically aimed at the older generation. While the share of seniors receiving such emails differs across the countries (over 55% of 56+ years old in the Czech Republic, but only 27% in Poland), most of their recipients – and elderly users in particular – forward them further (see Fig. 3.4), thereby contributing to the spreading of disinformation. Our interviews also confirm that such emails are a source of misinformation, including scaremongering stories about violence and disorder attributed to immigrants (e.g., Q1.9).

However, the Internet and social media are not the only types of media in the disinformation ecosystem in Central and Eastern Europe. According to country's experts, various offline media brands are often disseminating disinformation as well, including public service TV and radio stations in Hungary and Poland, a minor commercial TV in the Czech Republic, and an international state-affiliated radio station in Serbia (see Fig. 3.5-3.8). Our interviews likewise show

Q1.9 "I've never seen anything positive in this connection, that the immigrants help anybody. Only disorder, everywhere...in France, Germany, that's everything... Now in Greece [...] everything burning there, on fire...I received it by e-mail...My acquaintances sent it to me. [...] I watch it on TV and then it comes by e-mail, to confirm it."

(Cze-28, female, 66, rural)

Q1.11 **Interviewer:** Smoleńsk – you believe third parties were involved.

"This is my inner conviction."

Interviewer: Does the media talk about this?

"Yes, they do, in a sense that they give money for the activities of some commission, which does God knows what...I've read this on Facebook."

(Pol-11, female, 63, rural)

that mainstream media may be acting as sources of misinformation and even conspiracy theories, for instance those about the Smolensk plane crash, about immigrants, or about the influence of the Hungarian-born American billionaire and philanthropist George Soros (Q1.10). While this does not diminish the concerns about the role of social media in spreading similar narratives (Q.1.11), it suggests that policies aimed at countering disinformation as well as those trying to improve media literacy should broaden their focus and not leave traditional media aside, especially those controlled by the government.

Q1.13 "Well, probably when I would feel like there is no news source that is objective and this is what my access to objective news would depend on, then I would pay for it. But as long as there are others that I don't have to pay for then probably not."

(Hun-24, male, 42, urban)

Q1.12 "What can I do. What can I say? Even if they are doing it, I'm indifferent. I don't do anything bad, so there's nothing to blackmail me with."

(Srb-09, male, 48, rural)

The focus on disinformation should, at the same time, not overshadow other issues that ought to be tackled by media literacy programmes and policies. Our interviews have revealed a significant lack of digital skills and/or awareness about issues of online privacy and security among Internet users across the four countries (e.g. Q1.12). In addition, many interviewees seemed unaware of how journalism is being funded in the digital age,

leading to a widespread unwillingness to pay for news in an environment when online content is seemingly "free" (Q1.13). We propose therefore that media literacy education also pays due attention to enhancing people's knowledge about the basic principles of digital economies, algorithm-driven marketing strategies, as well as the about the economic impact of digital platforms on the sustainability of independent, professional journalism.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Media literacy programmes and policies should focus on previously neglected populations that are most vulnerable vis-à-vis disinformation, particularly the elderly and those with lower education. Specifically tailored projects and campaigns should help these groups enhance their abilities to recognize disinformation and improve their digital skills³. At the same time, these **projects need to broaden their scope in terms of the type of media types and platforms**, and incorporate more complex strategies for fighting disinformation in a high-choice but increasingly government-controlled media environment. In addition, **media literacy should aim at enhancing people's skills to better cope with the risks of online environment**, as well as to promote the importance of paying for news to safeguard independent journalism. Finally, the media themselves should assume an active role in educating citizens and get involved in media literacy initiatives. For that purpose, a specific **media literacy training for journalists** should be promoted and implemented.

1.4. Trust, news diets and polarization

A number of polls and studies have recorded a continuous decline of media trust in most democratic countries over the last several years. Our survey data confirm that distrust is more prevalent than trust across the four CEE countries, with the Czech and Polish respondents being relatively less distrustful towards both traditional and digital media than the Hungarian and Serbian ones (Fig. 4.1.-4.2.). However, while this outcome suggests a correlation with the state of media freedom in each country, the relationship on the level of individual news consumers is more complicated. Even though for many people, perceived independence of a particular news medium is clearly a major factor in deciding whether to use and trust it (see Q1.14), there are still plenty of those for whom it is more important that news brands align with their own views. In other words, they consume specific sources precisely because they are biased, and because they lack autonomy, rather than this serving as a reason for distrust (Q.1.15).

This reveals the effect of audience polarization, reinforcing people's tendency to subordinate their news diets to their political and ideological preferences. As our survey demonstrated, even though a majority of news consumers chooses sources from across the political and ideological spectrum, a significant number of people have a very enclosed, homogeneous news diet, resembling "echo chambers", or "bubbles" from the online environment (Fig. 4.3.). Such audience bubbles can be found on both sides of the political spectrum, however their size differs substantially across countries; while this affects only 16% of the Czech respondents. In Serbia they compose half of the population, with

Q1.15 "I think M1 is objective, even though they say it is biased, I think...public service media should report on the government's work, and this is what they do... Of course they say that HírTV is biased, it is true that it is a right-wing channel but since my way of thinking is also similar, so... [laughs] This is what I want to listen to."

(Hun-14, female, 56, urban)

Q1.14 "In the case of some media, I used to read them and do not read them anymore, for example Mladá fronta and the like, and I learnt that it is owned by Babiš, at length, indirectly, and I stopped reading it. Because I do not completely trust him. And I lost my trust for the medium."

(Cze-15, female, 44, rural, anti-gov)

43.5% falling in the conservative pro-government bubble. In Hungary, on the other hand, the liberal anti-government bubble includes a quarter of all news consumers. The only country with a sizeable proportion of people whose media diet is roughly balanced in terms of its political/ideological bias – those called "non-committal omnivores" in our research – is the Czech Republic, which is possibly related to the relatively lower level of polarization and the fact that the extent of bias of many news media brands is not as prominent as in case of the other countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In a highly polarized environment, people's news media choices are increasingly guided by selective exposure based on partisan preferences, which is further fuelling polarization. However, findings from qualitative interviews (see section 2) make us believe that it might be a supply-driven process, and that there could in fact be a public demand for more independent, unbiased media that uphold standards of impartiality, factual orientation and professionalism. Therefore, in order to reduce the adverse effects of polarization and partisan selective exposure, **regulatory authorities should strive to uphold the principle of political impartiality** of broadcast media (while safeguarding their editorial freedom and ability to fulfil their watchdog role). Also, the **states as well as the EU should foster an economically enabling environment for independent media, including via programmes for their direct or indirect economic support**, with the preference for those that demonstrably adhere to values of journalistic professionalism and factual accuracy.⁴

1.5. Local and regional news media

Local and regional media have always been considered among the crucial institutions of democracy at a sub-national level. However, it is precisely this segment of the media system that is currently facing the greatest economic problems in many countries of the CEE region, pushing many outlets to the brink of extinction or causing significant loss of independence, especially following the impact of the pandemic.

Our research has brought evidence of local interest

as a significant motivation for news consumption preferences. When asked to explain why they use the news outlets they do, our participants often mentioned local or regional news coverage (Q1.15, Q1.16). This was particularly common in Poland and the Czech Republic, but also in Serbia and Hungary among participants from rural areas and small towns, who tend

to be particularly underrepresented by mainstream national as well as online media, and who also tend to be more easily captured by populist and illiberal political movements and parties.

Q1.17

"I read it because it's a good source of current news about Toruń and the surrounding area. I know what cultural offer is, what the city budget looks like, what investments are planned, there are some discussions as well. There are also reprints from nationwide newspapers."

(Pol-21, female, 67, urban)

Q1.16

"It is national but the way it is in Rádió 1 is that now we are in Nyíregyháza for example, then the news is about Nyíregyháza. So first they broadcast the main news that are relevant to the whole country but then they also broadcast the local news. That is why I like them."

(Hun-08, female, 28, urban)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

National media policies should include mechanisms for support of quality local/regional media, as well as strategies for increasing local/regional content in national media outlets and platforms.

1.6. Support for media organisations during public health crises

As the COVID-19 crisis confirmed, the dissemination of trustworthy, clear, and accurate information is an essential prerequisite for effective public health crisis management. Efforts aimed at containing viral diseases can be derailed by conflicting opinions and guidance, and by the spreading of misinformation, which can undermine public trust and compliance with preventative measures. However, our research has also shown that the capacity of media organisations to engage in effective health crisis communication can be diminished by the presence of populist leaders and political polarization. The COVID-19 crisis further exacerbated the problems discussed earlier – namely, it contributed to the proliferation of misinformation, increased political pressures on media organisations, prompted new restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of information, and heightened distrust among significant segments of the population.⁵ All of this was happening while media professionals were themselves struggling to navigate the competing pressures of remote work and threats to their own health, amidst an upsurge of audience demand and dwindling advertising revenue. In two of the four countries examined, where pre-existing polarization was most entrenched and where political elites were abusing the pandemic to further their political agendas (Serbia and Hungary) a large proportion of our participants distrusted the government. This distrust extended to experts involved in directing the national crisis response, and to information provided during live briefings and press conferences (Q1.18). Although most of our participants reported turning to the public service broadcaster for information on the pandemic, several of them explained that they did not necessarily trust the information provided, because they thought the public service broadcaster was influenced by the government.

Particularly in the context of a high-choice information environment, with digital and social media acting as an important source of information, the combination of populism, political polarization, and lack of independent media can also make populations more vulnerable to misinformation. Our participants who distrusted official health authorities and experts were more likely to turn to social media for alternative sources of expert opinion (Q1.19).

Q1.18 “I think that the government was using those conferences to brainwash us.”

Interviewer: You think that the government was using the conferences to manipulate the people?

“Yes, I do.”

Interviewer: Did the presence of those doctors make you feel safer?

“No, they made me feel scared, especially when they were talking about the number of the deceased, especially about the number of the deceased in the gerontological centres and in the rest of the world. I was really scared to be honest.”

(Srb-09, male, 48, rural)

Some of these were providing reliable information, while others promoted harmful misinformation. At the same time, it is important to note that people relying on social media for expert opinion often did so because they perceived social media platforms to be more authentic, and as means of direct access to information without editorial control. This should be kept in mind when devising appropriate measures for combatting disinformation online during public health crisis, as outright censorship may well deepen distrust among a part of the citizenry.

Q1.19 "I also watched certain TV shows which I found on YouTube, and which dealt with what certain virologists and epidemiologists, who weren't prominent in the media, had to say about the Coronavirus. I trusted them more than the doctors from the Crisis Headquarters."

(Srb-06, female, 31, urban)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Regulatory authorities should develop support and guidance for media organisations during public health crises, incorporating regulatory measures that proved effective in ensuring the dissemination of trustworthy, clear, and accurate information during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Such measures should include **support in the form of direct or indirect subsidies, which need to be distributed in a fair and transparent manner**, independent of political interests.⁷ Guidance should be provided on how best to complement direct government crisis communication, but also on how to support public health measures in a context where political elites might be abusing the crisis for political gain, and on how to respond to misinformation. **Regulatory authorities should also strive to act as a protector of freedom of media independence and access to information during a crisis** and challenge the attempts of political authorities to interfere in the circulation of information.

2. Journalistic practice recommendations

These recommendations are not intended to put additional pressure on a profession which is, by and large, overstretched, facing an unstable and often precarious economic situation, and which finds itself under increasing political attacks in the CEE region. They are rather meant as ideas stemming from our research that might hopefully be inspiring for media practitioners and organisations who share the ambition to be part of the solution with regards to some of the troubling tendencies currently observed in CEE media and society.

2.1. Tempering polarization

It is well known that the framing of the news as well as the language, visuals and other symbolic material accompanying the story can significantly influence audience's perceptions and interpretations of particular societal issues and problems. In a partisan political climate that intensifies the tendency towards media polarization, an increasing number of news organizations exploit audience's attraction to polarizing content. Our interviews however indicate that not everyone is thrilled by the deepening divides within the media ecosystem, and that some people perceive the growing societal divisions critically (e.g. Q2.1, Q2.2)

In order to dampen these polarizing trends, journalistic associations as well as media organizations themselves should, in their practice, give more prominence to issues of shared concern, i.e. those that are less likely to be contributing towards further polarization. They should also develop guidance on how to tackle polarizing content, e.g. in a manner

that is not slanted or partisan, but still exposes the relative strengths/weaknesses of particular positions (i.e. avoiding false equivalence). Heavily polarizing issues (such as immigration or the rights of ethnic/sexual minorities) should also preferably be approached through a human interest/individual experience angle, which might have a better potential of encouraging the audience to consider an alternative viewpoint.

Q2.1 "Plus, I do think newspapers in Poland are divided these days. On one side you have liberal newspapers, on the other the left-wing ones. So, I don't really trust the newspaper journalists. Only on the Internet can you have freedom."

(Pol-03, male, 34, urban, pro-gov)

Q2.2 "Those ones too, to some extent, unfortunately the journalists are also divided, just like the whole country is divided, etc. etc. But... if... if I take that one and some others, I can get an adequate opinion for myself."

(Hun-04, male, 73, rural, anti-gov)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Media organizations, journalistic associations and other professional bodies should develop internal codes of practice and/or guidance on how best to avoid fuelling polarization in news media reporting and journalistic conduct, especially in relation to language and style of reporting, e.g. by avoiding language that demonizes the “other side”, or by choosing a human interest perspective on polarizing topics.

There should also be training programmes aimed at journalists and other media professionals, educating them about the risks of polarization and about the role of media in stoking it.

2.2. Strengthening impartiality and professionalism

Alongside with concerns about the increasingly divided and partisan media, some of our interviewees indicated a general discontent with what they perceived as an overtly opinionated style of reporting, and expressed a wish for a more neutral, fact-oriented way of providing news by journalists (Q2.3, Q2.4). The relatively high prevalence of such opinion is also supported by other studies, for example by the Reuters

Institute's Digital News Report (2020),⁸ according to which 60% of the survey respondents prefer news that has no particular point of view, and only 28% give preference to news that coincides with their own opinion. Interpreting the findings, the report states that "the majority of people would like to make up their own mind rather than be told what to think by a journalist" (p.20), which is a result that is at odds with the oft-cited forecasts that opinionated and partisan journalism is the inevitable future of news media. In line with the observations mentioned in section 1.4, we think this trend might be at least partially supply-driven, and that there might be more appreciation for the values of impartiality, fairness and accuracy in news production than what currently meets the eye.

Q2.4

Interviewer: Why is TVP Info biased?

"From what I've seen, the information provided by their so-called 'journalists' is never without additional commentary and clearly supports a particular political option."

(Pol-22, male, 34, urban)

Q2.3

"I mostly take the news as a sort of information, a fact that something happened, not something you can agree or disagree with. But there are some journalists who put too much their views in the news, in my opinion. And I sometimes disagree."

(Cze-06, male, 19, rural)

This should also extend to the domain of social media, where many journalists maintain their active presence, share stories, engage with users and build their personal brands. While this might be incredibly beneficial in terms of enlarging audience reach and fostering a more personal, community-style relationship with the audiences, journalists' conduct on social media might sometimes also be seen as unduly partisan and/or activist, and thereby polarizing.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Adapting their practices and routines to the reality of the contemporary high-choice information environment, **news organizations should still continue to separate facts from opinions, and to uphold the values of impartiality, accuracy and fairness** when reporting about current affairs, in order to minimise perceptions of partisan bias and to increase trust among audience members of different political persuasions. News organizations – not only public service media, but commercial news organizations as well – should **develop guidance on acceptable behaviour on social media**, to help journalists maintain their professional image, personal credibility and impartiality.⁹ Standards for quality journalism should also be fostered through international journalistic networks.

2.3. Cultivating investigative journalism

Often seen as the most prestigious of journalistic genres, investigative journalism is widely considered as essential for a well-functioning democracy, and its absence or low prominence as a sign that democracy is at risk. Following the capture of media by the government and/or the oligarchs, but also in consequence of the crisis of the traditional business model, investigative journalism has been pushed out of the mainstream and into the fringes of the media ecosystem in many CEE countries. Nevertheless, it manages to

survive (often with the help of crowdfunding campaigns and/or grants and donations from abroad), and our data (Fig. 1.1-1.4.; Q2.5) indicate that those brands that nurture this genre also tend to belong to the most trusted ones by the audiences. This only strengthens the need for the news organizations – wherever still independent – to cultivate investigative journalism, despite the economic pressures that dictate to cut the budgets of those units and desks whose operation is associated with relatively the highest amount of costs.

Q2.5

Interviewer: Why do you follow Reportér and Reflex, and not Lidové noviny or Novinky?

“It is because their articles are interesting. Investigative journalists publish in Reportér and that is why I believe that the level is high, the articles are well-grounded, the journalists work hard on them, they do not just share.”

(Cze-24, female, 31, urban)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Despite adverse political and economic conditions, **news media organizations should strive to maintain and, wherever possible, to expand the amount of professional, high-quality investigative reporting**, in order to increase their appeal for audiences, elevate the general trust in journalism and – by exposing the misdeeds and transgressions of the political and business elites – to help counter the process of democratic backsliding. Innovative methods of funding to safeguard independence and sustainability should be explored, e.g. crowdfunding.

To minimize the risk of audiences avoiding news for the perceived dominance of negativity in their coverage – a trend also documented in the later phases of the pandemic¹⁰ – critical investigative reporting should, wherever possible, also be complemented by solutions-oriented reporting, focusing on how a problem has been or can be resolved.¹¹

2.4. Health crisis reporting

Existing research on news consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic, including our own work,¹² showed that news media – and public service media, in particular – have potential to play an important role in providing clear, accurate and unambiguous information.

Q2.6

“Yes. I haven’t been using the official websites directly. Because they write in a specific manner suitable for the government. I don’t understand what they mean sometimes. [...] For an average person to understand, they need to be more straightforward and say things more clearly”

(Pol-15, male 38, rural)

Participants from across all four countries reported a noticeable increase in news consumption during the first peak of the pandemic in March 2020, as well as a marked reliance on public service media. Several of them also specifically noted the value of news reports in providing information on preventative measures or recent developments in a concise, clear and accessible form. Although the majority of our participants followed live broadcasts of government briefings or accessed official COVID-19 websites, they sometimes found

them too detailed or difficult to understand (e.g., Q2.6). In this context, news reports played an important role in making government messaging more accessible and effective.

While our research showed a marked increase in news consumption during the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it also highlighted the phenomenon of news fatigue and even news avoidance, typically occurring within 7-9 days since the introduction of national lockdowns. Several of our participants reported being overwhelmed by the amount of information, and the sense of anxiety and fear it generated, which appeared to be exacerbated by the overwhelming emphasis on the latest numbers of news cases and deaths, and the relative lack of clear and unambiguous guidance on protective measures (Q2.7). This suggests that more attention should be paid to providing clear and unambiguous information on protective measures, as such information can have an empowering effect on citizens and helps them better cope with the stress and anxiety of a health crisis.

Q2.7

“I think that may be true for everyone now, that it comes in waves, sometimes you feel like ‘I don’t want to know’, ‘I’ve had enough’, ‘I can’t take it any longer’, etc. and it changes so often... For example, you think that you are doing the right protocol, I don’t know, you search for how you should buy groceries, you find out that the virus does not only survive 1 day but 5 days, so, you’ve been doing it wrong... and then you find out that that was not true, um... yes. So... then you say goddamn it, you can’t do any better than this.”

(Hun-12, female, 59, rural)

A significant proportion of our participants also reported distrusting expert guidance. In two of the countries covered – Serbia and Hungary – this distrust was most often prompted by the perception of political interference, and a sense that experts were

Q2.8

"I was surprised that there are many experts with different opinions and, frankly speaking, I am tired of it. I think that people without education must be very puzzled of it... And now we have here this pandemic and half of epidemiologists say let's keep lockdown and the other is for letting the virus go into population. So, what is a common man to think? Maybe, it is better to pray..."

(Cze-11, male, 34)

insufficiently independent from political interests. Another common reason for the perception of disagreements among the scientific community (Q2.8) – for instance, with regards to the relative benefits of mask wearing, or the pros and cons of lockdown – which was prompted by exposure to conflicting information and/or exposure to misinformation.

Another finding emerging from our data is the importance of personal contact in forming a relationship of trust. More specifically,

our participants were inclined to be particularly trustworthy of medical experts and practitioners they knew personally, including their own doctor and friends and acquaintances who are health professionals or have medical expertise (Q2.9). This suggests that journalists – especially those working for local or regional media – could usefully capitalize on such connections, and for instance seek to interview community-based medical professionals to aid the promotion of public health messages at local level.

Q2.9

"I have two biologist/medical acquaintances and they wrote guides, and since they work with all kinds of bacteria as researchers, these acquaintances of mine, if they say about something that this is what people should do, then I say okay, I believe that. "

(Hun-18, male, 32, urban)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In light of the pandemic, journalistic associations as well as individual media organisations (both public and commercial) should **develop guidance for journalists' conduct during a public health crisis**. Special attention should be paid to guidance for reporting on protective public health measures in a variety of forms and through a range of channels designed to reach different segments of the population. Also important is the provision of guidance on reporting on divisive public health measures, and **guidance on communicating scientific findings and expert advice**, especially in a context where political elites may be seeking to interfere in expert work, and/or where expert knowledge becomes politicized.

Notes

1. See <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>. Among the measures proposed to help creating a safer online space, the DSA introduces various due diligence obligations for online platforms to tackle illegal and harmful content, including obligations to conduct an assessment of risks related to disinformation, to put in place effective mitigation measures, to cooperate with “trusted flaggers” in flagging problematic content, or to enable access to data for independent researchers.
2. Among such approaches, the use of use accuracy primers or “nudges” (such as asking to evaluate the accuracy / reliability of the content – or its source – before sharing it) and similar interventions pointing people in the right direction when encountering online content prone to abuse or misinformation have been suggested, with some encouraging results displayed in experimental studies, see e.g. <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/study-accuracy-nudge-could-curtail-covid-19-misinformation-online>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0956797620939054>.
3. A source of inspiration for such projects could be the campaign to strengthen media literacy amongst senior citizens run by the **Norwegian Media Authority** () in 2019, in collaboration with the Norwegian fact checking service Faktisk.no and the National Association of Local Newspapers, supported by Facebook. A recent report by the **European Regulators Group on Audiovisual Media Services** (EGRA) on media literacy campaigns countering disinformation (2020) also emphasises the need to focus on older people. Some practical tips on how to plan a media literacy campaign have been **outlined** by the Media Literacy Taskforce, European Platform of Regulatory Authorities (EPRA, 2019).
4. Such programmes for economic support of media should, however, be carried out in a transparent fashion and under an independent oversight, ensuring fair distribution and no misuse of these funds by media that do not conform to the standards of political independence.
5. See the 2021 Media Pluralism Monitor (<https://cmpf.eui.eu/mpm2021-results/>) as well as the 2020 Rule of Law Report, released by the European Commission, which details the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the rule of law in the EU, including the impact on media pluralism and media freedom: https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en.
6. For a detailed overview of different measures introduced by regulatory authorities and media organisations from across Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic see the report “Regulators and Citizens”, prepared by the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities: https://cdn.epra.org/attachments/files/3722/original/Regulators_and_citizens_updated_paper.pdf?1602690760.
7. On the risks associated with non-transparent, politically motivated distribution of state support during the COVID-19 crisis see the 2020 The Rule of Law Report, p. 6 (https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en).
8. See https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf
9. Guidelines for journalists’ conduct on social media already exist in some media organizations, e.g. as part of the **BBC Editorial Guidelines**, or those developed by the **Swedish Radio**. In 2019, the public service Czech Television has adopted a code of conduct for its news reporters on social media as well (the code however exists only as an internal document).
10. The findings are related to the UK audience and stem from the Reuters Institute’s 2020 Digital News Report, see <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-a-growing-number-of-people-are-avoiding-news-139246>
11. For examples of such “solution journalism” from Central and Eastern Europe see the **designated website by the NGO Transitions**, which also provides training and support for local journalists.
12. Mihelj, S., Kondor, K, and Štětka, V. (2021) Audience Engagement with COVID-19 News: The Impact of Lockdown and Live Coverage, and the Role of Polarization, *Journalism Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1931410>; see also Van Aelst et al. (2021): Does a Crisis Change News Habits? A Comparative Study of the Effects of COVID-19 on News Media Use in 17 European Countries, *Digital Journalism*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1943481>.

Appendix A – survey charts

Fig. 1.1.	Public trust and perception of independence of Czech news media
Fig. 1.2.	Public trust and perception of independence of Hungarian news media
Fig. 1.3.	Public trust and perception of independence of Polish news media
Fig. 1.4.	Public trust and perception of independence of Serbian news media
Fig. 1.5.	Public vs expert assessment of Czech news media independence
Fig. 1.6.	Public vs expert assessment of Hungarian news media independence
Fig. 1.7.	Public vs expert assessment of Polish news media independence
Fig. 1.8.	Public vs expert assessment of Serbian news media independence
Fig. 1.9.	Preferences for democracy vs preferences for authoritarianism by audiences of PSM / commercial broadcasters
Fig. 1.10.	The extent of ideological polarization of the news media ecosystem in each country (expert survey)
Fig. 1.11.	The extent of political polarization of the news media ecosystem in each country (expert survey)
Fig. 1.12.	Intensity of consumption of PSM by age
Fig. 2.1.	Attitudes to immigration by frequency of social media use
Fig. 2.2.	Attitudes to same-sex marriage by frequency of social media use
Fig. 2.3.	Attitudes to democracy by frequency of social media use
Fig. 3.1.	Frequency of encountering disinformation online
Fig. 3.2.	Encountering disinformation by age groups
Fig. 3.3.	Encountering disinformation by education groups
Fig. 3.4.	Forwarding chain emails by age groups
Fig. 3.5.	Intensity of spreading disinformation – Czech news media brands (expert survey)
Fig. 3.6.	Intensity of spreading disinformation – Hungarian news media brands (expert survey)
Fig. 3.7.	Intensity of spreading disinformation – Polish news media brands (expert survey)
Fig. 3.8.	Intensity of spreading disinformation – Serbian news media brands (expert survey)
Fig. 4.1.	Trust vs. distrust to news media
Fig. 4.2.	Trust to news media – traditional vs. digital
Fig. 4.3.	News media repertoires by country

Fig.1.3. Public trust and perception of independence of Polish news media
Perceived independence vs trust in media - Poland

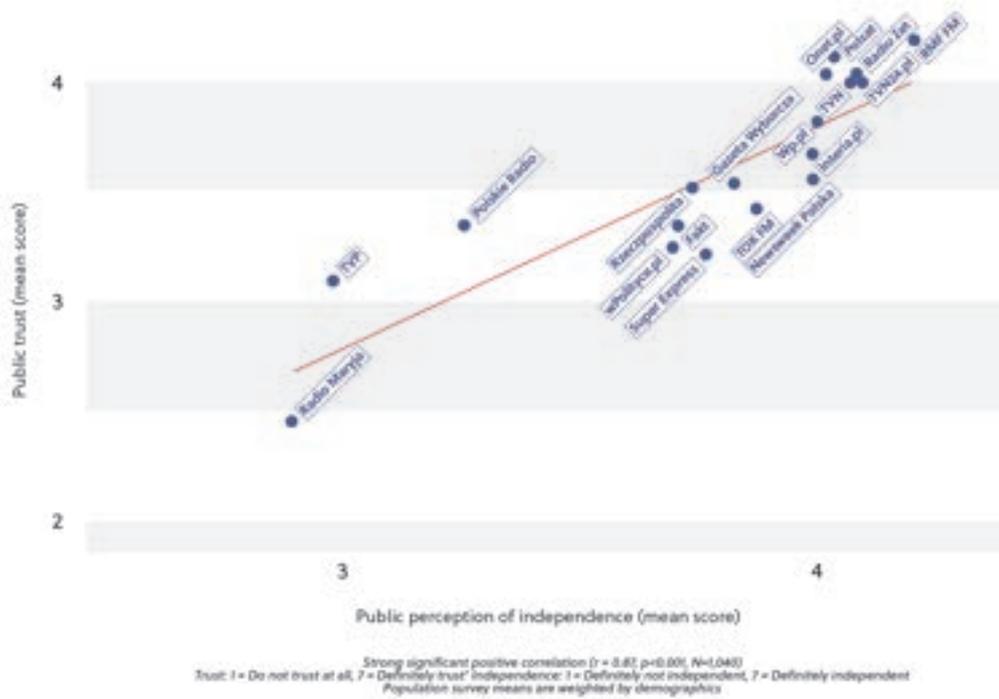


Fig.1.4. Public trust and perception of independence of Serbian news media
Perceived independence vs trust in media - Serbia

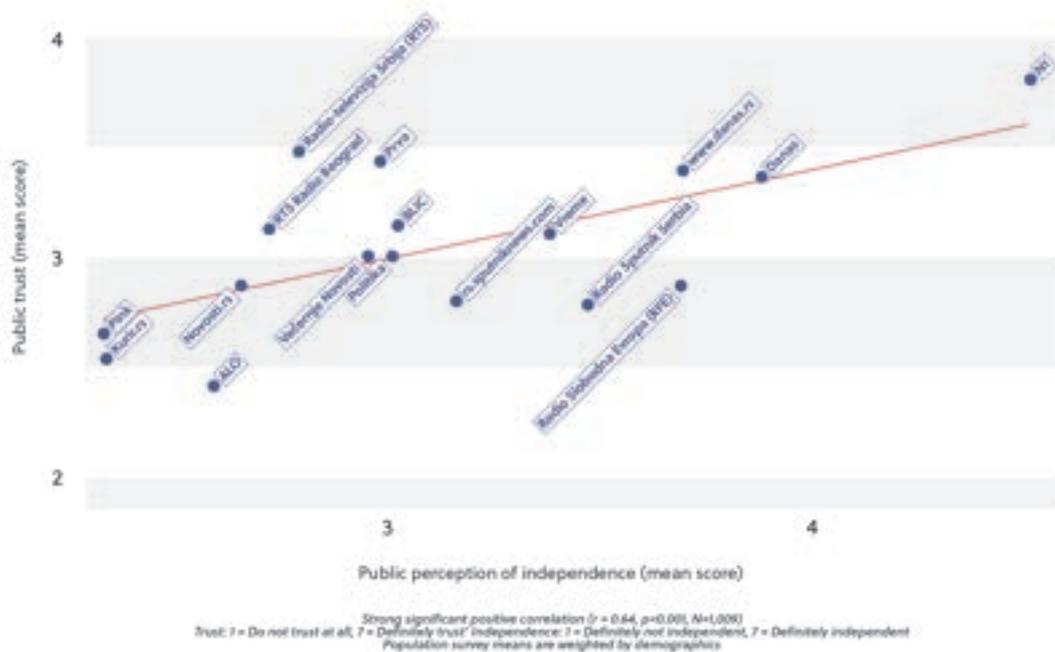


Fig.1.5. Public vs expert assessment of Czech news media independence
Perceived independence of media - Czech Republic

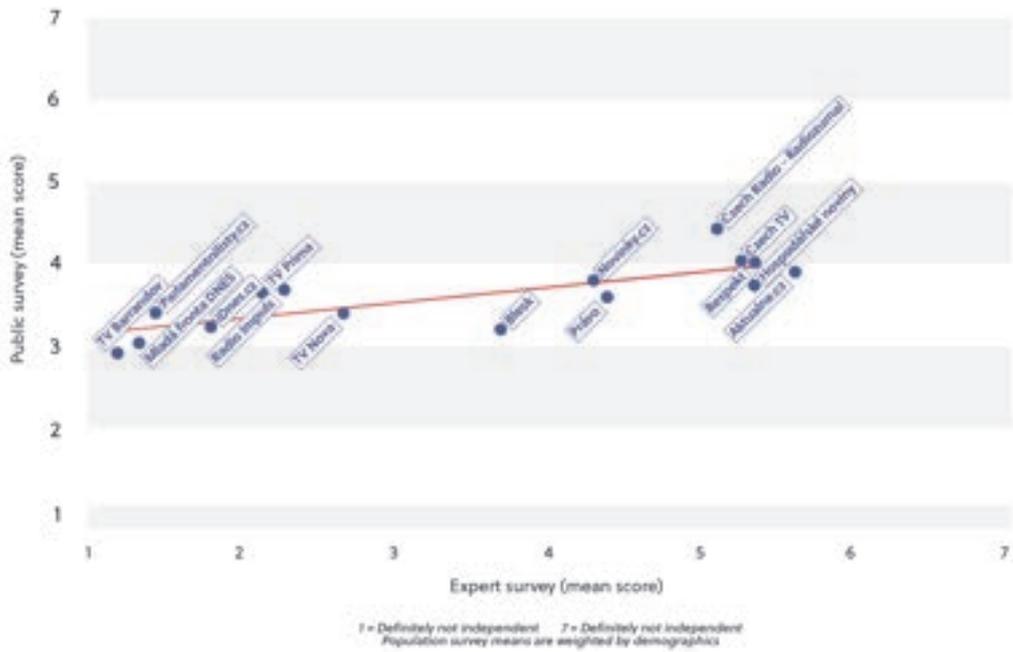


Fig.1.6. Public vs expert assessment of Hungarian news media independence
Perceived independence of media - Hungary

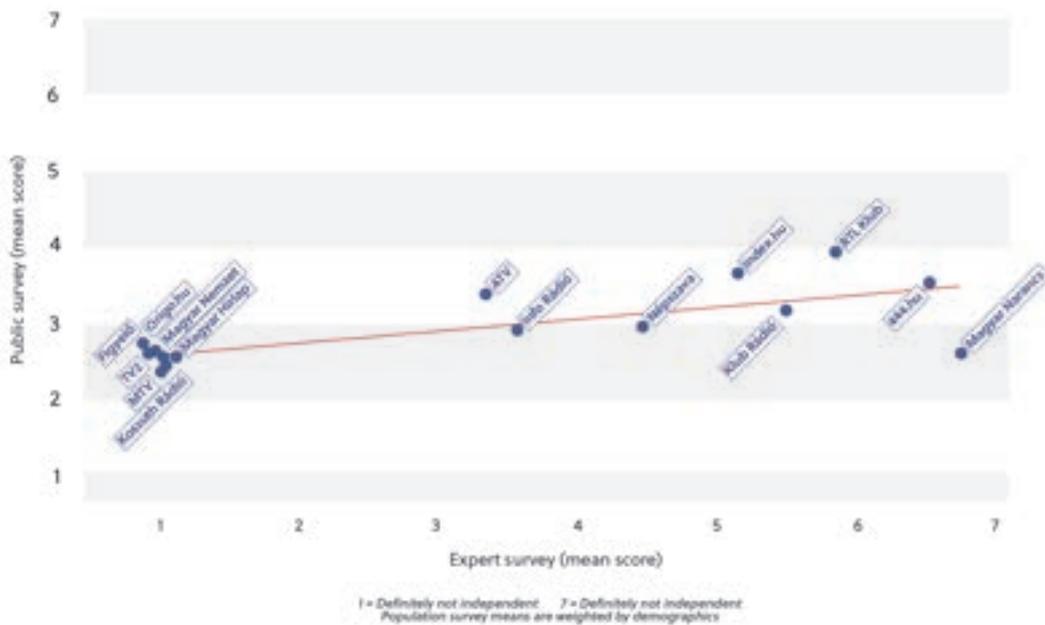
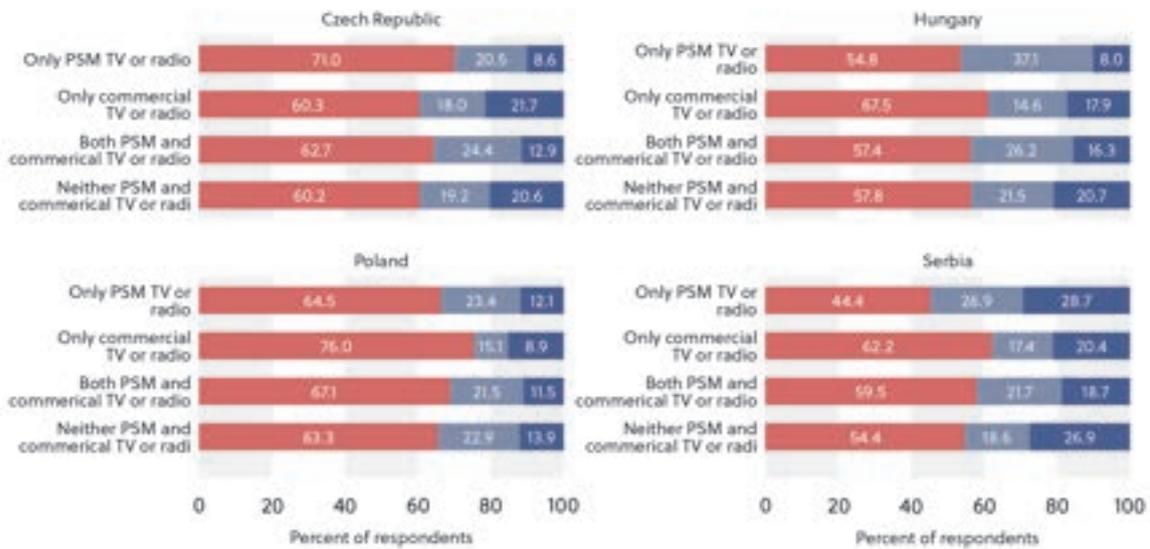


Fig.1.9. Preferences for democracy vs preferences for authoritarianism by audiences of PSM / commercial broadcasters

Preferences for democracy / authoritarianism (PSM vs commercial TV and radio)



Which one of the following statements do you agree most? Choose one.

- Democracy is preferable to any other form of political system
- Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one
- For people like me, it does not matter whether a government is democratic or authoritarian

Percentages weighted by demographics

Fig. 1.10. The extent of ideological polarization of the news media ecosystem in each country (expert survey)

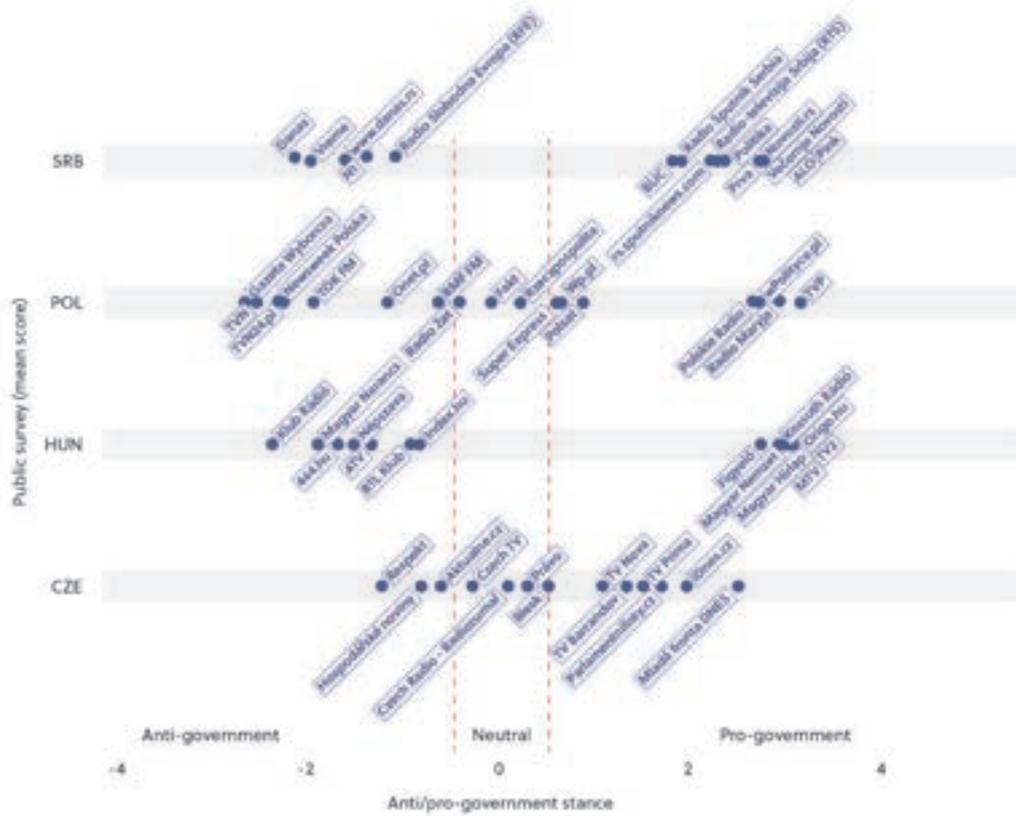


Fig. 1.11. The extent of political polarization of the news media ecosystem in each country (expert survey)

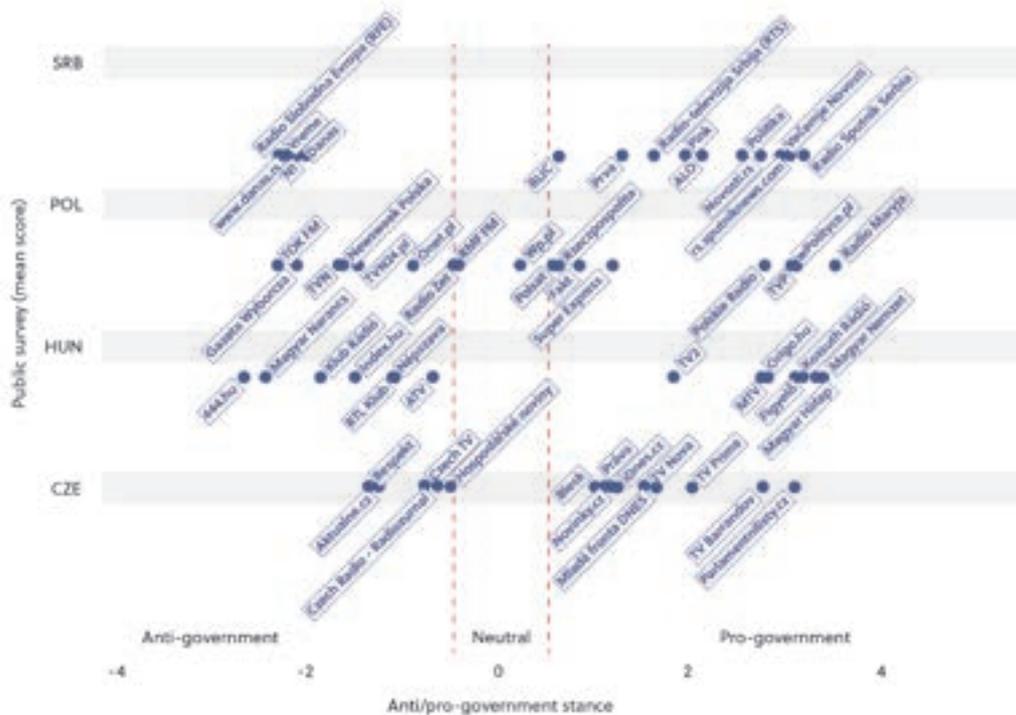


Fig. 1.12. Intensity of consumption of PSM by age
Consumption of public service media by age

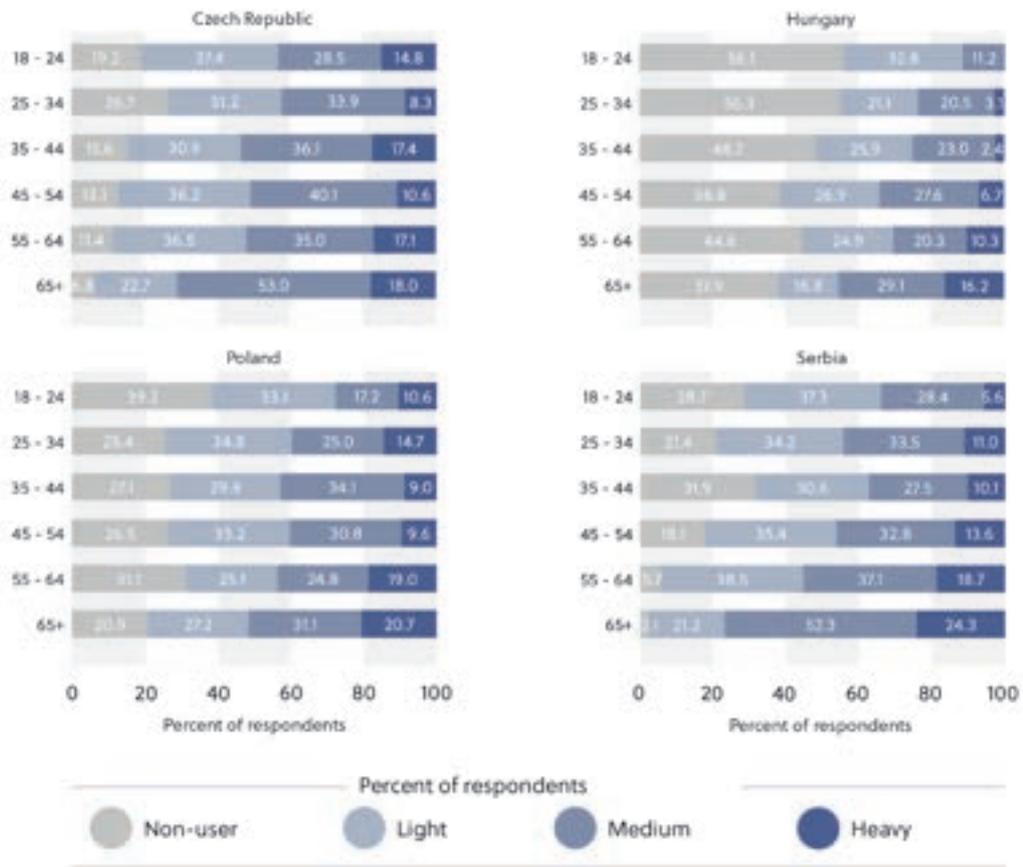


Fig. 2.1. Attitudes to immigration by frequency of social media use
Frequency of using social media

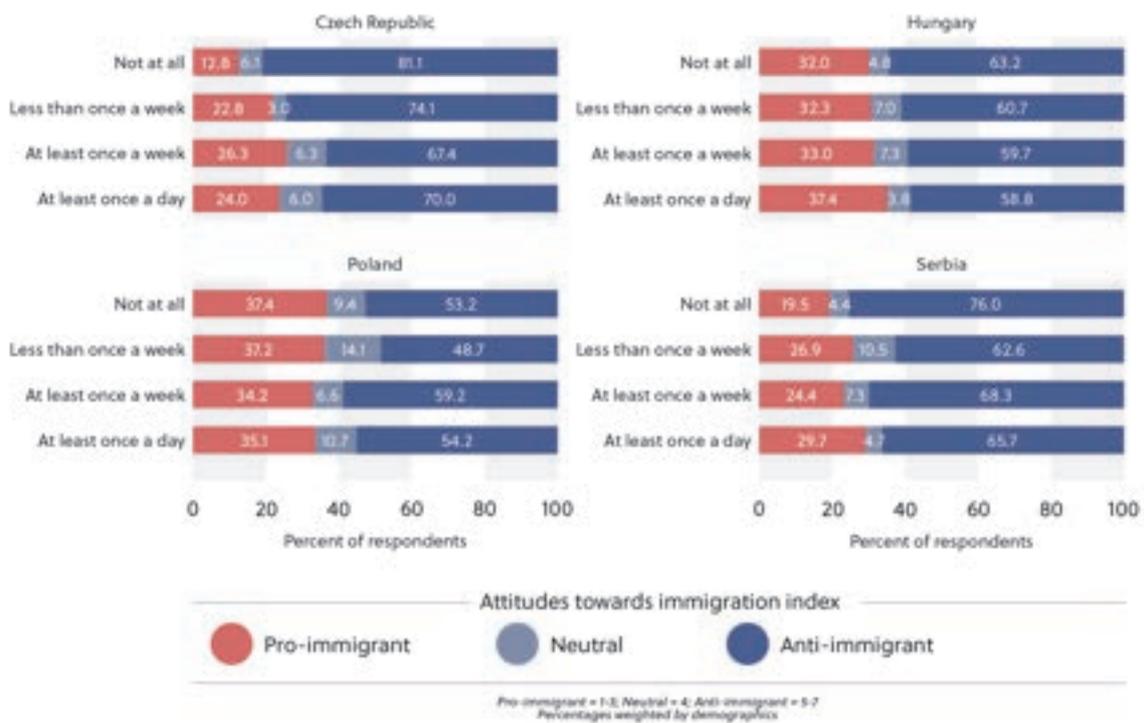


Fig. 2.2. Attitudes to same-sex marriage by frequency of social media use
Frequency of using social media

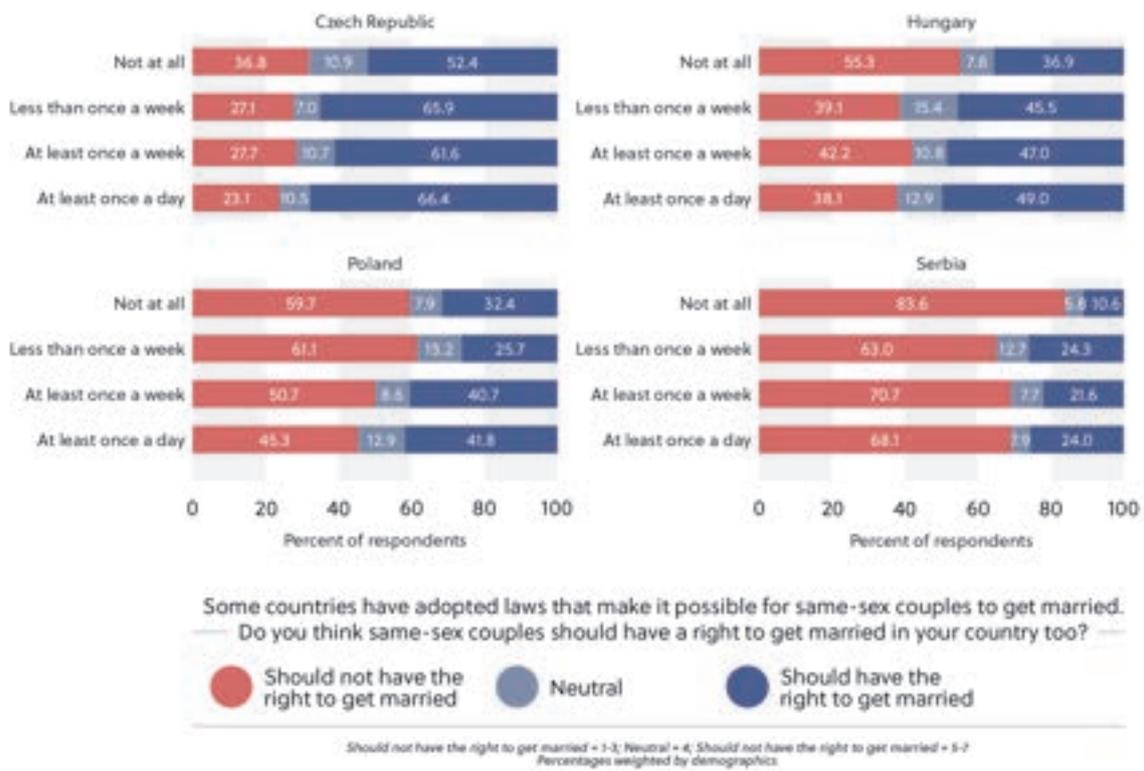


Fig. 2.3. Attitudes to democracy by frequency of social media use
Frequency of using social media

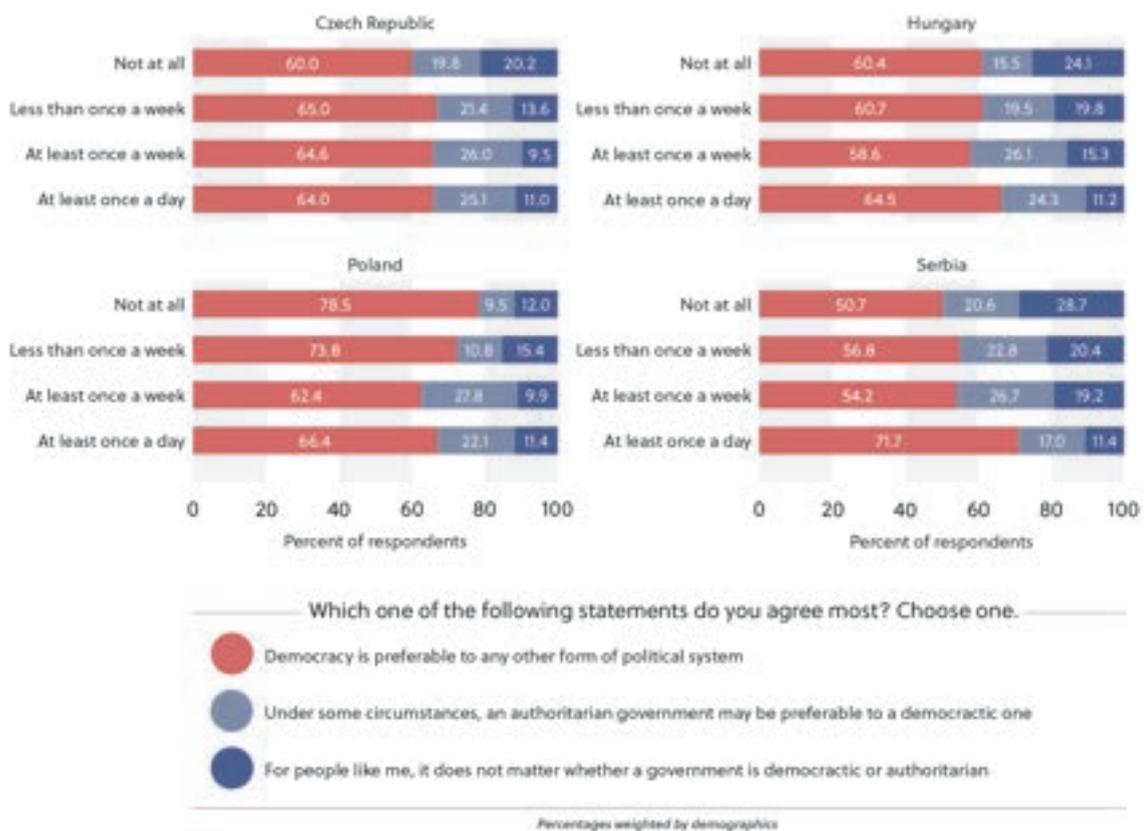


Fig.3.1. Frequency of encountering disinformation online

Encountered fake news

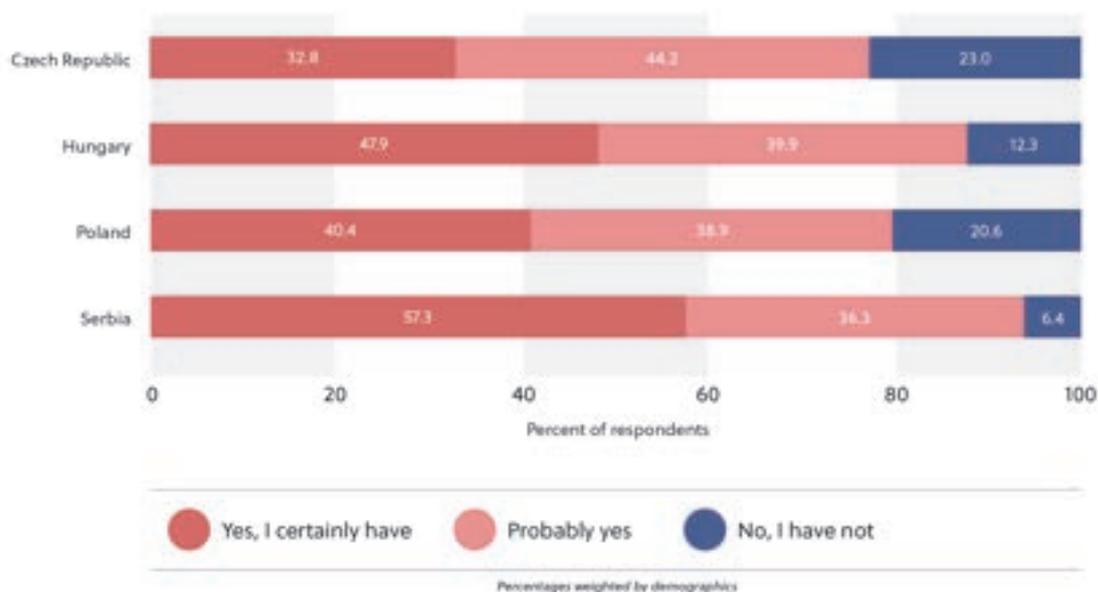


Fig. 3.2 Encountering disinformation by age groups

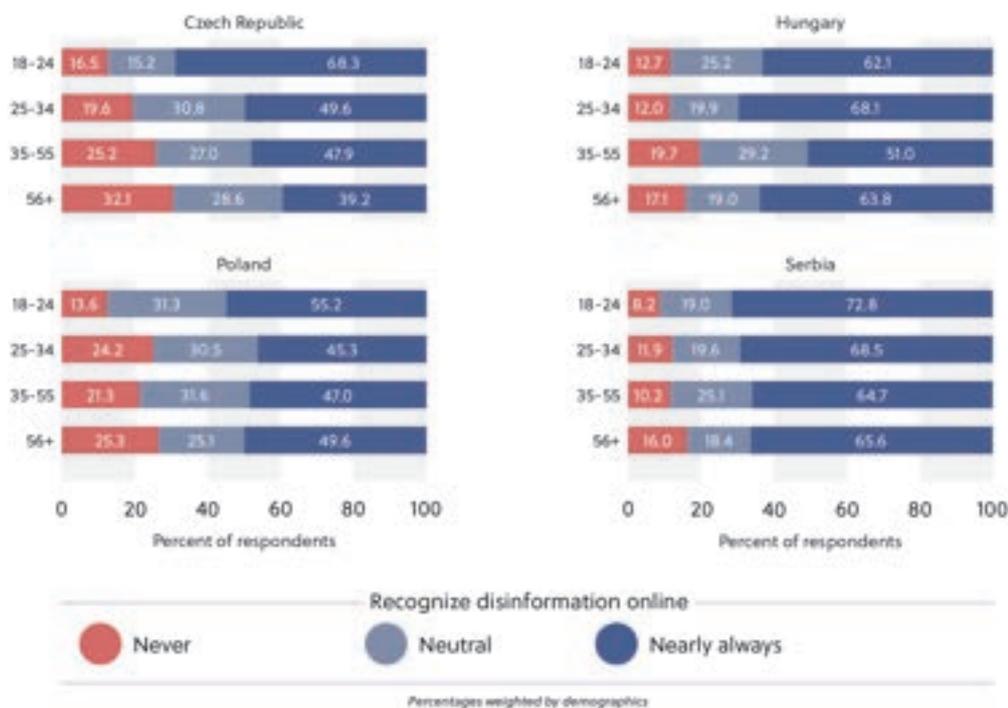


Fig. 3.3. Encountering disinformation by education groups

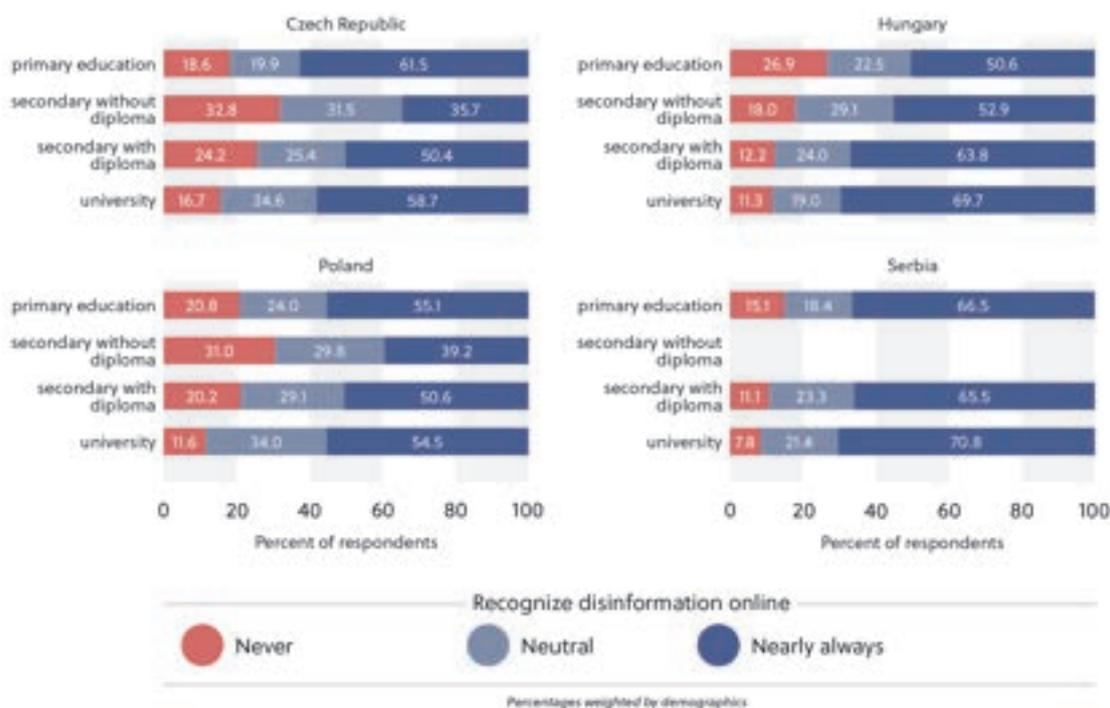


Fig. 3.4. Forwarding chain emails by age groups

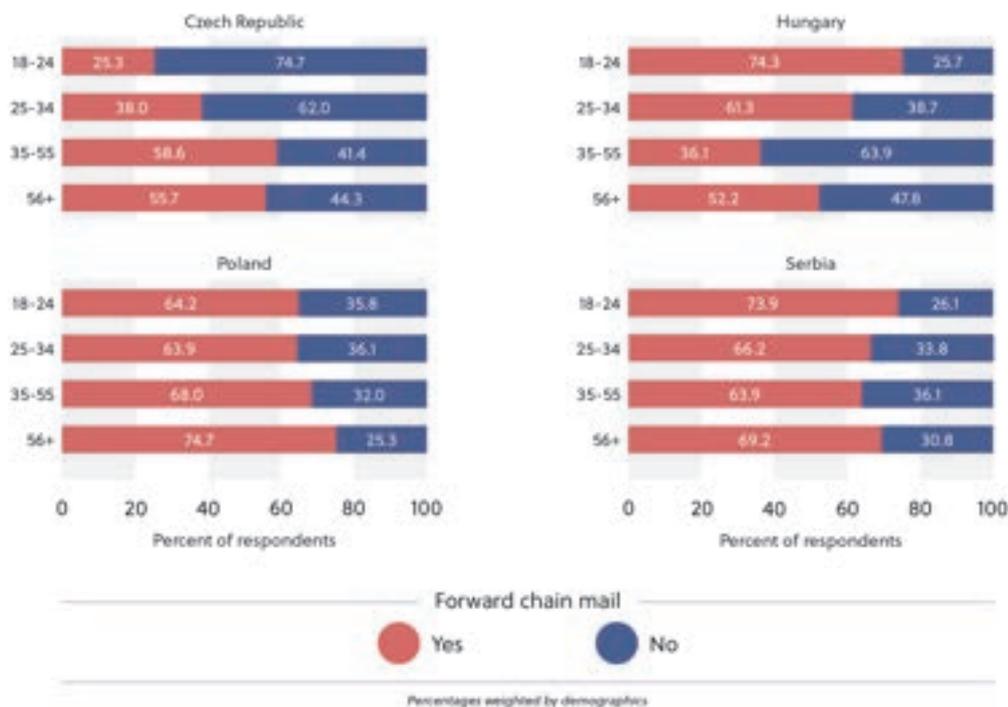


Fig. 3.5. Intensity of spreading disinformation – Czech news media brands (expert survey)

Frequency of disseminating disinformation - Expert rating (Czech Republic)

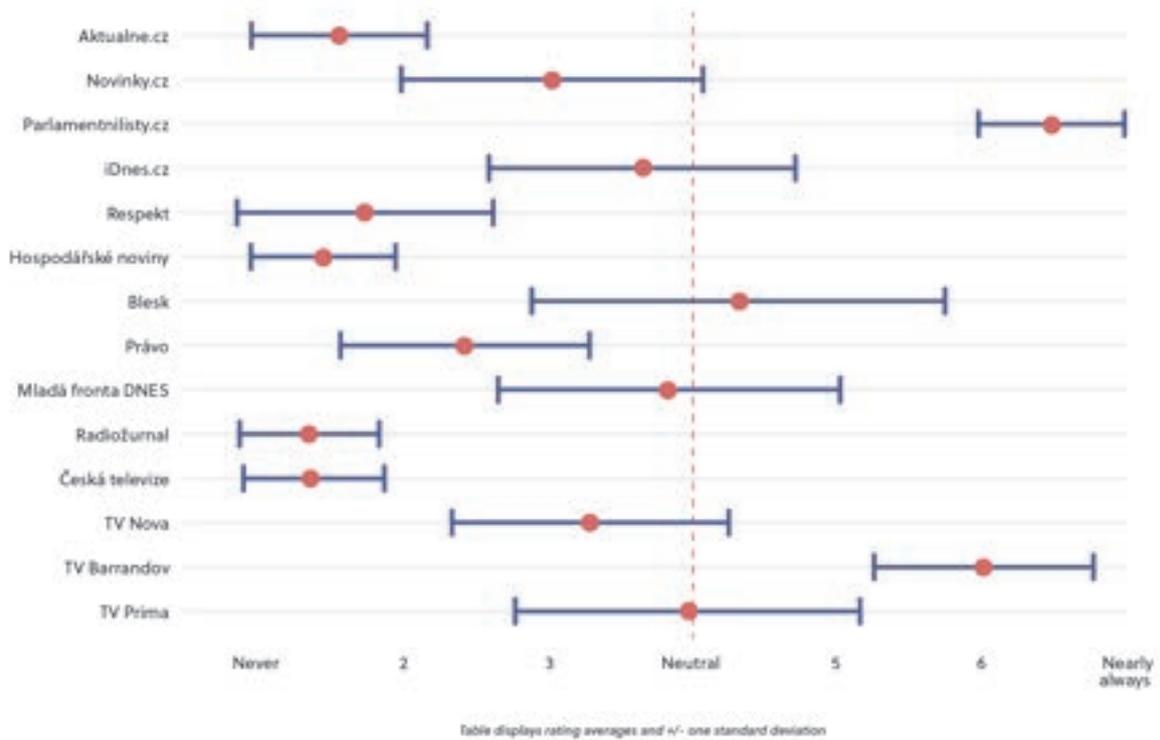


Fig. 3.6. Intensity of spreading disinformation – Hungarian news media brands (expert survey)

Frequency of disseminating disinformation - Expert rating (Hungary)

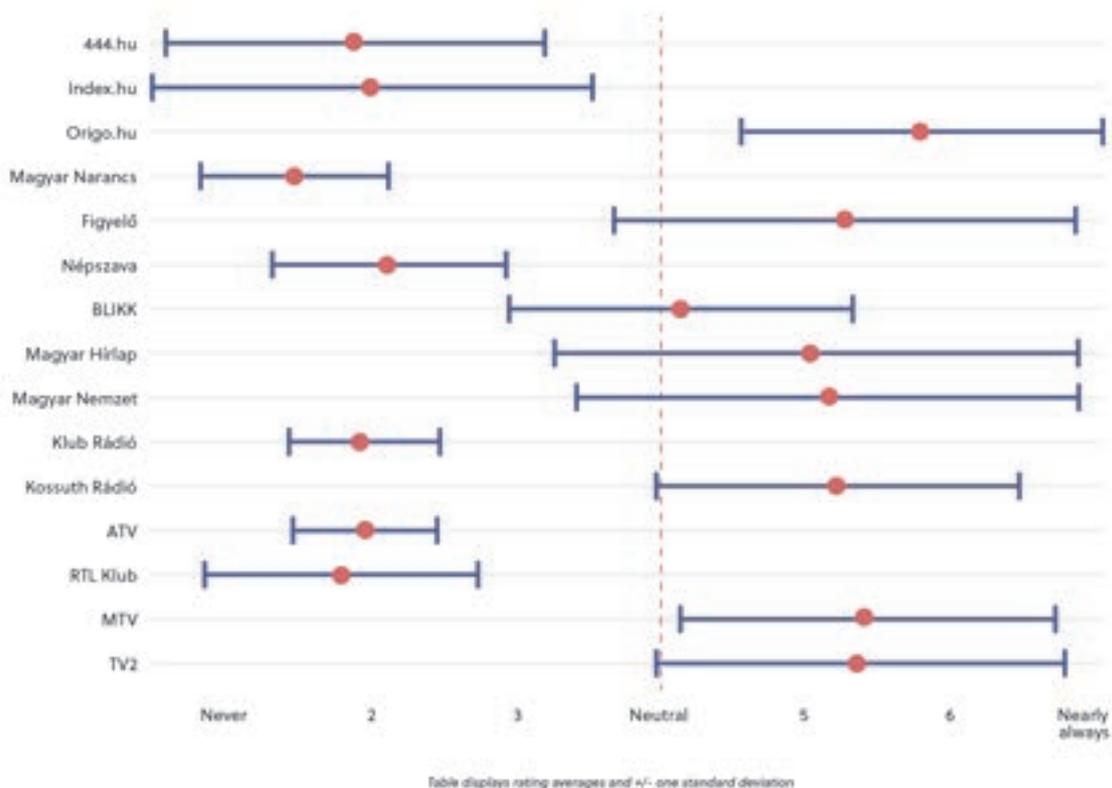


Fig. 3.7. Intensity of spreading disinformation – Polish news media brands (expert survey)

Frequency of disseminating disinformation - Expert rating (Poland)

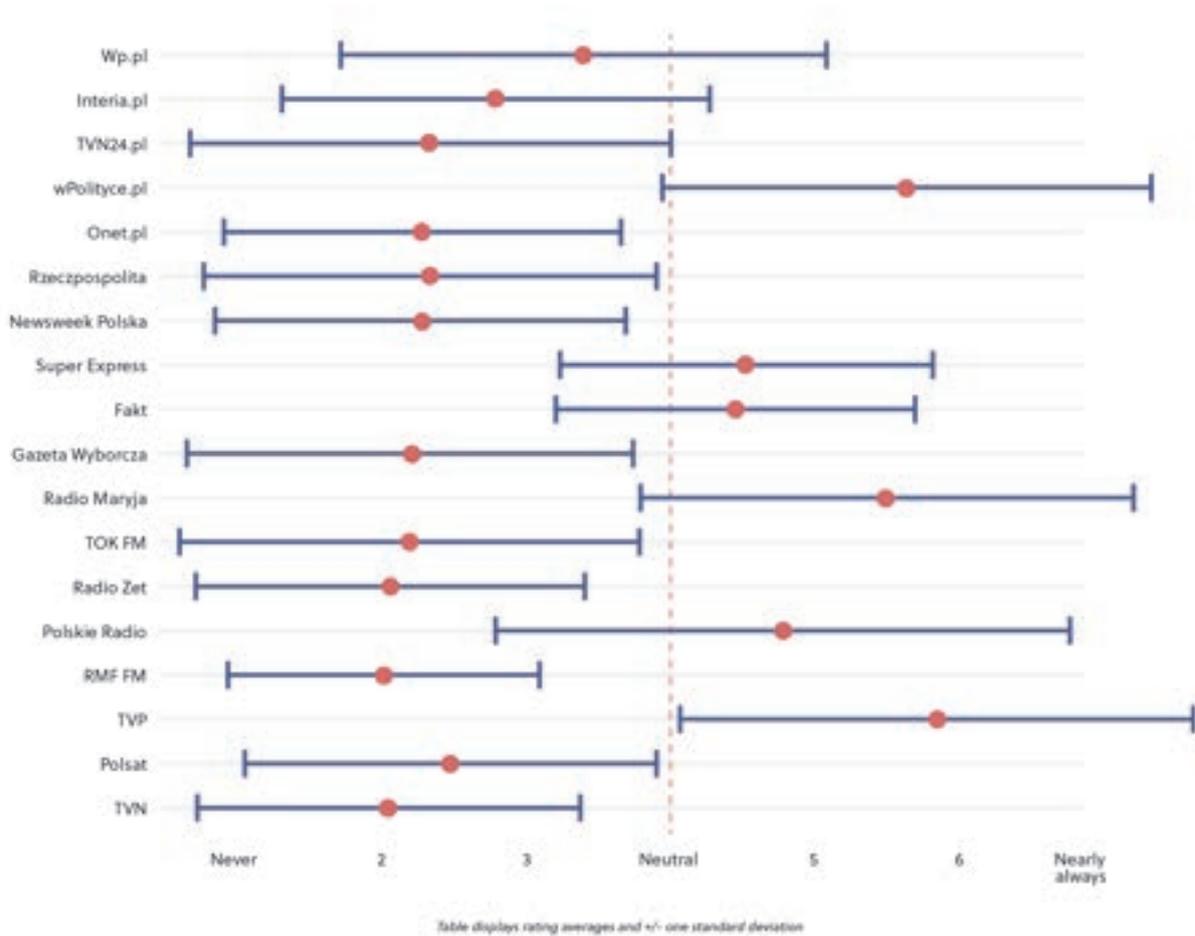


Fig. 3.8. Intensity of spreading disinformation – Serbian news media brands (expert survey)

Frequency of disseminating disinformation - Expert rating (Serbia)

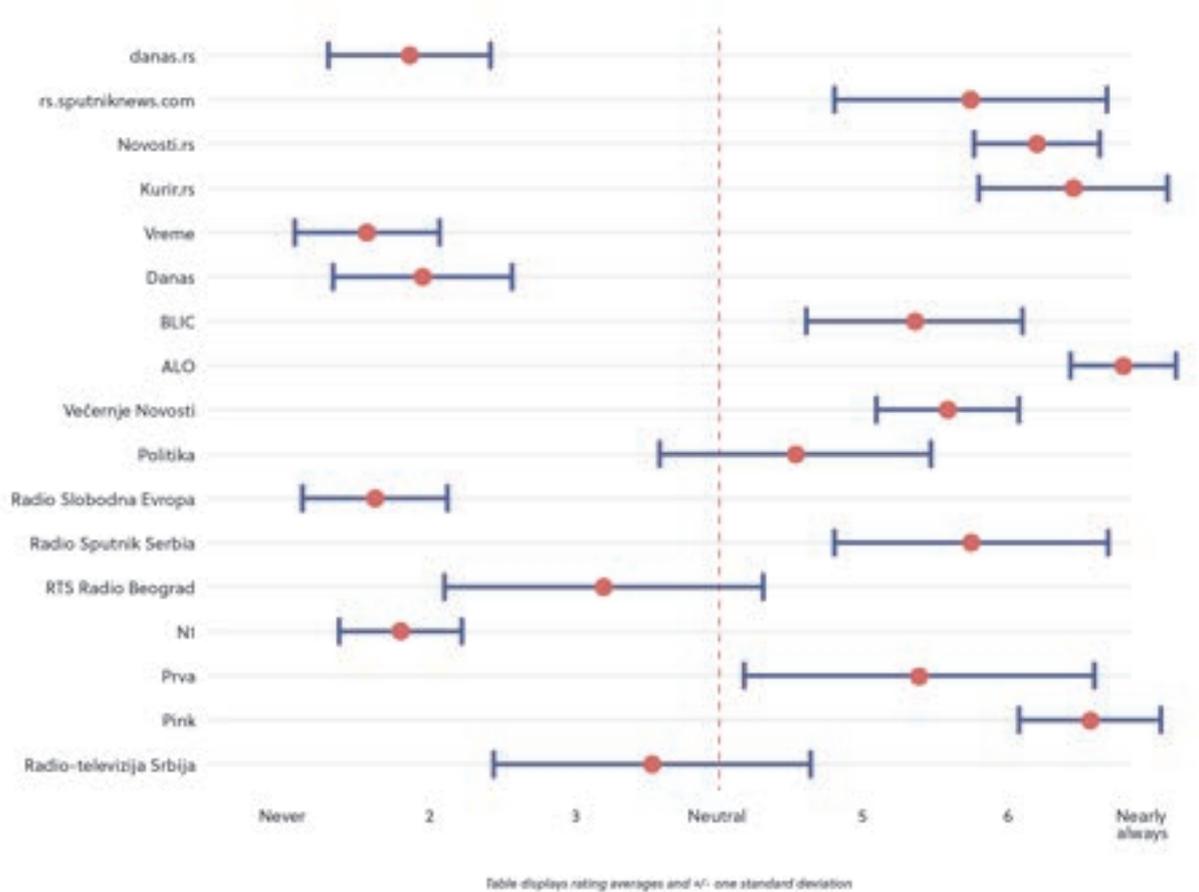


Fig. 4.1. Trust vs. distrust to news media

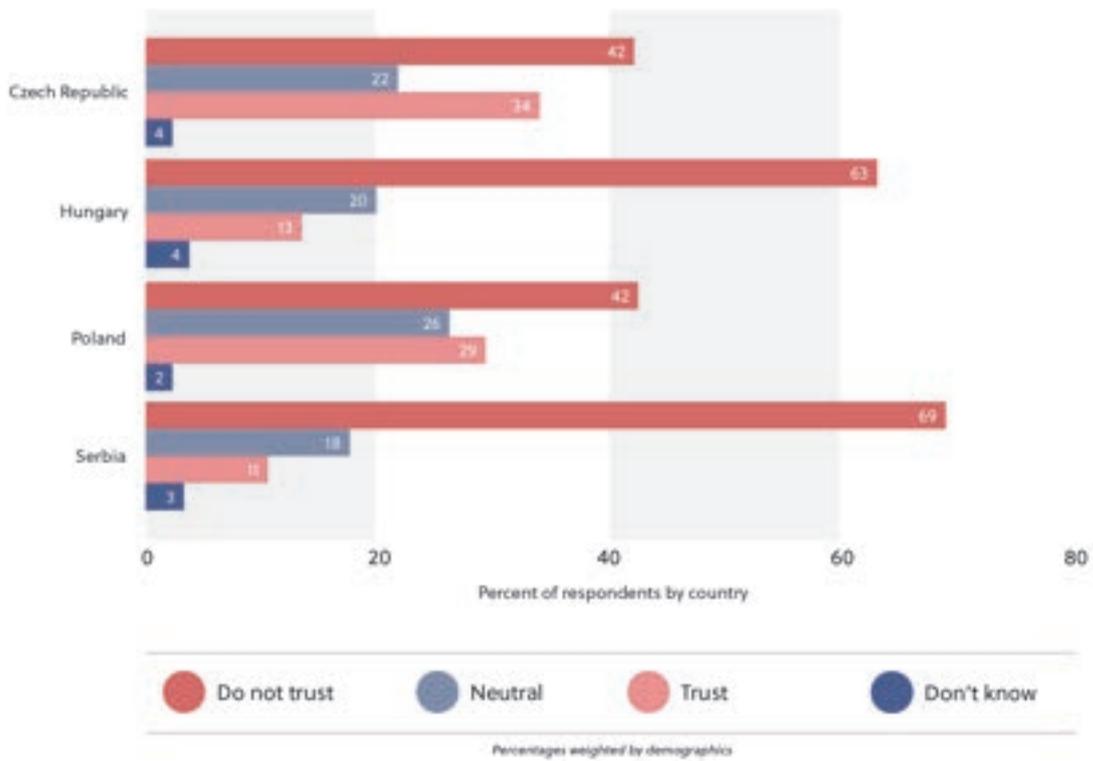


Fig. 4.2. Trust to news media – traditional vs. digital

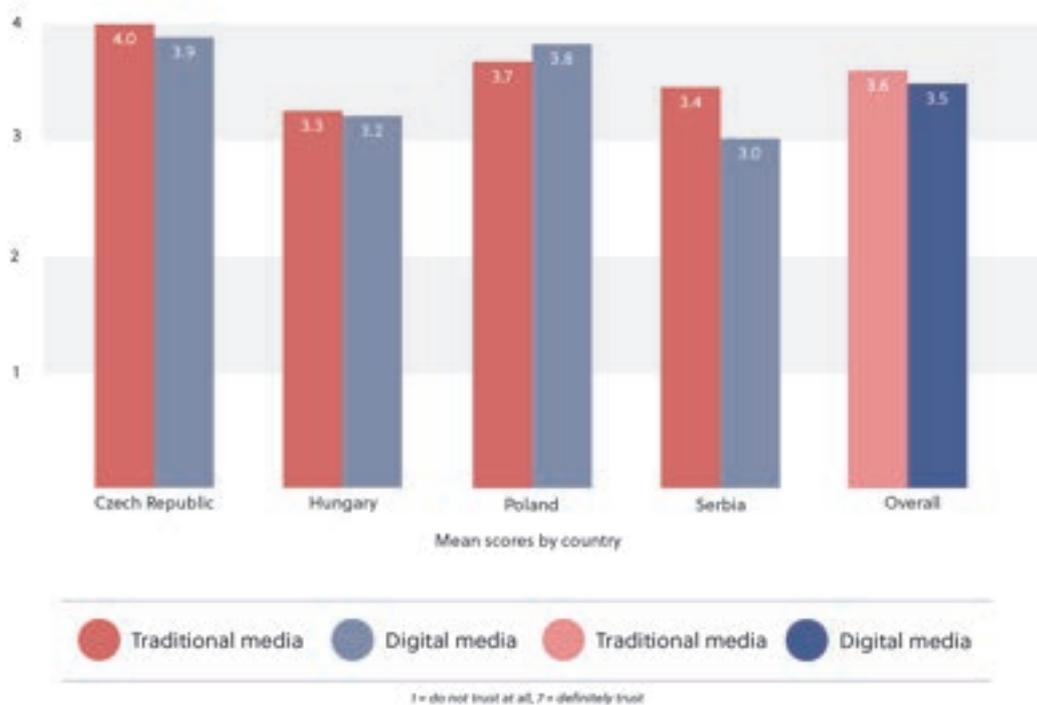
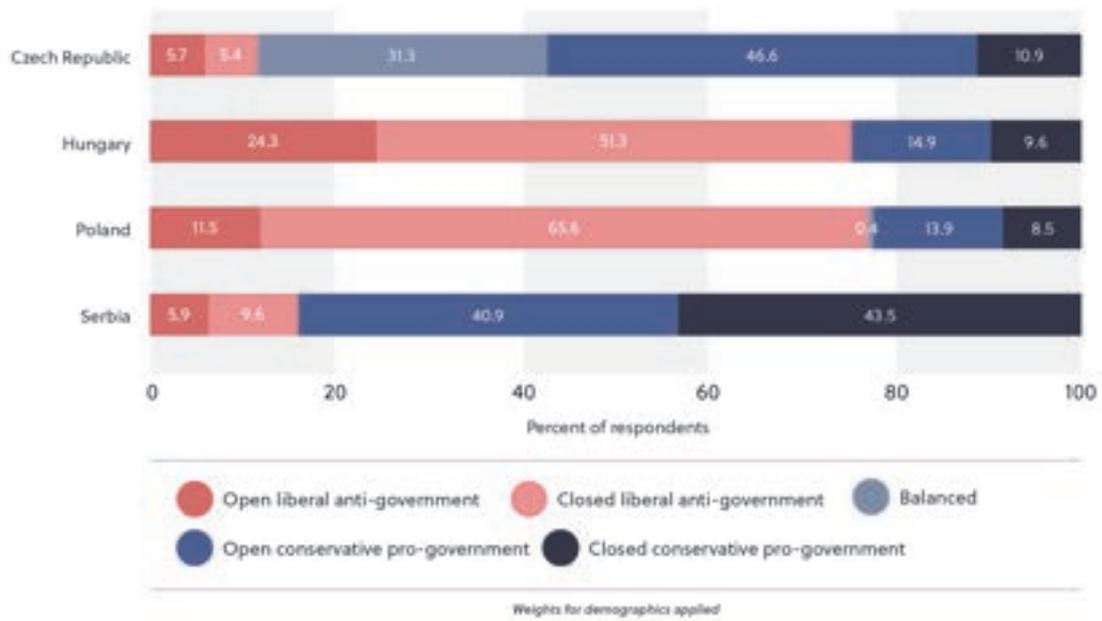


Fig. 4.3. News media repertoires by country
Membership of repertoires groups by country



APPENDIX B – methodology of data collection

Our research combined quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection: population survey, expert survey, interviews and media diaries.

The population survey (N=4,092) was collected online (CAWI, 75%) and via telephone interviews (CAPI, 25%) in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Serbia. Respondents were selected by quota sampling, designed to be representative of the general population for key socio-demographic quotas: age, gender, education, region (nation-specific), size of municipality and internet usage frequency. Pilot testing started at the end of November 2019 and the main fieldwork was conducted in December 2019 and January 2020.

The online expert survey (N=60) was conducted in the same four countries between February and May 2020. Participants were selected based on stakeholders' and respondents' recommendations (snowball sampling), aiming to include a proportionate number of experts with professional, academic, and civil society backgrounds.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out with 120 participants from the four countries (30 per country) between February and April 2020. Participants were recruited from quantitative surveys, using a combination of purposive and quota sampling, and from personal connections. Quota sampling was used to ensure the purposive sample was sufficiently diverse on several key demographic dimensions known to shape both media use and political behaviour, namely age, gender, domicile size and political preference. Each participant was asked to participate in two interview sessions—one face-to-face in February and one remotely in April—as well as to keep a diary for three weeks from 9 to 29 March 2020. In their diaries, participants were asked to include descriptions of all encounters with information, broadly defined, regardless of whether these encounters involved media or not.

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