



**RESILIENCE:**  
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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**STRENGTHENING PUBLIC  
TRUST IN THE MEDIA  
AS A RESPONSE TO  
DISINFORMATION  
AND PROPAGANDA**

*Milica Bogdanović*

**MONTENEGRO**

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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### MONTENEGRO

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# STRENGTHENING PUBLIC TRUST IN THE MEDIA AS A RESPONSE TO DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

*Milica Bogdanović*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Along with the problems of financial sustainability and operating in an unregulated market, one of the serious challenges for the Montenegrin media is the inconsistent application of professional standards. Content in which different opinions of interlocutors are contrasted and which provide the public with a comprehensive overview of an important social or political topic has become a rarity in the Montenegrin media. Aggravating this issue is the lack of adequate self-regulation, which would stimulate media outlets to fully implement the Code of Ethics of Montenegrin journalists.

Although studies analyzing disinformation and hate speech do not recognize the established media as the creators of disinformation, domestic media, due to the lack of capacities, often rely on content created by regional media (Bogdanovic, 2020). Thus, Montenegrin media release incorrect information, failing to fact-check the information they take.

Because they share a common language with the rest of the region, regional media do not only create content for the audience in their own countries but audiences throughout the region, including Montenegro, through the online space. Earlier statistics showed that Serbian tabloids, which local journalists' associations and fact-checking websites recognize as a source of disinformation and hate speech, are among the most read websites in Montenegro (Bogdanovic, 2020). In crisis situations (coronavirus pandemic, elections or the passing of the Religion Law), these media intensify reporting about Montenegro, releasing a series of disinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda, which undoubtedly affects public opinion

During 2020, the South East European Network for Professionalisation of Media (SEENPM) established through the first study that hate speech, disinformation and propaganda are created and released through **media operating in the countries of the region that are read in Montenegro**. The content is then carried by certain Montenegrin online media, thus contributing to the widespread distribution of unprofessional media releases. The content is disseminated through **certain right-leaning Montenegrin online media**

established/edited by individuals recognized as anti-NATO activists and via **pages on social networks** that continuously release insults and hate speech against public figures in Montenegro, with unknown organizations/structures financing them (Bogdanovic, 2020).

The second study showed that these are the main channels through which disinformation, propaganda and narratives containing hate speech are released, regardless of whether the reports are on migrants, journalists, opponents of the authorities or advocates of some other important social issue.

After these analyses provided a clear overview of the media community, due to the important social role the media has in shaping the public opinion, SEENPM decided to examine how citizens perceive the media. The study was intended to establish whether citizens believe they are correctly and fully informed by the media and how strengthening public trust in the media can help raise professional standards and prevent the spreading of disinformation.

Under the Resilience: For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation project, financed by the EU, a public opinion poll was carried out as well as a focus group with journalists and editors. This analysis was carried out based on the findings, providing guidelines for institutions, civil society organizations and the media community in building social resilience to disinformation, hate speech and propaganda.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In cooperation with the Ipsos Strategic Marketing agency, which is present in Montenegro and five other partner countries (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and North Macedonia), public opinion polls were conducted in February and March of this year on a representative sample of respondents. The regional research team formed a list of the ten most important questions, with suggestions from local researchers, and citizens in all the countries answered the same set of questions.

The questions cover three areas: **use of media** (which media serve as the most frequent source of information for citizens – TV, radio, press, online media, social networks, personal contacts, such as family, friends and colleagues), **trust in the media** (do people believe that media provide complete, accurate and balanced information; what type of media is considered reliable – TV, radio, press, online media, social networks, foreign media agencies, media specializing in investigative journalism; what is public confidence in the media based on; how much the public broadcaster Radio and Television of Montenegro is trusted), **standpoints and experiences with the media** (do people agree with the claim that the media serves democracy and the public interest; that the media is under government control; that the media lacks independence and impartiality; that the media spreads political

propaganda, disinformation, hate speech, etc.). The study was carried out in Montenegro between 3 and 7 March 2021, on a representative sample of 1,018 respondents. The data was gathered by using a combined method – phone calls and an online questionnaire.

The results of the public opinion poll were discussed in the focus group with media professionals in Montenegro to better understand its findings and establish a possible course of action to improve public confidence in the media and prevent the spreading of disinformation. To spark a discussion and reflection on the issues we research, we presented to the focus group members, who have many years of experience as journalists and editors, the results of the study as well as the findings of previous analyses on the presence of media and communication practices responsible for spreading disinformation and propaganda in Montenegro and on the narratives containing disinformation and hate speech. We collected their views and made good use of their experience and suggestions for how to improve the current situation in the media community, thus increasing public trust in the media. Seven of the focus group participants are employed by different media in Montenegro. The results of the discussion in the focus group will be presented without stating the names of the participants.

An important aspect of this analysis is the gender-based violence to which female journalists in Montenegro are subjected. Through the public opinion poll, we investigated whether citizens recognize female journalists as targets for insults/threats/harassment/assaults and whether they recognize gender-based violence and which parts of society they deem important in protecting female journalists. Through the focus group, we addressed in more detail how journalists and editors perceive gender-based violence against female journalists and how much that affects their work.

In the following chapters, we will display the results of the public opinion poll and the views of media professionals from Montenegro.

## 3. TRUST IN THE MEDIA

### 3.1. People mostly watch TV

The majority of the Montenegrin population get inform themselves via television. More than three quarters of the respondents (78%) claim that they watch television programmes every day, while television is the primary source of information for almost half the population (43%). Because of this, television stations, especially ones that broadcast nationally, have an additional responsibility to release accurate and complete information and, through professional reporting, prevent disinformation from shaping public opinion.

Social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube) are the second most common source of information in Montenegro. Some 59% of the population follow these media daily, and for one in five citizens (19%), social networks are the primary source of information. Almost a third of the population (28%) never use social networks. Half of the population (57%) follow online media daily. For one in three respondents (30%), online media are the primary source of information, while one in four citizens (25%) never follows online media.

Almost half of the respondents said that they inform themselves daily through conversations with people from their immediate environment (family, friends and colleagues). However, this is the chief source of information for only 4% of them.

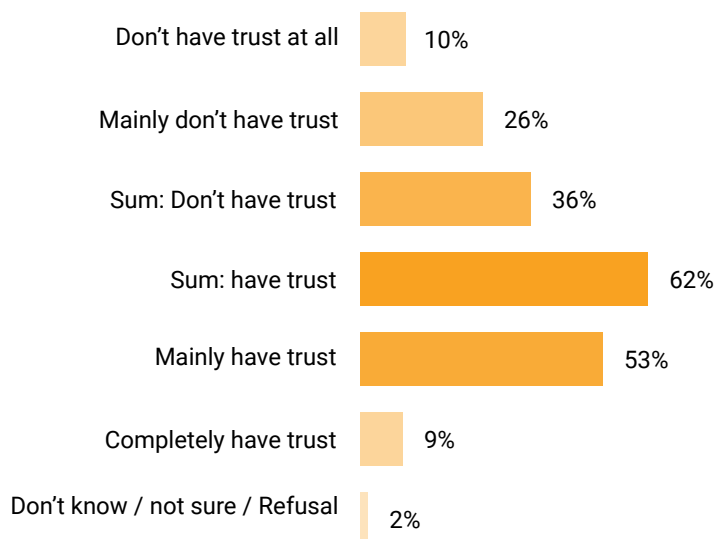
Apart from television, other traditional media are not particularly popular among the Montenegrin population. Only one fifth of the respondents (21%) said they listened to the radio every day, while 14% of the population read a newspaper daily. The press is the primary source of information for 2% of the population, while radio is the primary source of information for only 1% of the population. Half of the population never read newspapers or listen to the radio.

The older population (60+) mostly watch television, while the younger generations (ages 18 to 29) more frequently choose online media and social networks as their preferred source of information. Knowing that online media and social networks are recognized as the channels most frequently used to spread disinformation and propaganda, the younger segment of the population can be more exposed to unprofessional reporting and content. Therefore, civil society institutions and organizations have the additional obligation to initiate educational programmes to enable young people to develop the skills needed to recognize credibility in media content, compared to disinformation.

### 3.2. Most people trust the media

The majority of the Montenegrin population (62%) trust media such as television, radio, newspapers and web portals to release complete and accurate information. In comparison, one third of the population have the opposite opinion (36%). The level of public trust in the media is lower in people who choose to get most of their information through contacts with people from their immediate environment.

Graph 1 - How much do you trust, in general terms, that the media (press, TV, radio, web portals) release complete and accurate information?



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Most journalists and editors participating in the focus group (FG) said that these results were expected.

*"I'm glad if that's the case and if people are true to traditional media. Because, regardless of how good or bad they are, they are still the best place to come by information. We know what social networks are like, we know how they work, we know what the potential for manipulation is",* said the FG participant 6.

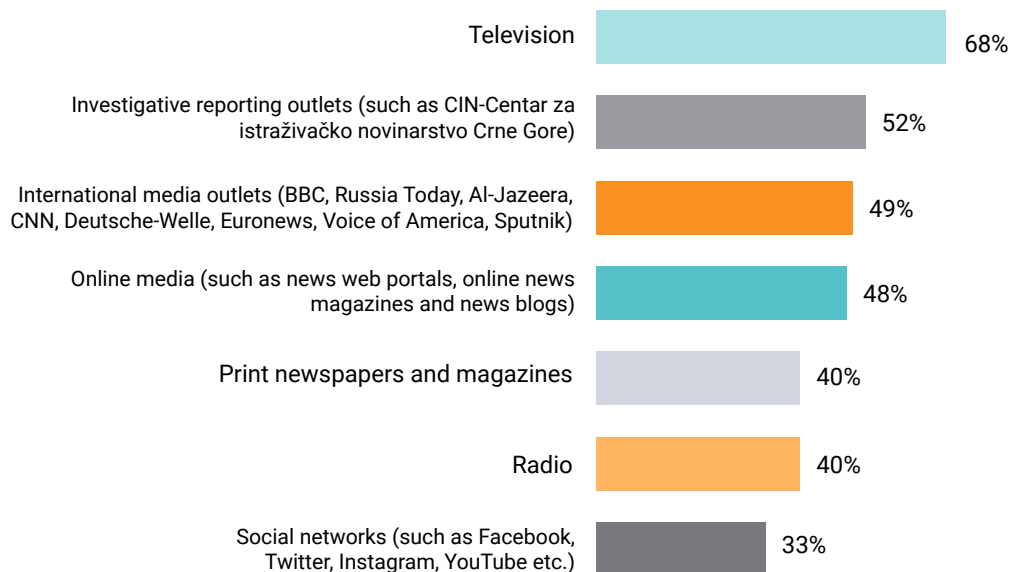
*"I'm glad that people trust traditional media the most, and that's where I see a chance for traditional media in Montenegro. If they garner the most public trust, that that opportunity should be embraced and capitalized on",* said the FG participant 1.



*“The oversaturation of the public with an abundance of information at unbelievable speed, via the internet and which, for the most part, isn’t fact-checked, leads to traditional media being increasingly valued, which still adhere to the Code of Ethics and fact-check all the information they release to the public”, believes the FG participant 3.*

Most citizens who took part in the public opinion poll (68%) recognize television as a reliable source of information. Around half of the population trust media specializing in investigative journalism (52%) and foreign media agencies (49%) and online media (48%). Also, four in 10 citizens consider radio and print media/magazines reliable sources of information (40% each), while one in three citizens believes that social networks are reliable (33%).

Graph 2 – To what extent do you trust that each of the listed media is a reliable source of information? Sum of “I trust it for the most part” and “I completely trust it”



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The youngest respondents (ages 18 to 29) most often trust foreign media agencies, then online media and radio, while highly educated citizens more often consider foreign media agencies and media specializing in investigative journalism more reliable. On the other hand, foreign media, media specializing in investigative journalism and online media enjoy a far lower level of trust amongst the older population (60+).

Citizens have the least confidence in social networks as reliable sources of information. In total, 45% of them recognize Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube as the least reliable sources of information.

All the focus group participants, who see online media and social networks as the channels that most frequently spread disinformation and propaganda, agree with such evaluation.

*“Large quantities of false information, semi-information and spin originate from Twitter and Facebook. These are all big organizations, with target groups and a schedule for releasing certain information. I think we have a big, much more extensive problem here”,* the FG participant 4 stated.

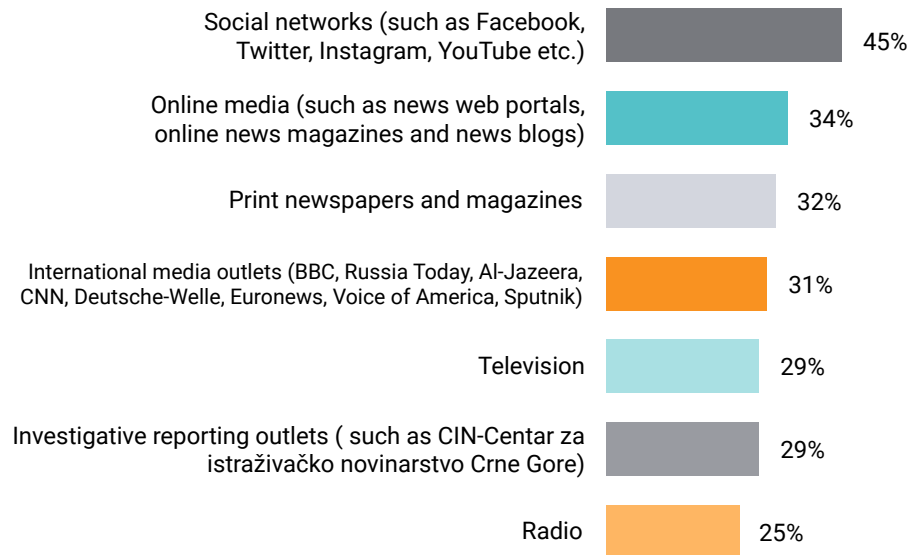
*“Social networks and, in general, communication in the online space are recognized as places where, basically, anything goes; that is to say, nothing is strictly prohibited, at least not in an organized and systematic way and they are actually not legally and formally defined as media, which is why most disinformation, propaganda and hate speech is spread there”,* said the FG participant 3.

Regardless of the majority of respondents in the public opinion poll saying they use online media daily, one in three (34%) does not believe them to be reliable sources of information. The focus group participants also think that the online space lacks resilience to disinformation but they cite the financial challenges they face as the reason for this, which is why they are “on a constant hunt for clicks”.

*“In recent years, the number of clicks has become the most important concern for online media. The more clicks they generate, the more influential they become or the more followers they generate, regardless of the quality. However, there are those media that don't publish disinformation consciously; that is, they do it out of ignorance, laziness, lack of professionalism and time and inability to fact-check some information and, with such practice, in my opinion, professional journalism falls victim”,* said the FG participant 3.

The public opinion poll showed a tendency in people to characterize their favourite media as reliable too. Therefore, those who prefer traditional media more often name television, radio and the press as the leading three most reliable sources of information. On the other hand, respondents leaning towards digital media show more confidence in online media and social networks but also in media specializing in investigative journalism and foreign media agencies. The conclusion can be drawn that the response to disinformation and propaganda should come from both traditional and modern media, thus ensuring accurate and fact-checked information reaching the broadest audience possible and preventing the influence of disinformation on its viewpoints.

Graph 3 – *To what extent do you trust that each of the listed media is a reliable source of information? Sum of answers “I believe it is, for the most part” and “I don’t believe it is at all”.*



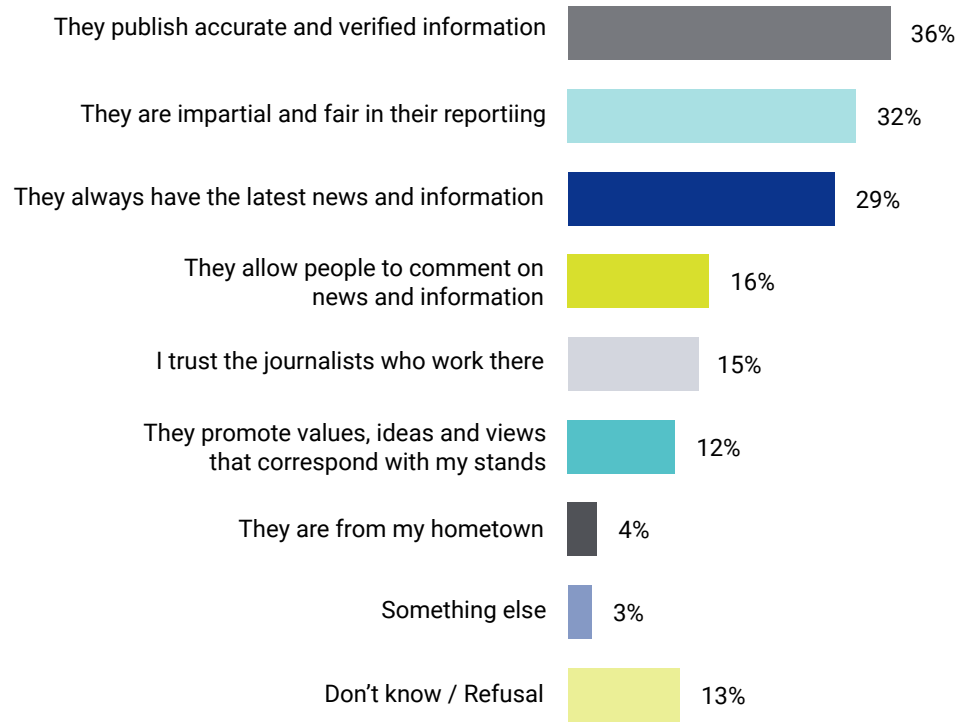
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Observing the main reason, as well as all other stated reasons, for citizens trusting certain media, releasing accurate and fact-checked information comes first (36%), while impartiality in reporting is the second most frequently stated reason (32%). Furthermore, more than a quarter of respondents mentioned the releasing of the latest news and information as one of the reasons for trusting certain media (29%).

A small portion (16%) of respondents stated as the reason for trusting a media outlet that it allows the audience to comment on the news and information it releases, and that they trust journalists who work for that media outlet (15%), which indicates that the work of individual journalists is not the decisive factor in building public trust in a media outlet. Furthermore, a small portion (12%) of respondents trust a media outlet because it promotes values and ideas compatible with their worldview.

The smallest percentage of respondents (4%) stated a media headquarters being in their hometown as the reason for trusting it, which could raise the question of whether citizens recognize the importance and role of local media in reporting on issues of importance to the local community.

Graph 4 – *In terms of media you consider to be the most reliable, what are the main reasons for trusting them?*

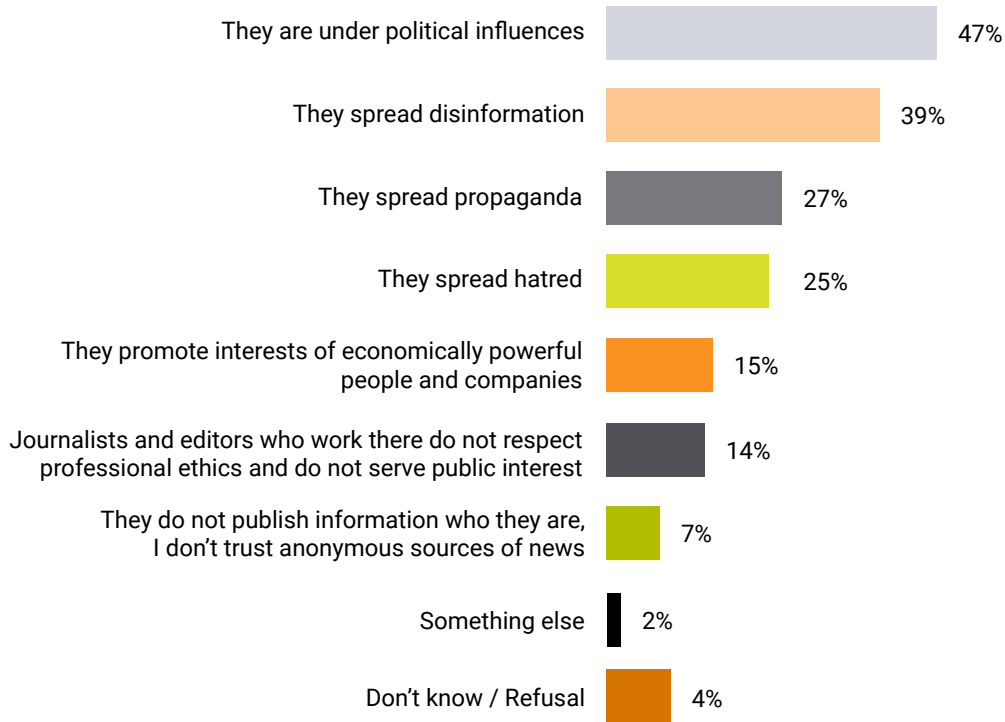


Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The younger population (ages 18 to 29) consider trustworthy media outlets that release the latest news and information, allow people to comment on articles and information they release and release correct and fact-checked information. The older population (60+) most often say they do not know why they trust certain media or that they have confidence in those that release correct and fact-checked information while reporting with impartiality and fairness.

On the other hand, the main reasons respondents do not trust certain media is that they believe that they are subject to political influence (47%) and because they spread disinformation (39%). Otherwise, around a quarter of respondents have no confidence in certain media because they spread propaganda (27%) and hatred (25%). As the reason for distrusting certain media, citizens leaning towards modern media state more often mention their “promotion of the interests of economically powerful figures and companies, because journalists and editors of those media neither adhere to professional code of ethics nor serve the public interest”.

Graph 5 – *Thinking about media outlets you consider the least trustworthy, what are the main reasons for distrusting them?*

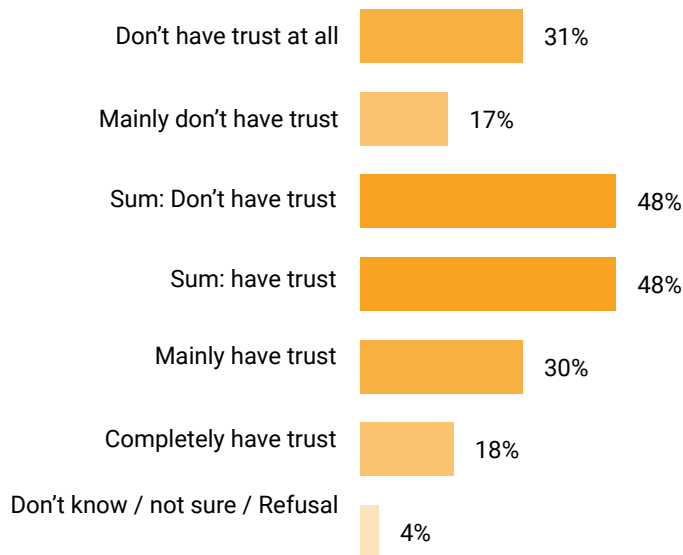


Source: Ipsos, 2021.

### 3.3. Polarization affects the attitude towards the public broadcaster

Opinions are divided when it comes to the Public Broadcaster Radio and Television of Montenegro (RTCG). While 48% of respondents in the public opinion poll think that this media outlet provides accurate, complete and balanced information, 48% do not share their position. This is also confirmed by the finding that one fifth of the respondents stress that RTCG is the outlet they trust the most (18%) while a quarter stress that RTCG is precisely the media that can be least trusted (25%).

Graph 6 – On a scale of 1 to 4, how much do you trust the Public Broadcaster (Radio and Television of Montenegro) as a media outlet that releases accurate and complete information?



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

All focus group participants agree that this is a consequence of the polarization of society. They think that belonging to a certain nationality or political group determines people's attitude towards the Public Broadcaster and the level of trust they have in this outlet.

*"People choose content that is compatible with their viewpoints; that is, they read what they are comfortable with and what they agree with. It is difficult, it seems to me, for people to read things that don't correspond to their opinions. Therefore, they read media they prefer as they know exactly what they will find in them. It has always been the practice in Montenegro that people choose which media to follow based on their political affiliation",* said the FG participant 5.

When establishing the demographic structure of the Montenegrin respondents in this study, their answers on ethnic identity were also taken into account. By crossing this information with their answers to how much they trusted the Public Broadcaster (RTCG) as a media outlet that releases correct and complete information, it is possible to infer that the level of trust also depends on the respondents' ethnic identity. Thus, the level of trust in RTCG is higher among ethnic Montenegrins and Bosniaks.

*"It would be ideal if we could establish what political option is supported by the 48% who trust or don't trust RTCG. Because, if these 48% of 'sovereignists' trusted television until yesterday, now they will not trust it; and the other 48%—if there are changes in the RTCG management structure, and there probably will be—will trust this media. So, this is a prime example of the division we're talking about, which I talked about earlier and which I'm still talking about, the division of Montenegrin society into 'pro' and 'contra'",* thinks the FG participant 6.

*"Everything that's happening in Montenegro reflects on the Public Broadcaster and the trust the public places in this outlet",* believes the FG participant 1.

*"You'll have a difficult time convincing a supporter of the Democratic Front, even if the Public Broadcaster was the most professional media, that it is the best. In any previous poll, those supporting this political option will say that Public Broadcaster is the worst and that it wasn't providing the most objective information. On the other hand, I think that people supporting the former authorities will believe that the Public Broadcaster is good, regardless of everything",* said the FG participant 2.

*"RTCG should enjoy the most public trust because it's a public broadcaster. That's why, to me, a poll showing an equal degree of public trust and distrust in this outlet is a cause for concern. This indicates that certain professional standards weren't, in actuality, adhered to. My concern is even bigger if, instead of the Public Broadcaster, the public places most trust in a private media outlet with far fewer resources. I mean, props to them, but I am sorry to say that the Public Broadcaster isn't like that",* said the FG participant 3.

Some of the focus group participants emphasized that opposing views of politicians, who talk about this outlet as the "propaganda tool of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS)" or a "flawless professional media", also fuel the public division about RTCG.

Members of the focus group agreed that efforts must be made to improve trust in the Public Broadcaster by having this outlet address all the problems in society.

*“The Public Broadcaster must be addressing all the problems in society, from a critical point of view, by asking questions and by not having any taboo topics or interlocutors, by uncompromisingly adhering to the Code of Ethics”,* thinks the FG participant 3.

### 3.4. Citizens vs journalists – prominent negative perception

Respondents in our public opinion poll expressed a prominently negative attitude towards the media. Four out of five respondents (82%) think that there are no independent and unbiased media outlets in Montenegro and that the Montenegrin media is controlled by the political and economic centres of power (81%).

Journalists and editors, focus group participants, reject these claims and consider them groundless.

*“People usually remember your mistakes or when you fail to adhere to the principles of professionalism and forget all the things you do well every day”,* thinks the FG participant 7.

*“A basic understanding of professional journalism doesn’t exist. In some cases, articles are even published that come from an interest group and are treated and presented as products of investigative journalism. I think this is one of the reasons why outlets aren’t addressing issues of general public interest and, which, ultimately, would result in a positive public perception of the media”,* said the FG participant 3.

*“Credibility is established over a long period, but it only takes one false step to lose it. If someone perceives our work as unprofessional, that we spread propaganda, then we have to ask ourselves why that is. Are we really spreading propaganda, representing someone’s political or business interests, or something else? Or perhaps it is the consequence of the media in Montenegro behaving like cats in a bag. I have a feeling that when something bad happens to a media outlet here, many enjoy their predicament”,* said the FG participant 6.

The fact that the majority of respondents in the public opinion poll believe that media outlets are spreading political propaganda and disinformation (76%) and that there is a clear division between outlets controlled by the Government and those controlled by the opposition (73%) sounds “impossible” to the journalists and editors participating in the focus group.

*“How is it possible to trust the media while simultaneously considering them responsible for spreading propaganda and disinformation? It’s as if someone asked you if you trust the media and you say ‘I don’t’, and when they ask you if you have a TV set or access to the internet, you say ‘I don’t’. It’s simply a groundless answer”,* thinks the FG participant 2.



*“It’s a fact that political propaganda is being spread and that much the people have got right. I disagree, however, with what they say about disinformation and propaganda. But, if such a high percentage of citizens thinks so, then it’s quite alarming and very problematic”,* thinks the FG participant 6.

Citizens included in the public opinion poll have a distinctly negative attitude towards social networks as well. Seven out of ten respondents (71%) believe that political propaganda and disinformation are spread on social networks, while two thirds of them think that social networks spread hate (65%). Almost the same number of citizens think that the media are spreading hate.

Half of the respondents (57%) think that the media can freely gather and release information on all important social issues, while 40% have the opposite opinion. Almost half of the respondents (54%) agree with the claim that the Government controls most of the media in Montenegro, while one in three people (35%) doesn’t share that opinion.

The public is also divided when it comes to the contribution of the media to democracy. Almost half of the citizens (49%) think that the media in Montenegro serves democracy and the public interest very well, while almost the same percentage (46%) think the opposite. People who mostly trust the media are prone to believe that the media in Montenegro is free and that it serves democracy and the public interest very well.

Some of the focus group participants see the reason for the negative public perception of the media in a series of crisis situations that took place in Montenegro during 2020 and up to the beginning of 2021 (from the events around the passing of the Religion Law and elections to the coronavirus pandemic), which also impacted the quality of media reporting.

*“Media outlets mobilized on a multitude of issues and put themselves in the service of different groups. Many political events that took place, then the pandemic and that’s what most of the manipulation and propaganda focused on, that could be the reason for such a result”,* said the FG participant 6.

*“We all seem to forget that it’s the citizens and the public whose best interest we should serve. We’re not supposed to be representing anyone individually or our own interests. It is up to me, as an individual, to decide whether I will or will not do something, whether I will stand behind something or not. I mean, the bottom line is, I know it’s very difficult, each and every one of us has to win that small battle and then move on or to simply make a break and say ‘OK, I will not do this and I will look for work somewhere else’”,* said the FG participant 1.

Participants in the focus group agree that continuous efforts have to be made to improve the public perception of the media and that the media and journalists themselves have a significant role to play in this.

*“It’s my impression, unfortunately, that there is a great number of those citizens who approach the media non-selectively and don’t know what they will get after clicking on certain content. No matter how much we journalists try to create quality, unbiased and accurate content, citizens have to be the ones to recognize it, which is why we need to make them media literate”,* stated the FG participant 1.

*“Representing a big problem in improving the public perception of the media is the fact that the majority of people are prepared to turn a blind eye to a lie reported by their favourite media outlet. Most people are more likely to believe a tweet or a Facebook status than an article signed by a journalist, and this is where our problem lies”,* said the FG participant 6.

*“We need media that are independent of their owners. I know that’s not easy to achieve and that the price to pay is high, but those who had to choose between freedom and safety and chose safety don’t deserve either. Surviving in Montenegro on this principle is exceptionally difficult, but there’s no other way. A wasteland remained and everything else will turn bad as well”,* thinks the FG participant 7.

*“But the most important thing is that you know you’re right, that you’re doing the best you can and know how and, of course, that you’re not defaming anyone. It means you’re doing your job in the public interest, in the best way possible. But you have to be committed to that and that’s what people will notice. I wouldn’t say this is how things are done in most Montenegrin media, unfortunately”,* continues the FG participant 7.

*“I think that citizens are entitled to be professionally informed and that they have the right to know all the facts. I think that platforms such as Raskrinkavanje.me and similar initiatives can help us uncover what some media are really like and use that knowledge to make ourselves better”,* said the FG participant 3.

However, despite the critical role that fact-checking platforms play, most respondents in our public opinion poll (74%) are unaware that such platforms exist in Montenegro. One in five citizens (19%) has heard about platforms such as Raskrinkavanje, while only 6% of them follow their releases. Those who follow these platforms are, for the most part, highly educated citizens leaning towards these media. That is why the fight against disinformation with the power to shape public opinion must be fought in parallel on different fronts and through those media with the widest reach.

The focus group participants see the solution for suppressing disinformation

and propaganda in both the education of journalists and media workers and the education of citizens through the promotion of media literacy.

*“There’s obviously a lack of will among decision-makers both those in the previous authorities and those there currently to address the problem of propaganda. It is there that I see an important role for us, people working in the media community, to commit ourselves to improve the media literacy of our people so that they are able to discern between propaganda and quality content independently”,* thinks the FG participant 1.

*“Our internal capacities and awareness of ethical reporting are what matter not only for us journalists but for citizens too, which is achieved precisely with media literacy”,* said the FG participant 3.

*“Additional education of all participants in the media industry is needed to compensate for the pressure exerted by politics on the media but also by other centres of power, primarily the business sector”,* thinks the FG participant 6.

*“I think that journalists have a special obligation and duty to be careful but also transparent in their work if they want to keep the public’s trust”,* said the FG participant 4.

### 3.5. Viewpoints on the protection of female journalists are encouraging

The majority of respondents in our public opinion poll expressed the opinion that the position of female journalists in Montenegro is distinctly unfavourable. Four in five respondents (81%) believe that female journalists are frequent targets for attacks, threats, insults and harassment. Also, almost three quarters of citizens (73%) agree that attacks, threats, insults and harassment of female journalists are a consequence of gender prejudice and stereotypes, while 87% of them think that the attacks were the consequence of their work on uncovering the truth and reporting on politics, corruption and crime.

Participants in the focus group think such viewpoints are encouraging.

*“This shows that we are not predominantly a patriarchal society after all, and that citizens can recognize when female journalists are the victims of insults and attacks”,* thinks the FG participant 1.

During the discussion, the question was raised of sanctions for those directing insults and profanity at female journalists and who harass them or physically attack them. Some of the participants in the focus group indicated that efforts had to be made to improve the mechanisms for protecting female journalists from different forms of harassment and attacks, which are especially prominent on social networks.

*“As journalists, we have to be careful about who we engage in conversation with so that the media space is made available to those who are recognized as not being sensitized and prone to gender-based violence and making sexist remarks against female journalists”*, thinks the FG participant 1.

They mention as a particular problem the fact that narratives are spread throughout the online space which contain disinformation, propaganda and insulting speech that refers to them and their colleagues. Our earlier study showed that the online reporting about journalists is dominated by the narrative of them being “the creators of fake news”, “victims of state repression”, “mercenaries working for third parties (Serbia, Russia, ANB, etc.), “enemies of the state” ... (Bogdanović, 2020).

Participants in the focus group claim that such messages don't affect their work directly or discourage them; however, they do notice that they often have a political connotation and call their impartiality into question.

*“If I know I have done something right and that I have presented correct information, I'm always ready to take pride in that and try my standpoints against opposing ones. People hide behind false identities online and on social networks and then insult journalists and their work. I don't think that any attention should be wasted on that”*, thinks the FG participant 4.

*“If it's obvious that a commentator is a bot, someone hiding behind a fake user name, I pay no attention to that. Such messages of hate don't concern me, nor speculation on who I work for, who pays me and whether I dare to write something about someone or not”*, thinks the FG participant 1.

Some focus group participants agree that messages referring to journalists' work often have a political context.

*“Messages from readers on web portals are most frequently insults and accusations related to journalists' political affiliation or religion, which is how we have been labelled everything from CIA collaborators, Liberal Alliance of Montenegro supporters, and DPS supporters to ustasas and chetniks...”*, explains the FG participant 6.

The social environment in which violence is considered an acceptable course of action, as some of the focus group participants point to, can lead to someone becoming bold enough to attack a journalist on the street.

*"I think that the biggest problem occurs when inflammatory comments and rhetoric are heard in society, in public, directed against journalists. When such changes occur, political, health, economic, due to someone's interests, or otherwise, an atmosphere is created in which the lynching of all those writing, doing their job professionally, is called for and I'm sure that such an atmosphere affects both journalists and media",* said the FG participant 3.

Participants in the focus group and respondents in the public opinion poll (96%) are almost unanimous in saying that the state authorities (police, judiciary) should protect female journalists if they are threatened or under attack (96%).

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Complex social events, such as the coronavirus epidemic, elections and change of power in Montenegro, are reflected in the work of the media and the quality of their reporting. The challenges the media were facing earlier, such as financial sustainability, the unregulated media market and lack of adequate self-regulation, became especially pronounced during these crises.

Although new media regulations have been adopted, the civil sector and international community indicate that there are still disputable legal provisions. There is still no strategic approach to the development of the media nor has the issue of online media been fully regulated. There is a continuous expansion of online media that do not adhere to professional standards and which, along with regional media, represent the main channels for spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda.

Social networks not contributing to the promotion of professional journalism but enabling additional spreading of disinformation and conspiracy theories play a great role. All this affects the level of public trust in the media and people's perception of the media as professional social actors who deliver correct and complete information based on which they can make correct decisions.

The public opinion poll carried out by the Ipsos agency for the purposes of this analysis shows that the majority of respondents claim they trust the media. The majority of them follow television news daily and believe that this is the medium releasing correct and complete information. More than half of respondents use online media and social networks daily but there is distinct distrust for social media as a reliable source of information.

Opinions are divided when it comes to trusting the Public Broadcaster. The same percentage (48%) of respondents believe that this media outlet is delivering correct and complete information as those who have the opposite opinion. Journalists and editors from different Montenegrin media to whom we presented the results of the public opinion poll and who discussed them in the focus group said that such positions are a consequence of the general division in Montenegrin society and that national or political identity significantly influence people's views and their perception of the RTCG. On the whole, they agree that it is necessary to work on improving public trust in the Public Broadcaster to make it a more professional outlet that people will have most trust in.

Journalists and editors agree that the fact that people trust traditional media the most is encouraging and represents a chance for Montenegrin media, especially national television stations, to create professional content and adhere to standards. The influence on public opinion of those media spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories could be reduced by strengthening public trust in the traditional media.

Although most respondents generally trust the media and consider that media outlets release correct and reliable information, they also expressed distinctly negative standpoints on the media. Most of the respondents think that media does not contribute to the development of democracy or serve the public interest. They also believe that media outlets spread hatred, disinformation and political propaganda and that they are neither independent nor impartial. Journalists and editors, participants in our focus group, think that such standpoints expressed by the people are, on the one hand, contradictory, and, on the other, concerning because they call into question the efforts that journalists and media are making, in adverse conditions, to do their job in the best way possible.

Focus group participants agree that there is a significant amount of room for improving the work of the Montenegrin media and adherence to professional standards as preconditions for strengthening public trust in the media. However, they also think that, along with professional media, society also needs media literate citizens, who can distinguish credible media from those that aren't. Therefore, they perceive both journalists and editors as important actors in promoting media literacy and developing critical thinking among the population.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve public trust in the media and thus curb the spreading of disinformation and propaganda, the Montenegro Media Institute, based on this and the previous two analyses, prepared a set of recommendations for decision-makers, the media community and the civic sector:

- During 2021, the Government should put together a Media Strategy, which would set out the directions for the development of the media and improvement of the working environment for journalists, as well as an accompanying Action Plan. To produce a general societal response to the spreading of disinformation and propaganda, the Government must include the Media Literacy Strategy and the accompanying action plan in its 2021 Work Programme. The Media Literacy Strategy represents a broader document that encompasses issues related to the media and online safety, radicalization in the public space and the study of media literacy in the school system. All interested social stakeholders must take part in developing both strategies.
- Institutions in charge of implementing the Law on Media must take the necessary steps to enable the most efficient possible implementation of new regulations and resolve possible dilemmas (registration of online media, the reaction in the case of failure to register, transparency of the media, etc.)
- Institutions in charge of implementing the Law on Media should provide for transparency in the work of the Media Pluralism Fund and precisely regulate the issue of financing self-regulation from public funds to prevent any undue influence on media and self-regulatory bodies.
- In the long term, the divided media community should form a common self-regulatory body, which would indicate the examples of spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda and promote professional standards.
- Online media should take concrete steps to improve comment moderation systems on their websites and social networks, thus curbing the spreading of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda in readers' comments.
- Professional associations and professional media organizations should help in strengthening the capacities of the media for moderating comments, recognizing propaganda and fact-checking information.
- In cooperation with the representatives of institutions, the established media, especially national television stations, should create professional and educational content that would serve as an adequate response to the spreading of disinformation and conspiracy theories about issues related to public health.



- With the support of foreign donors, professional associations and professional media organizations should help strengthen the capacities of the media for moderating comments, recognizing propaganda and fact-checking information.
- Local media analysts and fact-checking platforms should continue to contribute to the fight against disinformation and propaganda and strengthen their resources so that they can engage in more intensive monitoring and analysis of media content in Montenegro. To improve their visibility and influence, they should consider cooperating with the established media, first and foremost television stations with national frequency, which people watch the most often and which they trust.
- Civic society organizations (CSO) should continue activities in promoting media literacy, with an emphasis on the education system. CSOs should continue advocating the introduction of media literacy as a compulsory subject in all secondary schools in Montenegro. CSOs should initiate the studying of media literacy as an additional subject in primary schools.

CSOs should continue developing education programmes in media literacy for the younger population, who use online media and social networks the most, as well as for the more mature population, who usually get their information from traditional media. The synergy of CSOs and traditional media is the path towards improving media literacy and restoring public trust in the media.

## Literature and sources

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Ipsos, 2021. The public opinion poll carried out in Montenegro for the purposes of the Resilience project from 3 to 7 March 2021, on a representative sample of 1,018 respondents.

Participants in the focus group discussion, on 30 March 2021, via Zoom:

Focus group participant 1 – journalist from a print media outlet (female).

Focus group participant 2 – editor of an online media outlet (female).

Focus group participant 3 – journalist from a national television station (female).

Focus group participant 4 – news agency editor (male).

Focus group participant 5 – journalist from a weekly (male).

Focus group participant 6 – local media editor (male).

Focus group participant 7 – non-profit online media editor (male).

## About the author

Milica Bogdanović graduated from the Department of Journalism of the Faculty of Political Science in Podgorica. She gained professional experience in the media and the NGO sector. She produced this study as a researcher of the Montenegrin Media Institute.

This publication is a part of the RESILIENCE project research component. The third series of research reports examines TRUST IN THE MEDIA in Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Nine media development organizations in the Western Balkans and Turkey have joined forces under an EU-funded project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey'. The three-year project is coordinated by the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM), a network of media development organizations in Central and South East Europe, and implemented in partnership with: the Albanian Media Institute in Tirana, the Foundation Mediacentar Sarajevo, Kosovo 2.0 in Pristina, the Montenegro Media Institute in Podgorica, the Macedonian Institute for Media in Skopje, the Novi Sad School of Journalism in Novi Sad, the Peace Institute in Ljubljana, and Bianet in Istanbul.