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Media consumption patterns and media landscapes in illiberal regimes

Case studies from Poland and Hungary.

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Introduction and Methodology

Introduction

In the past years, illiberal political regimes emerged in Poland and Hungary. This political environment has had a negative effect on a number of institutions and organisations that are meant to provide and support the personal and institutional fundamental democratic rights of society. One of these institutions that fell victim to these illiberal regimes is the previously free and independent media. The freedom and independence of the media in these countries are now under pressure from various angles, such as legal regulations and outright political pressure. Many researchers (both local and international) focus on the media landscapes of these countries, but they rarely change their focus from the national media and the whole society to the opinion and experience of the small, rural media outlets and rural society in general.

Our project aimed to gain a better understanding of the rural media consumption and rural media landscape in Poland and Hungary, and also to raise awareness on the importance of the topic. Therefore this project contained a complex qualitative research, school seminars in rural highschools in the topic of conscious media consumption, an online conference and a social media campaign of educational infographic in the topic.

Research Analysis

Introduction

Our research is meant to provide an up-to-date snapshot of the rural media landscape in Poland and Hungary and an insight into the experiences of the rural society in connection to the topic of freedom and independence of the media and the press. Since many researchers have already provided quantitative data on the topic, our chosen methodology was qualitative. We conducted focus groups and interviews in both countries to gather insights and to be able to see a more complex picture of the situation of the rural media. Complementing the main narratives that emerged from these interviews, however, we shall also provide quantitative benchmark data gathered from previous projects that we conducted on the same theme in our final summary of the complete project.

Methodology

Focus groups – Hungary

21 Research Center conducted 2 focus groups on media consumption on the 8th and 9th of June 2022. The groups were organized by 21 Research Center and the discussions were led by a trained moderator. Each group had 6 participants who were chosen based on their localities, gender, age, political preferences, and identity. The demographic quotas of the groups are as follows:

CHART 1. - FGI SPECIFICATIONS - HUNGARY

	Gender	Age	Locality	Political preferences	Identity
Group 1	mixed, balanced	2 people from each: 21-30 31-50 50+	2 people from each: Western, Eastern, and South Hungary	Unsure	Not Roma
Group 2	mixed, balanced	2 people from each: 21-30 31-50 50+	2 people from each: Western, Eastern, and South Hungary	Pro- governmental	Roma

The guide of the FGI's was based upon our previous understanding of the topic and the previously agreed research plan. The guide was accordingly organised around the following subtopics:

- * Introduction
- * Media and news consumption
- * Local public life
- * Fake news, credibility, independence
- * Social media consumption

In Hungary the number of localities with a Roma majority is considerable, therefore we found it important to examine their points of view on the topic. As a result, one of the focus groups was composed solely of Roma participants. The participants were invited from rural localities according to our goals: the media landscape in Hungary is quite unbalanced and very much Budapest-centered. Though many pieces of research aim to quantify the habits of media consumers in Hungary, not too many of them focus on the deeper reasons behind their consumption choices. Therefore our goal was to find out more about these motivations and gather narratives of rural citizens on the topic.

Focus group interviews – Poland

Project Polska also conducted 2 focus groups in Poland. The groups were organized with the same methodology as the Hungarian ones. The FGI guides and the demographics of the groups were modified according to the Polish actualities, but the focus of the discussions stayed the same. The demographic quotas of the groups are as follows:

CHART 2. – FGI SPECIFICATIONS – POLAND

	Gender	Age	Locality	Political preferences
Group 1	mixed, balanced	under 30	2 Central- Eastern Poland 2 Central- Western Poland 1 South-Western Poland 1 North-Eastern Poland	Pro-opposition
Group 2	mixed, balanced	1 people from each: 34 -70	Central-Western Poland	Pro- governmental

Individual interviews – Hungary

21 Research Center conducted 5 individual interviews on the current situation of the media market in Hungary between the 11th and the 26th of July 2022. The interviews were organized by 21 Research Center and were led by a trained moderator. The subjects were professional media workers from rural Hungary. They were chosen based on their locality. The interviews were conducted according to professional ethical expectations and the current rules of GDPR, and the anonymity of the subjects was provided.

The first Hungarian focus group included 7 supporters of the opposition and the second 6 pro-government (Fidesz) members. In Poland, the first group included 6 supporters of the governing party (Law and Justice) and 6 voters of the opposition. For each group, originally 8 participants were recruited, but technical difficulties and last-minute drop-outs resulted in these final numbers. Each group was homogenous in terms of the established selection criteria. Nonetheless, these groups were not representative of the Polish and Hungarian rural population, partly due to the sample's small size, but primarily by nature of this form of qualitative data collection.

CHART 3. - IDI SPECIFICATIONS - HUNGARY

	Gender	Locality	Type of media outlet
Subject 1	male	Southern Hungary - Baranya	Online news portal
Subject 2	female	Southern Hungary - Baranya	Online news portal
Subject 3	male	Western Hungary - Győr-Moson-Sopron	Online news portal
Subject 4	male	Western Hungary - Komárom-Esztergom	FM and online radio
Subject 5	male	North-East Hungary - Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	Online news portal

The guide of the IDIs was based on our previous understanding of the topic and the outcomes of previous focus group interviews on the topic of media consumption. It was also adjusted to the previously agreed research plan, containing the following topics:

- * Introduction
- * Audience monitoring
- * Independency and freedom of media in Hungary
- * Hungarian media market

Our considerations while organizing these IDIs were based upon the previously written topics. We wished to take a closer look at the situation of independent journalists and editors from rural localities. We found it important to gather a deep understanding of the rural media landscape and the considerations behind their operation models from a professional point of view.

Individual interviews – Poland

Project Polska also conducted five interviews with Polish professional media workers. The methodology of the research – similar to the FGIs – did not change in comparison to the Hungarian interviews, but the guide was adapted to the Polish circumstances. Similar to the other IDIs, the focus of the topic remained the same. They were conducted according to professional ethical expectations and the current rules of GDPR, and the anonymity of the subjects was ensured. The demographics of the subjects are the following:

CHART 4. – IDI SPECIFICATIONS – POLAND

	Gender	Locality	Type of media outlet
Subject 1	female	Central-Western Poland – Czerwonak	Local press
Subject 2	male	Central-Western Poland– Luboń	Local press
Subject 3	male	Central-Western Poland – Swarzędz	Online news portal
Subject 4	female	Western Poland – Świebodzin	Local press
Subject 5	female	Central-Eastern – Kutno	Local press

Research analysis – Main findings

Focus group summary – Hungary

The first part of the focus group interviews focused on the participants' habits in information gathering and specific choices of media channels.

We found that gathering political information via television among the participants was rather atypical. They are more likely to gather information from online written media outlets and social media than from traditional media outlets such as radio stations, printed newspapers, or television. Information gathering via social media often meant that they follow certain media outlets' pages (for instance on Facebook) and they tend to land on their homepages starting from the given social media platform. According to their narratives, having every media platform often visited by them in the same 'place' makes information gathering easier. Practical aspects such as this were often mentioned in connection with this topic.

Interpersonal information gathering (in both groups) has an important role but requires a great amount of trust towards the source of that information. In the Roma group, the situation was comparable, in somewhat of a contradiction to previous quantitative studies (including ours) that find that among this group television is usually the main source of information.

Almost all of the participants (in both groups) tend to gather information as a secondary action: they do not have a dedicated time to read or listen to the news, they usually do that during other activities such as dining, traveling, etc. Here, again we heard about practical approaches. Some make some time during their lunch breaks to read the news, while others follow the decades-long tradition to end the day with a quasi-ritual of watching, or rather listening to the news while having dinner, and several similar scenarios.

'I usually listen to them after work, in the evening. (...) Last night I was cooking strawberry jam when I started to listen to a podcast. House chores are very convenient for this!'

'For me, it (reading the news – the editor) is always secondary. I watch Netflix, if I cook, (...) but it is a secondary action for me! So I do it next to something else!'

We also inquired about participants' thoughts on local news. All of them in both groups found it important to get informed about local news, and local opinion leaders are usually the most trusted sources on whom they can rely. These people are usually mayors or other charismatic representatives of the given settlement. This does not mean that they strictly gather information from these sources. They do read rural, local news portals, but they trust those news more, where the aforementioned people are mentioned as the source of information.

They usually don't trust national media outlets, they believe that they often distort actual events. They see national media as a Budapest-centered entity that falls very far from their actual problems and usually tells only partial truth for their need to twist the actual events in a way that will mean profit for them. This distrust is slightly less noticeable among the Roma.

Regarding politics and current affairs, the participants in both groups expressed a relatively high level of interest. However, their willingness to gather information on these domains largely depends on their personal preferences. Their preferences are usually based on political orientation and on their personal experience with the actual subject matter at hand. In general, they find those topics the most important to get informed about that are connected to their everyday lives, such as news on taxes, corruption, building renovations, education, healthcare, etc. In both groups, they usually read about national and local politics, but comparatively rarely about international affairs. In this latter domain, they only gather information if they know from a secondary source that something should concern them personally. Here we must note that the majority read about topics other than

politics (e.g. culture, entertainment, sports, tabloid content etc.), much more frequently. These tend to relate to their hobbies and interests, or their jobs. Among many participants, there was a palpable negative attitude towards political news: they tended to think about it as a burden, rather than as a matter of curiosity and interest.

'I don't like to read about politics, I am into tango news and strawberry growing, gardening, and I am in an accountant club! That is very useful for me! (...) I try to avoid politics but I can't, it is everywhere!'

'I mostly read about sports, but as Jozefina also said, it is necessary to read about politics! And anyways... it is everywhere!'

The longest part of the discussions focused on the freedom, independence, credibility, and bias of the media. Both groups found it important to have independent media, but they did not find Hungarian media particularly independent. They believe that the source of dependence is primarily rooted in financial factors. Since donors are usually tied to politics, the media outlets are bound to lean towards the political preferences of these donors. This is also one of the main narratives provided by professionals in connection to this question.

Both the Roma and the non-Roma group had a very long and interesting conversation about the definitions of freedom and independence. The narrative that we mentioned before mainly boils down to the current situation of the media: they see the media landscape (regardless of political preferences) as a very unbalanced one. They do realize that the majority of media outlets are financed by the government, therefore they do not see them as an objective source of news. Those who agree with the current government read these newspapers and online outlets regardless, which leads us to the question of bias, in close connection with credibility.

Credibility is a very important aspect for the participants. They find someone credible if the individual puts an effort into objectivity and has a proper professional background. For the non-Roma participants, bias seemed to

be a problem only if someone is biased towards the opposite political direction they are. There was a strong dissonance between this statement and the one voiced by the very same participants: those who are partial cannot be credible. They eased this dissonance by saying that if this bias is based on rational considerations and professional experience, then it is acceptable. The Roma had a different idea on the topic. They stated:

'If someone believes what you believe, it doesn't mean they are right!'

Therefore they were much more careful when ascertaining credibility, they did not list the lack of bias as a requirement.

Both groups position the given media outlets rather accurately on the ideological scale (pro-government vs. opposition) we provided to them. The interesting parts of this exercise were about the middle of the scale (there was a minor debate in the Roma group on whether it referred to being centrist, or independent), and about the local media outlets (both groups agreed that it was impossible to assign them on the scale because they differ in every case based upon the political composition of the given region and municipality).

We also found it important to ask the groups about the news themselves. Both groups evaluated the quality of Hungarian journalism as generally low. They felt that the quality of a given piece is mostly determined by the outlet it is found on: they usually mention mainstream media outlets as low-quality outlets on both political sides. They do not see a connection between financing and quality.

In both groups, the participants found it hard to determine fake news and tell them apart from credible news stories. When determining if something is true they usually look for certain indicators, such as the name of the writer (if something is published anonymously, it suggests to them that the individual is not ready to take responsibility for their claims), citations, cross-references, etc. They also find Facebook news less credible, except for the news published on Facebook pages of existing media outlets.

FIGURE 1. - INDICATIONS OF NON-ROMAS (LEFT - OPPOSITION MEDIA, RIGHT - PRO-GOVERNMENT

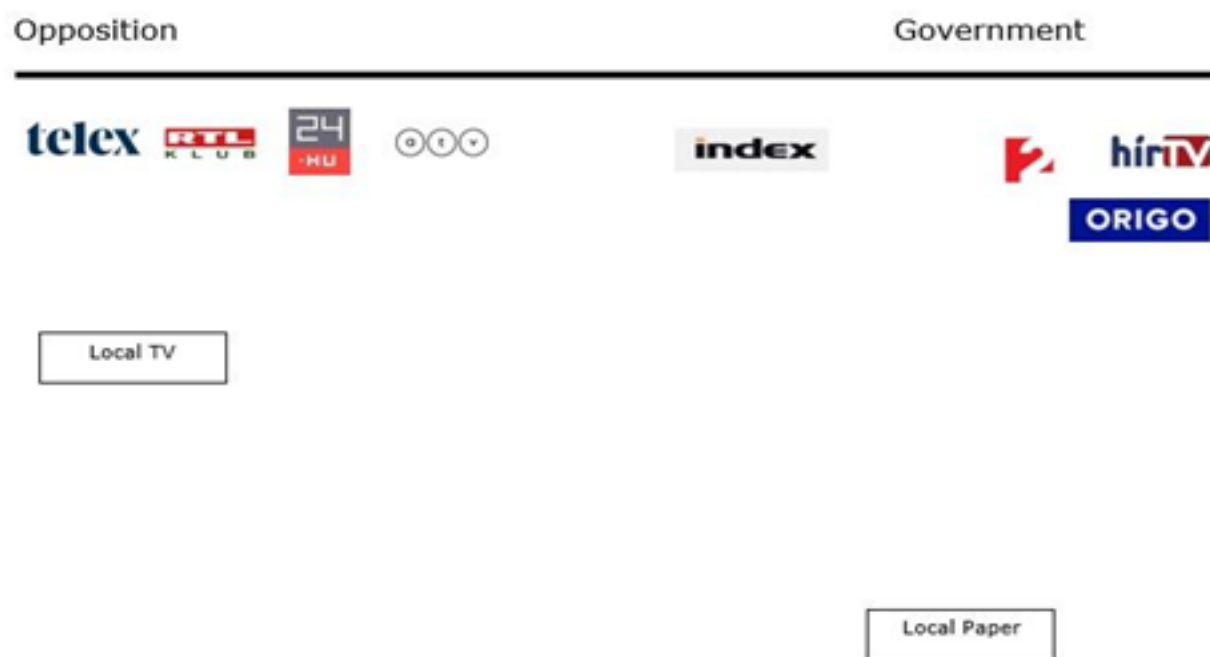


FIGURE 2. - INDICATIONS OF ROMAS (LEFT - OPPOSITION MEDIA, RIGHT - PRO-GOVERNMENT MEDIA)



The wording and style of news content were also important for both groups. They find it as the most visible sign of the quality of a certain piece. Based on their personal preferences and their consumption habits, they prefer different lengths and difficulties, but all agree in both groups that typos, aggressive wording, and unjustified bias signal a low quality. From the examples we provided, the participants picked the pro-governmental outlets' contents as the lowest quality ones – in both groups.

As the closing part of the FGIs, we were also curious about their news consumption habits on social media. We wished to see how active they are when it comes to interaction, especially on political opinion leaders' pages. On social media platforms – mainly on Facebook – the Roma were less likely to interact with other people or pages. It is also less likely for them to follow political actors' pages. The same goes for any kind of interaction, such as commenting, sharing, or even liking. In the other group, the strongest form of interaction was content sharing, but it is more likely to be restricted to what the participants called „useful information” rather than political content. Liking and commenting of political content is most common among men in the non-Roma group.

Both groups tend to use Facebook to get informed on a regular basis. The reasoning behind this – as mentioned before – is mainly one of convenience: they can find all of the important media outlets' pages in one place on this platform. They consider these pages credible, and they are willing to read them accordingly.

In summary, there was no significant difference between Romas and non-Romas. The focus group discussions in both groups were successful, the participants were engaged and active throughout the conversations. The main differences were in social media activity and the more abstract definitions, like bias and credibility. These differences were consistent with what we had already known about these groups's news consumption habits.

The main conclusions of the focus groups are the following:

The participants had a highly complex image of the Hungarian media landscape. Even if they could not exactly put it in words, we could read from their narratives that they see a very polarized and unbalanced government-dominated landscape. They might agree with some of the content coming from the pro-government media, but they do not necessarily find their quality appropriate. They can position the main media outlets on a political scale fairly well, and they tend to see bias as a 'red flag': credibility is very much at the center of their cognitive filtering process, and they have the need to gather information from more than one source. Quite often, the wording and style of the opposite political side's contents are stepping over the threshold of bias they can take and tolerate (on both sides). For most participants, this often signals a lack of credibility (more often among the non-Roma than the Roma).

They do not necessarily see a strong, free, and independent part of the Hungarian media landscape. From our 'scale experiment', we can also see that they find two groups of media outlets: pro-government and pro-opposition. They would expect the independent media to be in the center, and to be objective, or in other words: without bias.

Focus group summary – Poland

The first associations in the Polish focus groups concerning such terms as „media”, „credibility”, and „fake news” tip us off to fairly traditional and obvious tropes, which are not differentiated by affiliation with the opposition or government side. One of the most noteworthy patterns that emerged is that the „media” is most often associated with the Internet. The association with „traditional press” was the least frequent in the enumeration made by the respondents. On the one hand, for „credibility,” the associations were based around such concepts as „truthfulness of information”, „reliability”, and „certainty” of information. On the other hand, „fake news” was defined as disinformation, lies, manipulation, and articles or topics intended only to increase click-through rates.

The media accompanies the respondents in their daily lives, but rather as a background, rarely playing a central role in their daily schedules. In the case of opposition supporters, television is a tool that plays in the background and is somewhat similar to what radio used to be in the past. The latter is mainly listened to while driving. Information about the world is gathered from leading Internet portals, where the main news on the site are viewed in various topics, such as politics, sports, celebrity life, and global affairs. This information accompanies respondents all the time on their phone, over breakfast, and coffee.

Woman, 30, opposition supporter: *‘In my case, it is mainly the Internet. I do not own a radio. Newspapers sometimes, but news mostly from my phone I read, and TV also sometimes plays in the background. I don’t have a favorite station, so I pass through the channels, although with TVN, I think I’m most comfortable.’*

Woman, 22, opposition: *“Also Internet. I always browse Onet in the morning, what’s on the front pages. On TV, it’s TVN24. Polsat News will also drop in sometimes. From the press, it’s only the local news in my locality.”*

The patterns are similar for the supporters of the ruling partz. For them, the media is mainly what we have on our phones as well. The information they gather is about news and matters related to herbalism or criminology. During the interviews, it emerged that some of the respondents have a penchant for conspiracy theories. They tend to look for a „second bottom” behind a lot of information, and are rather distrustful of what they read or see. However, this distrust is not always rational or well-founded.

Woman, 56, government: I look for daily information and entertainment in the media. I listen to historical podcasts. They de-stigmatize stories, e.g., Urbex (I'm old school and wasn't taught about it). They also allow me to deepen my knowledge as they refer me to other books and movies. I listen to programs about herbs, about health.'

Interestingly, there appeared a remarkably high level of pluralism regarding media consumption among government supporters. Compared to opposition supporters, they more often indicated a willingness to form their own opinions based on various views, not just from sources generally considered as pro-government.

Men, 34, government: 'Mainly the Internet, I can browse it when I have time when I am waiting for something. I look for information on different sites, but I never trust any particular one. Unfortunately, you must draw an average (Gazeta Polska, Interia.pl, TV Republika, Wirtualna Polska). TV, I rarely watch because I don't have time to do it. Still, if I do, it's Wiadomości, Fakty, and Wydarzenia to also have a view from all sides.'

One of the tasks of the respondents was to indicate what topics in the local community could be those that would interest a journalist our interviewees would like to report on. In the case of opposition supporters, the most frequently indicated issues were those related to security (the problem of alcoholism, pathology) and the desire to intervene in these matters (also collections, actions for sick children). In this case, the journalist was seen as

a tool that could publicize the problems and thus lead to the reaction of the relevant institutions and change the state of affairs for the better.

Men, 28, opposition: *'Alcoholism, vandalism, pathology, this is an old village in which once existed a State Agricultural Farm (PGR). When something is renovated, it is immediately destroyed, and this is the biggest problem. It follows from my observations.'*

Woman, 23, opposition: *'Problems with some pedestrian crossings that are poorly marked. Problems with access to some of the smaller villages in the area.'*

The situation was similar for supporters of the government. Here, the main problems to be covered in the media were such typical local issues as smog, concretosis, disastrous road infrastructure, and excessive tree cutting. Respondents had a low sense of influence in local matters, so they saw journalists as an opportunity to change this state of affairs. Interestingly, the catalog of issues indicated (air protection, trees, excessive use of concrete in the public space) tends to correspond to the left-liberal narrative agenda, which would suggest that respondents have widespread access to information from a variety of sources and do not close themselves off to them or treat them as their own.

Men, 34, government: *'Road infrastructure, overbuilt strings of semi-detached or single-family houses and no paving, also lack of stores and children's playgrounds, the municipality has not kept up with the increasing population.'*

There is also no difference between the two groups regarding the designated opinion leaders. According to opposition supporters, a journalist's first steps to get information or a statement will be to local government officials, larger business people, and possibly a priest (which was expressed with a wink, showing that parishes still play a dominant role in many places). Ordinary people were treated merely as participants in a „street poll.“

Men, 28, opposition: *'It depends which TV would come, if governmental it would probably be about the parish priest in the first place, and beyond that, it's the mayor, the authorities, sometimes and asking the parish priest makes sense, but not always. Generally, it is the local authorities.'*

Respondents expressed concern about whether materials about their locality would be prepared fairly. They indicated that depending on which media outlet came to them, this is how the reality would be colored. They also expressed a desire to see the material later to verify whether it was truthful or not.

Woman, 30, opposition: *'I would look for this information later. I am a bit of a gossip girl, and I like to know what is going on and who committed what crime. I read what is going on in our country. I would watch regardless of the station, but at a distance from the veracity of this information.'*

Woman, 42, government: *'The mayor, our local celebrity who knows everything. It depends on which medium, but I think they would describe it rather sensationally so that you can't say what it was about. I would watch or read regardless of which medium would show it.'*

Government supporters also felt that all media, regardless of sympathies, would be looking for sensationalism. However, some statements suggested that it would be more the opposition media that exaggerate. Respondents declared they would watch news about their locality, even if the news were in a media outlet they disliked.

Men, 34, government: *'It depends on which medium it would be. I think it would be presented in a biased way. Each editorial board would do it so that it would look how they want people to see it.'*

The discussion then turned to the topics of „credibility” and „journalistic independence.” According to respondents who sympathize with the opposition, „credibility” is showing the truth, showing events as they are. A journalist is „independent” when he pursues the truth and, without succumbing to pressure, is not hired by some politician.

Woman, 22, opposition: *'Credibility is truthfulness, independence is writing about various dirt, such a journalist is not afraid to bring it up.'*

Woman, 23, opposition: *an independent journalist is a credible journalist. TVN is dependent but not yet propaganda.*

Opposition supporters pointed out that today many journalists depend on the Law and Justice government and the Catholic Church.

Government supporters also see the media as „dependent” on something or someone. Here they point to politicians and private sponsors. However, they avoid the topic of government media, which leads one to guess that when they speak of „dependence”, they mean media that favor the opposition. In doing so, they point out that the presence of private capital creates more dependence than public capital.

At the same time, they feel that everyone is manipulating a bit. Still, they emphasize that it is important that there is a balance in the media market so that you can draw your own conclusions based on what different media outlets say. These statements fit in with the government narrative, which states that by taking over the public media, the government has finally created a situation where there is balance in the media (public, government vs. private, opposition). None of the respondents referred to the fact that the public media should at least strive to equally present the rationale and arguments of both sides of the political dispute in Poland.

Another task of the respondents was to arrange the pro-government and opposition media on appropriate axes.

In analyzing these placements, it should be noted that familiarity with particular media was poor in both groups. Only the main titles are known. Some of the „middle” ratings were due to unfamiliarity with a specific media outlet.

Nevertheless, respondents from both groups define Poland’s media market similarly.

- Media favoring the government side include public television (TVP).
- Media critical of the government include private television (TVN), media from the Agora group (Gazeta Wyborcza, Radio Tok FM), and media from the Axel Springer group (more Newsweek than Fakt). Onet, Radio Zet, and RMF radio are also positioned on the opposition side. The citizen-funded Okopress portal is also treated as opposition.
- Newspaper titles such as „Rzeczpospolita” (whose shareholder for many years was the state treasury) and „Dziennik Gazeta Prawna” are assessed as „centrist” or mildly „pro-government,” as well as Polsat TV. Respondents have difficulty attributing political affiliations to „Wprost” magazine, the WP.PL portal, as well as tabloids (Fakt, Super Express)

Both groups also correctly passed the test for detecting fake news, indicating that from the proposed catalog of topics, it was a news item designed to elicit more clicks. In the group of opposition supporters, one person considered as fake, the news he had not heard about („I hadn’t heard about it, so I decided it wasn’t true”). The situation was similar for government supporters. There, too, the respondents verified the „truthfulness” of the information based on whether they had previously heard about the issue from another

FIGURE 3. - INDICATIONS OF OPPOSITION SUPPORTERS
(LEFT - PRO-GOVERNMENT MEDIA, RIGHT - OPPOSITION MEDIA)



FIGURE 4. - INDICATIONS OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORTERS
(LEFT - PRO-GOVERNMENT MEDIA, RIGHT - OPPOSITION
MEDIA)



source. This allows us to cautiously infer that the credibility of the information would not necessarily be determined by its content but by the fact that other media had previously reproduced it.

A more difficult task was to assess the „bias” of the given media material. The example we gave concerned the „Equality March” organized in Warsaw, expressing support for non-heteronormative social norms. In this case, the attitude to the LGBTQIA+ topic determined which news would be judged as biased and which would not.

1. The Equality Parade passed through Warsaw. On the streets, thousands of participants. „Hurt, but stronger”. Thousands of people took part in Saturday’s Equality Parade in Warsaw. The march went from the Plac Defilad to Pole Mokotowskie. The event was held under the patronage of Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski. (pro-opposition)
2. Trzaskowski lashed out at the Equality Parade: This is a celebration of all who are tolerant. All those who are smiling. It was peaceful, which is how the capital’s police assessed the course of the Equality Parade, which passed through the city center on Saturday afternoon. The parade was attended by Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski and left-wing politicians. (pro-government)
3. Equality Parade in Warsaw. „Here beats the heart of smiling Poland”. Thousands of people marched through the streets of downtown Warsaw on Saturday as part of the Equality Parade, which was held under the patronage of the capital’s mayor Rafal Trzaskowski. Western agencies covering the event wrote of a „rising tide of homophobia” in Poland. (centrist)

Interestingly, opposition supporters indicated that virtually all materials, including those media outlets that belonged to “their bubble” of information, contained expressions that could be considered biased (e.g., exaggerated exaltation because of the march).

Man, 28, opposition: *'With the first, there is no commentary, so I consider it objective. Precise information is given. The second is with the backlash, which has pejorative overtones, and the third has a little biased sting at the end.'*

Government supporters also saw bias in "their materials" and considered each of them to be "biased to some degree." However, what hurt them the most was the reference to "the West" as the determinant of civilization standards in Poland.

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to rate social media as a source of information about the world. In both groups, the reliability of social media was found to be low, and Facebook was treated as entertainment rather than a reliable source of information.

Men, 26, opposition: *'I do not consider Facebook a reliable source, and it is not verified in any way. I believe that in other media, the editor does some control. I try not to see politicians' posts because they want to put themselves in a good light or their opponents in a bad light.'*

Woman, 30, opposition: *'I think Facebook is a good source of information. Still, you need to verify it because it may not necessarily be true.'*

Respondents know that not everything published there may be true, as no one has complete control over it. They also recognized the ineffectiveness of Facebook as a tool for debate, discussion, and persuasion (every post can have a counter-post). They visited political profiles infrequently, not treating them as "sources of information" but as tools for self-promotion. They indicated that they follow only those political profiles that amuse them, where a particular politician has written something ridiculing the other side of a political dispute.

Men, 28, opposition: *'I like profiles of politicians just for laughs, such as Janusz Piechociński's posts.'*

Also, the government's supporters pointed out that one cannot build an informative picture of the world based on Facebook. They assessed that it is such a stream that anything can flow through. They declared that they do not comment on politicians' posts, do not like these channels, and do not share them.

Men, 34, government: *'Facebook is a stream. Anyone can put there what they want, there are times when there is reliable information, but there can be anything, so I also treat it as fun. I don't follow politicians because there is slapstick, right side stepping on the left, left on the right, etc.'*

Woman, 35, government: *'As for politicians, I agree with the previous speaker. Facebook is unreliable. I like to look at what other people think about some issues.'*

Woman, 42, government: *'It's not worth discussing on Facebook at all. There's immediate hate.'*

Individual Interview summary – Hungary

The second pillar of our research consisted of five individual interviews, conducted with professional media workers.

The interviews started with the introduction of the subjects. All the professionals worked in the media industry for more than ten years, some more than twenty or even thirty. Four of them are journalists, the fifth subject is a radio editor. They all work at rural media outlets, which they call independent based on their definition.

The media outlets they work with are mainly online news portals. The exception is a commercial radio station. All of them are focusing on local, and regional news. They do have political content or at least content on public life. With the exception of the radio station, they find it even important to report on political content, they feel the responsibility of 'fighting' against 'governmental propaganda'. The radio station found that their audience's needs don't match with political news reporting. They are very proud of the fact that they only report practical information in connection to politics or public affairs. The interviewed editor mentioned that they often interact with their audience (because of the nature of their job) and he believes that this is the reason they can maintain and grow their audience base, leading to a position where they can find enough advertisers to finance their operation – without any political connection.

'In the worst case, we do reports on public life, but I usually say that we don't care about party politics! It is absolutely out of the question, it can not be a topic! Obviously, if it is about for instance the decision on the public utility cuts, that actually have an effect on everyday life, of course, we talk about them! And as we know, nowadays people tend to mix politics in everything, but we don't. What we would like to do... so I think, that politics are often pushed in the face of people, and we would like to keep it out of the studio and stay on this road: reporting on public life, and everyday practical news.'

About their audience, all five of the subjects were able to tell that they tend to be most interested in topics in connection with their everyday life. For this reason, even political content can be popular among them, but only to the extent that it satisfies these criteria (as mentioned before).

They rarely mentioned an exact audience number, but they were proud to say that their numbers sometimes tend to reach even higher than local government-financed media's. Throughout the interviews, we could discern a noteworthy attitude, perhaps best described as a 'proud defender' attitude towards independent media. There was this untold tension coming from the fact that most of them are constantly underfinanced (as they mentioned), barely staying on the market, and they feel constant political pressure (sometimes even on their skin) to stop reporting on 'unpleasant' topics, but they feel the constant need for their jobs, mostly in the rural regions. This attitude was present from the start of the discussions but became identifiable later on when we reached the topic of the freedom of the press and media independence.

An important part of the connection between the audience and the outlets is the communication between them. Based on the statements of the subjects, their audience is actively engaged with them in several ways, such as through social media comments, emails, and even phone calls. In most cases, the only way they 'measure' the audiences' needs is throughout these engagements. There was only one subject who mentioned regular consumer demand surveys of any kind, the others simply read incoming comments and emails. They sometimes view some statistics of their Facebook reaches, but are usually more concerned with the news themselves than the audience. The only subject who mentioned structured efforts for monitoring also added that the only reason they do that is because of a grant, in which they are „obligated to do so”.

'We conduct long analyses, but not for ourselves. Some grants aim to help rural media outlets by establishing methods that can make us competitive in the market, but I am skeptical (...) that there will ever be a moment in the Hungarian media market, in which rural media outlets can survive without any support. But anyways, they urge us to undertake these monitorings and persona creations very often and very strictly!'

These statements are all elements of the previously mentioned attitude and probably the self-image it is originating from: we see lonely figures with a lot of connections, but we can sense some kind of loneliness also when it comes to the whole community. Based on their narratives this feeling is most likely coming from the neglected situation of the Hungarian independent media without any meaningful legal protection, funding, and social support.

'Well, it is not that pleasant to work against all these headwinds, and it is also not (...) that satisfying financially, but there is something... I would not say, that I love this the most, or this gives me the most pleasure, but I would rather say that it is our duty, and it is my duty to do this!'

As mentioned before, most media outlets' feedback systems are mostly organic: the audience's feedback is channeled in in the form of comments, and sometimes direct emails. These feedbacks are usually about the quality of the given content (both positive and negative critique) or some tips to the journalist. In the radio station's case, they can also be about the musical profile, but it's important to mention that their operation is different from the online news portals, therefore for them, realtime and immediate interaction with their audience is much more important. All of the interviewed subjects mention direct social media connections with their audience through the media outlets' social media pages. The intensity of the interaction differs based on the size of the given media outlet.

Most of the interviewed media outlets are not ideologically independent – they tend to be pro-opposition, but the commercial radio station is proudly staying completely independent both in ideology and financing. Therefore it is not surprising that according to their information, their audiences' political orientation is mainly pro-opposition as well.

The next topic of the interviews was media freedom and independence. We started this block by referring to the previous focus group findings and asking the subjects' ideas on the main narrative between the participants on the topic. The narrative of the focus group participants was that there is no independent media and no media freedom in Hungary. The reasoning was based on their personal perception: every media outlet needs funding and the ones who are able and willing to fund these outlets are usually politicians or organizations connected to politics. Therefore when it comes to their opinion, they have to follow the direction of their donors.

The interviews show a picture that is more complex than the perception of the focus group participants. One of the main narratives in the interviews shows the same perception as the group participants, namely the conceptualization of independence both as a matter of political independence (i.e. non-interference from political actors) and value-based independence (i.e. not leaning towards either political camp in terms of ideology and values). However, another narrative that emerged in the interviews centers around professional independence (in a strong connection to credibility and objectivity) which may or may not imply value-based independence at the same time. According to this latter narrative, one must separate value- and

professional independence. Those who are willing to work independently do not necessarily display an independent attitude when it comes to their values. These two aspects of independence need not walk hand-in-hand to characterize a media outlet or journalism itself independent. For instance, one may be fully independent operationally speaking but openly profess conservative or liberal values which inevitably places the journalist (or the newspaper itself) closer to one political camp than the other. That said, the two narratives reach a common ground when it comes to financing. The perspectives are the same: they both argue that many media outlets are indeed financed by political actors, but they differ in the expected effect of these investors: one can work independently if no one tells them what to write and about whom.

When it comes to the freedom of media, there is only one main narrative throughout every interview, therefore we can suspect that it directly comes from the journalists' direct experience: every subject said that in theory there is indeed media freedom in Hungary. In reality, it is getting harder and harder to find donors to maintain everyday operations, because of the overpowering presence of government affiliated companies on the market, and it is getting nearly impossible to reach politicians if they have questions for them: they are allowed to ask the questions, but they won't be answered. Also, there is an increasing tendency of inviting only government-financed media to official events. Because they only have access to opposition narratives, responses, and statements (in the absence of pro-government ones), independent journalists often face the dilemma that even if they try to be objective, they are nevertheless accused of being biased. These challenges together make free and professional operation almost impossible for smaller, opposition and independent media.

'In theory, there is every opportunity for government representatives to say something (...) but they don't, and obviously, state institutions won't talk to us either, so we must manage with opposition responses and statements.'

When it comes to the media market, it is important to mention that the subjects talk about it as a fairly small market because they write in Hungarian, only to a Hungarian audience. What makes it even smaller, is the overpowering presence of government-financed media outlets. Finding the right professionals is also getting harder for small local newspapers and news portals because national media outlets tend to hire rural professionals for much bigger salary that they can offer.

Against the odds, the subjects mentioned that they see more and more local news sources that started their operations in the past few years, all around the country: mostly pro-opposition or value-independent ones. They tend to finance their operations from grants and political donors, for there is no other real opportunity for them to gain.

The other threat coming from the overpowering presence of pro-government media is that local entrepreneurs started advertising at these media outlets even if an independent outlet's audience is much bigger. The interview subjects could only guess about the reasons behind these decisions: one can be the fear from the reaction of the government when supporting an independent or an openly pro-opposition media outlet, and another can be the misleading audience numbers of government-financed outlets (these outlets are usually traditional, printed newspapers in rural Hungary, therefore they might be spread freely to millions of homes, but according to the news consumption tendencies in Hungary, fewer people read them by the day). In practice, this means that their incomes from advertising, therefore their ability to fund their operation decreased significantly in the past few years.

In summary, during the interviews, the most important topics for the subject seemed to be the importance of free and independent media in society and individual life. They see more and more promising independent rural news outlets in operation, and they feel the need for some sort of professional cooperation to gain an advantage in this small, but rapidly adapting market. They also feel the need for educating society on the importance of financial contribution to the operation of independent media. They mention low levels of consciousness when it comes to news consumption and information gathering as well as in financing. They feel that there is no tradition of crowdsourcing, community financing or social responsibility on economic actors' and businesses' part in Hungary. They talked about their hardships in everyday life originating from their professions: it is more common for them to be threatened because of their reports by individuals or even organizations, and more and more common to be sued for different reasons (they are almost always acquitted, but these procedures take significant time and resources). They find their job harder by the day but all of them are committed to the cause of popularizing independent media, mobilizing society, and operating the fundamental functions of independent media in a democracy. According to these interviews, they would be happy to participate in events aimed at enabling them to find more opportunities.

Individual Interview summary – Poland

In Poland Individual in-depth interviews were also conducted with five local portals and newspapers journalists. They were from Swarzędz, Luboń, Czerwonak, Kutno, and Świebodzin (central and western Poland). In four cases, the respondents were people running a medium independent of the local government – in one case, an interview was conducted with the editor of newspapers published on behalf of various municipal offices but with extensive journalistic experience.

Interviews were conducted by telephone from July 11 to August 8.

The respondents were dominated by the opposition supporters or equally distanced from both sides of the political divide in Poland. It should be mentioned that several attempts were made to conduct interviews with government supporters, but they failed. These journalists considered the foundation commissioning the research to be leftist and wanted nothing to do with the project. In some cases, there were fears of a lack of anonymity, especially since the first questions required some biographical openness on the part of the respondents.

It should be noted that the representatives of these most local media are usually business people who call themselves entrepreneur-journalists. To maintain their medium, they have to attract advertisers:

'Before I took up the job of editing news information content, I was primarily engaged in contacting clients, acquiring new clients, or maintaining relationships with regular customers. We are mainly talking about advertisers here since their funds support both the portal and the newspaper. We are the only independent publication in Municipality X.'

They also work another job, treating media work as a supplement, a hobby, or a second activity. All this makes the financial context the one that most strongly affects the quality and manner of their work.

Media consumption

It is no secret that what the respondents think most attracts readers' attention are issues that are somehow moving and resonating with each individual. Respondents refer to them as "human stories," even laughing that crime chronicles or information about disappearances are the most read:

'I was surprised that the police newsreel or the city guard newsreel trigger such interest. It involves their immediate neighborhood and stems from the conviction that "it can happen to me too.'

' "Sex, blood, money." And in all seriousness, the most popular materials are those about accidents, and missing persons, that are current, preferably sensational events.'

The second area of interest is local investments, new roads, sewerage, lighting, i.e., something currently or in the future being built near where they live. The third most sought-after information is cultural and sports events – things to go to, where "something is happening."

'It seems to me that, to a large extent, such information concerning the immediate area may affect them somehow. For example, it could be information about schedule changes on the weekend related to an organized sports event. It could be information about what will happen during local festivals or festivities. Residents also want to know if something is happening.'

'People like those that are not covered by other media, I mean local politics and problematic issues of residents, journalistic interventions, in general, they like journalism, exchange of opinions, and discussion. In addition, I report on cultural events – I do it decently and comprehensively, and readers appreciate it. Other editors publish, for example, a lot of accidents or fires, which has its readers, as there is a large audience that likes crime chronicles. Everyone has their own tastes. (...) For that, I also expose corruption stories. I write coverage of court cases, which municipal authorities don't like, but readers do.'

None of the respondents spontaneously identified national-level political topics as ones of interest:

'Readers are tired of this type of information. Today the political topics are both the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, so I try to filter this information because I can see that in excess, people are annoyed by it, as can be seen, for example, in the comments under articles on social media.'

How do journalists gather feedback on their work? The tool for monitoring voter preferences is mainly Facebook. It is usually the case that articles on portals or newspapers are shared in parallel on social media profiles. In this way, respondents have access to the most basic statistics. They know how many people clicked on the link, reactions, reach, and comments. Occasionally google analytics or WordPress tools are used. However, they are not always guided by what readers would expect:

'Not always what I post meets the expectations of the portal audience. This can be seen, for example, just by the popularity of a given entry. However, I am aware that the most popular entries are the information that have an element of controversy and is a bit flashy. I believe that on the portal, not only such information should be posted.'

In general, however, audience expectations are reflected in the topics covered by local media. Respondents indicate a high correspondence between what is expected and what is offered by the media. Interviewees suggest that opinion journalism is also very much in demand. They also try to make sure that articles don't look like reading the results of a Lotto (numerical game) – "there must be something going on there."

'Everyone has certain tastes. One reads sports, and another is a senior citizen and is interested in news from the "senior" section. We try to meet the expectations of all groups.'

Political topics are covered only in terms of what local authorities are concerned with. There are also "uncontroversial" opinions, i.e., going against the expectations of the audience:

'I don't try to meet any expectations. This does not affect the quality of my work. For example, if material about a missing person has the most clicks, does that mean I should cover the topic of missing persons more often? After all, the next such event may be only six months away. I don't look at "what gets clicks." I exhaust the topic, and that's it. In such a small city, there is little choice of what to give in the service and what to leave out.'

However, the political preferences of the audience are known. This is due to Facebook, which allows you to determine quite well what views people who have liked a profile have. The political preferences of the audience are revealed when posts are made about political topics – such as the visit of an important politician to the municipality. This currently generates many comments, and you can see what readers think. However, it should be noted that the dominant side is currently the opposition supporters on the Internet. Supporters of the government side tend to be withdrawn and rarely reveal their preferences for fear of online hate speech.

Independence

Despite the small sample size, opinions on this subject of media independence in Poland are divided.

A common opinion was that it is possible to talk about independent media because independent journalists continue to work, and there are also independent editorial offices financed, for example, by readers' money (crowd-sourcing):

'Fortunately, there are independent journalists with their own social media channels. Listeners pay them with donations. They work for these people. I can describe such journalists as fully independent.'

Also, their medium is often cited by respondents as an example of greater or lesser independence:

'The pressure I feel only from readers. That is, to do a lot, write a lot, and make interventions. If I am treated badly by the local government, I do not care, I do not face ostracism, for example, in terms of advertising from the local authority, but I write what I want, even bad things about this authority, which paradoxically commissions me to advertise in the portal.'

There are also opinions that there is no such thing as independent media because they are always financially or politically connected to some groups:

'Referring to my previous experience, i.e., working in the media, where my bosses were press publishers not affiliated with the local government, I draw the opinion that every medium is "set" politically somewhere. Financial ties certainly restrain the room for maneuver and make them dependent. I also see frequent social connections between journalists and politicians.'

There are also opinions that it is difficult to be independent because each journalist has their own views, because of which objectivity is a fiction:

'It is difficult to say whether there can be such a thing as independent media at all. The media are the product of certain people and certain journalists, and even if there are no specific political, financial, or any other connections, each journalist also has some of his own views. I assume that even if someone wants to maintain the maximum possible objectivity, there may be some imposition of their own beliefs... After all, I also have certain views and describe certain information willy-nilly somewhat differently from others. However, I try to remain objective.'

'Nevertheless, they cannot remain independent of certain views that journalists formerly held. From there, I think it is very good that a given journalist has views and that certain views also get visibility in the public space in this way. It would be a bit hard to read all the information sounding like a report on the results of Lotto.'

Locally dependent media are those published by local governments, where the editor-in-chief is the mayor or his collaborator. There are also cases of seemingly independent media, and it turns out that they are run by, for example, the sister of the vice-mayor.

'The worst situation, it seems to me, is one in which there is financial dependence. That's why, as I mentioned before, I'm not fond of one of the local titles. And an absolutely reprehensible form of dependence is family ties.'

Respondents, however, seem to be reconciled to this state of affairs, treating "dependencies" as something inevitable that is difficult to remedy. This is especially true of the national media, which are treated as "tainted" by dependence on either public funds (i.e., the current government) or international corporations (business).

As for local media, the need for more funds to be invested in their development is often highlighted. The respondents suggest that the key to the independence of the weakest media is to provide them with an adequate source of funding, either from external funds (e.g., Norwegian funds) or local government funds (from the provincial level, distributed regardless of the option). At this point, it should be noted that the respondents are referring to regional governments, which have EU funds at their disposal, and whose distribution rules are based on more transparency and less discretion (one must win the competition, settle it, etc.):

'First of all, to talk about the independence of the media, you need to talk about its stable source of funding, independent of politicians. I like what Oke Press does that the people fund it. In my opinion, media in which there is a purely ownership relationship do not have independence. You can help the media by subsidizing them. But these must be systemic solutions. Instead of allocating all of the public finances to the national media, some of these funds could be given to local media but to private ones, which, after all, also have a mission. There are Norwegian Funds.'

When asked about their own independence, respondents believe that their media can be such an example. They often raise the argument that their portal/newspaper is "the only one in our locality," which, on the one hand, is supposed to act as an ennoblement and, on the other hand, to show the responsibility that rests on the journalist to show the truth:

'I am the only independent medium in the area that writes about very local topics. I take up issues such as the city council's activities, something no one else covers. People have no alternative.'

They are also usually dominated by more or less criticism of the local government (except for journalists from mediums published by government offices – although it should be noted that these are not newspapers that pusillanimously promote the local government). Meanwhile, what may be a problem in rural communities is more a matter of "self-censorship." When approaching a topic, journalists are mindful of the fact that they often write about their friends, classmates, and family members who hold some public role in the municipality. They then try to be careful not to "hurt someone" by presenting the topic too harshly.

'Political content is raised as much as possible, especially concerning a certain range of local politics. However, this is done in a very careful way. I try to keep in mind that when we bring up topics of local politics, we very often talk about direct specific people who are not ours, often neighbors and colleagues, and acquaintances, so it is necessary to proceed carefully so as not to hurt someone accidentally.'

Respondents agree that what would increase the independence of their media outlet is to have funding sources independent of the municipality. This would prevent them from relying on funding through the municipality's advertising.

'The advertising market in such a city is basically non-existent. I am not able to make a living in this market. Before working in radio, I was looking for other projects to earn money. This, unfortunately, translates into the quality of my work. I sometimes don't have time, for example, to edit some material decently. I think there is a dependence of the media on politics, and politicians, through the way they are financed.'

Another answer is changes in the press law or other legislation obliging public institutions to provide information. Respondents indicate that they often depend on an official's goodwill to respond to inquiries on time, thus losing out to others regarding the speed of news publication.

Competition

When describing the competition in the Polish media market, one speaks mainly of three television stations: TVP (government), TVN (private – a Discovery concern), and Polsat (private, which many now believe is orbiting the government).

'As for news television, it is also practically possible to say from 2 camps. The owner, so to speak, of the 3rd camp, we are talking about Polsat, was at some point effectively "disciplined" by those in power. It seems to me that the Polish media market is too polarized. There is sometimes a lack of information provided without reference to current politics. It seems to me that then the information loses a lot of quality. The recipient may not necessarily feel comfortable with it either.'

'The Polish media market? This is a failure in general. In other media models, we have a very simple rule. Take the BBC – they have state funding, but they don't profit from advertising. In our country, not only is TVP lavishly subsidized by the state, but it also has a lot of advertising, just like the commercial media, to which they partially take their profits this way.'

In the case of the press, some respondents point to the opposition of Gaze-ta Wyborcza and newspapers and weeklies heavily financed by advertising from government institutions or state-owned companies. Thus, we have a competition between public (government) and private funds.

Respondents indicate that these media no longer compete for viewers because those viewers have long been locked in their bubbles. The competitive game is played only for potential advertisers or, which was not explicitly stated, to secure political support for certain narratives. The pro-government media strive to see support for the ruling party and the government grow, while the privately owned media more or less overtly support the opposition (when they fail to do so, however, they often receive the somewhat derogatory label of "symmetrism").

The market position of local media journalists is difficult. They see the difficulty of just staying in the market and competing fairly with others.

'I'm tired of telling my child – we have an empty fridge because mommy does what she likes.'

Those who are in opposition to the local government know that because of this, they may or may not get the expected information later. They also see competition in the form of various local groups on Facebook, which often publish more interesting and faster content.

'A new space for competitive rivalry may be social media. Here we are dealing with several profiles that try to gain the audience's attention by presenting local events.'

'A threat to our independence is the speed of the information transmitted, and no longer necessarily its quality. I am referring to the Internet, which dominates the message. This worries me.'

Respondents complain that they cannot work like professional journalists because this work does not bring them enough income, and they must simultaneously occupy themselves with something else. At the same time, they are proud of the fact that they are often the only source of independent information – they treat their work as a mission. You can see that it gives them a lot of satisfaction.

'What do I like most about this job? Well, the immense satisfaction I get when I see the information I have prepared. It is not really copying some content, reworking it very trivially, and posting the video on the Internet. But the kind of information that actually generates interest. And when I see that such news genuinely arouses interest in the audience. I see that many people click on such information and that there are big discussion comments. Also, when someone writes to me saying thank you for such information, he can find this or that thanks to this.'

'What attracts me most about my profession is that I am close to the people and close to the environment in which I live. I am from here from birth which makes me "know every hole here". Besides, I enjoy the fact that I can feel needed because people write to me, for example, asking me to intervene or to describe a topic, and I often do it. Sometimes they are grateful to me for this, for publicizing a problem.'

However, it should be noted that what happens in the media at the national level has little impact on the work of local editors. Of course, there are feelings of dissatisfaction that our taxes fund the public (government) media. The quality of media materials is very poor, but this is due to the political preferences of the respondents rather than the fact that they are losing in the media race to, for example, national television.

'Do these activities affect your work? If so, what kind of impact? – They have absolutely none. I am fortunate to work for an independent newspaper. I hope to keep this position until retirement.'

'I cover local topics where the dominance of the government media has no significant impact here.'

Some point out that public media dominate the advertising market, effectively cutting off smaller players from advertising:

'I am affected by the fact that I don't get these advertisements from public principals, also funded by my taxes. Yes, it affects me. So I have to be more creative, fight for advertisers myself, and be a journalist and an entrepreneur.'

Once again, the injustice of access to information at the local level is clearly pointed out. If you don't live well with the local government and criticize it, you can hardly count on access to other information. You will always be "second" in providing it.

'This causes a certain annoyance because, often knowing about an issue and gathering information, I am aware that competitors living on good terms with officials will run me down. And in the case of the portal, whoever is first is often better. Fortunately, enough is going on that there is something to write about.'

Conclusion

Focus groups

In conclusion we can say that media consumption does not differ significantly in the two countries. In all groups consumption habits are largely similar: television is a rapidly aging form of news consumption, radio is more likely to be listened to when driving, and online news portals tend to be the most popular sources of information hand-in-hand with social media. Printed media is more often consumed in Poland than in Hungary. Information gathering is often a secondary action during some practical activity. Gathering information from both political sides proved to be important regardless of their own political values.

Interpersonal (communal) spread of political information is still important in both countries, but the main difference is the role of the parishes – in Poland priests are still listed among those, whom the participants would turn to for more, and trusted information on local events. Meanwhile in Hungary, only people in secular positions were mentioned.

All groups agreed on the sensation seeking behavior of the national media, and turned to them with somewhat of a distrust. This attitude was slightly more dominant among the Hungarians, and the measure of it depended on the medium itself.

On the topic of independence and credibility there were also no significant differences between the four groups. All understand that the biggest threat to independence is a powerful stakeholder's (of any kind) influence on the content the given media outlet produces. Opposition or government supporters both understood the importance of independent media, but from the narratives of government supporters we could often hear pro-government narratives on the topic.

Both in Poland and in Hungary participants could position media outlets fairly well on the scales we provided. Polish participants tended to name those they could not position as centralists, meanwhile in Hungary the very existence of centrist media was a question raised by the participants themselves.

Fake news were successfully determined in most cases, and the ways to identify them were also mentioned. Credibility was in the focus of the topic,

and both in Hungary and in Poland respondents identified credibility with the professional and objective point of view of the journalist.

The other related theme was the question of bias, and this proved to be the most difficult. From their narratives we could understand their need for impartial contents but a cognitive dissonance was palpable: since 'every man kindles the fire below his own pot', their own examples showed that it is in human nature to believe those words closer to our own opinion. Still, in most cases there is an existing expectation towards journalists to be impartial.

The insight we gathered on the use of social media in information gathering is slightly different in the two countries. Hungarian participants named practical reasons for the use of social media: they usually see for example Facebook as a 'space' where they can find every important news portals' pages - they only need to use one application to follow news if they follow the official pages of trusted news portals. They were also aware that most media outlets promoting themselves on Facebook are sharing fake news, but the practical approach of information gathering was very strong. In the Polish groups participants did not mention such practical approach, but they did refer to Facebook as an unreliable source of news.

At last, we can say that in habits of social media interactions we could not see any significant difference. Following or liking politicians' pages is not common, commenting and sharing is even more rare in all groups. None have seen Facebook as an appropriate 'space' for debate.

Interviews

From the professional interviews we could see that the interest of the audience somewhat differed in Hungary and in Poland. While in Poland the most popular topics were crime stories and celebrities, in Hungary they also mentioned practical information that effect readers' everyday lives. In Poland, national political contents were not among the most popular topics, while in Hungary again, the method of selection was based upon practicality: if some national political news concerned everyday life, they are going to be in the most popular category. A negative effect on the audience of the overflowing political news was mentioned in both counties.

Journalists are aware of the political preferences of their audience. Although in both countries opposition supporters were overrepresented in the interviews, we have to mention that the interviewed journalists represented pro-opposition and independent media outlets, which means their audiences are more likely to be opposition leaning as well. Also, these media out-

lets are usually online outlets, they tend to monitor their audiences through social media, and traditionally opposition supporters are overrepresented on these platforms. Audience monitoring does not have a strong tradition in Poland or in Hungary, a negative attitude towards such activities was present among the Hungarian respondents (a 'necessary bad').

Another difference between the interviewed professionals was the attitude towards political contents. While Polish subjects had somewhat of a dismissive attitude (originating from the audience's preferences), Hungarian subjects saw political content creation as somewhat of a 'mission'. This attitude originated in the overrepresentation of pro-government outlets in Hungarian media.

The question of independence has similar approaches in both countries. The two prevailing narratives are:

1. As long as there are 'independent' journalists, who are able to work without political pressure, there is independent media.
2. Since everyone is financially dependent on someone, there can be no independent media.

The two key concepts were professional independence and value independence. One is not a requirement of the other, but both should be present to work fully independently.

Both in Poland and Hungary the subjects mentioned the presence of the local 'official' media outlets. These are not politically independent – they always adjust to the current local government's political identity. They are financed by the given local government of the day, often embedded in the circles of representatives, even at family levels.

In Hungary, the overwhelming presence of pro-governmental rural media, especially the giant media conglomerates owned by stakeholders close to the government is a concerning topic among the journalists. Polish subjects do not mention such conglomerates, but in both countries we could see that the subjects see the national media, mostly the public media similar to the rural local media outlets.

Financing is a cardinal topic in both countries, and the solutions are also similar. In both countries subjects felt the need of more independent funds, for their efforts in finding official advertising partnerships are not successful enough. Hungarian respondents mentioned again a governmental pressure, this time on the potential advertisers.

In connection with independence the lack of information from official institutions and actors is another concerning area. In both countries journalists mention that they often have to work from one-sided information because they can't get answers from institutions or government politicians. Polish subjects mention some kind of regulation for an obligation to answer as a possible solution for this situation.

The competition in both countries are mostly dominated by the government supported media. Some subjects mentioned a sense of vocation as the main reason for their efforts, for financially they are struggling. The lack of advertisers, as mentioned before, is a pressing issue in both markets. Despite the hardships of rural media outlets, interestingly Hungarian subjects mentioned a growing number of rural independent media outlets. Next to financing, the other issue of the market in Hungary is the lack of professionals. They see a tendency of national media outlets 'poaching' capable professionals from rural media outlets. Since they can not compete with the offered salaries, they must let their colleagues go and they struggle to find new ones. Polish subjects did not mention such a pattern. Among Hungarian respondents, a need for cooperation was frequently voiced, as a potential solution for the hardships in connection with the competition on the media market.

School seminars

Hungarian high school seminars

As the third component of the project we conducted 4 seminars (interactive workshops) for high school students in the Hungarian countryside on the 30th of September and the 18th of October for approximately 80 students. We traveled from Budapest to Oroszlány (30th of September, Hamvas Béla Highschool) and Szeged (18th of October, Gábor Dénes Technical School) by car, after having received approval for the events by the directors and responsible colleagues of the schools in question.

In Oroszlány, we arrived on a 'sport day', where students had to go through different bases where they needed to participate in various exercises and workshops throughout the day for different prizes for their classes. One of the programmes was our workshop on conscious media consumption. Accordingly, we conducted our workshops in 3 times for 3 different classes. In Szeged our workshop was part of an after-school program series organized by the school, therefore we worked with volunteering students from several classes.

We did not gather any personal information or registration from participating students because of Hungarian regulations considering underage participants. The permission to participate originated from the organizing schools and their school districts.

The material of the workshops was previously elaborated and agreed on by the participating partners from Projekt Polska and 21 Research center and was based upon the conclusions that emerged from our prior research. The workshop material contained a brief lecture on the functions and general operating principles of media, followed by the importance of conscious media consumption. We organised several exercises where students could interactively participate: they had to identify fake news and learn some practical tips on how to identify them, they were asked to find the meaning of online memes and some articles in a given topic as a practical presentation of conscious research. We also played quizzes with them based on our lecture and their own experiences. We used SurveyMonkey as our survey tool for these games and the feedback. The material of the workshops were also agreed on by the participating schools before the events.

We also asked for the students' feedback on the workshops. This was of course an optional part of the events, therefore not all students filled our feedback form. Their responses will be elaborated later.

In the student seminars we wanted to give every opportunity for the participating students to connect with us and with the material, which (given the age of the participants (16-19)) was sometimes harder than we had previously thought. We also realized that using quiz questions for this was definitely a good choice. This way they were able to participate (if they wanted to) interactively, but they did not need to do that openly, in front of their classmates. In their responses they were quite active and they had very smart answers and questions. The atmosphere of the workshops were quite friendly, and the students seemed to be more involved and interested in the topic than we had anticipated.

The first exercise after the workshops was on fake news. We asked the students to fill out a form where they had to identify the piece of fake news from the three options given. These options were gathered by us from trusted and unreliable news portals. Through these examples we demonstrated the ways to identify fake news. In total 70% of the students got the correct one. The main identification points were the lack of information on the author, the amount of advertisements, and the clickbait-like title. We tried to trick them by choosing real news that sounds or looks suspicious but we did not succeed with the majority of the students.

Following the exercise we talked in length about the dangers of fake news consumption and their effects on the media landscape. We gave them useful tools to avoid them, such as national and international lists of fake news portals and practical advice (look for author, date of the event, relevance, etc.).

The next exercise was about conscious research and practical findings. We asked the students to find the meaning of a given meme which reflected on the current energy crisis in a way that was linked to a previous sms campaign of the government in 2015. We did not expect them to make that mental link as this secondary meaning was arguably too dated for them to remember. We were mostly right in our expectations.

The students were able to identify the source of humor in these memes quite quickly, in about 2–3 minutes in each group. The workshops were held by two conductors, so we also separated the classes into two groups. The task was that they should guide the given conductor to find an article or any information on the source of humor in the meme. The fastest group won the game. This motivated the groups to work together and quickly, and to communicate their needs clearly to the conductor assigned to their groups. In the end, all groups in all the workshops found the right answer to the question, mostly by using Google Search but not necessarily through the same specific source

The next exercise was not conducted in all four workshops due to lack of time. But when it was, it had a quite interesting result. The next game also focused on the practicalities of conscious research methods when it comes to reading news. We asked the students to find articles written in different styles under the theme of pink education. Our aim was to show the difference between interpretations and article styles, and to find out more of their search habits.

The concrete topic given to them was the following: 'The Hungarian SAO conducted research in the topic of pink education.'

They found articles written by multiple media outlets on the topic. They managed to find articles written in different styles, not only from an objective perspective, but also from a feminist, a pro-opposition, or a pro-government one. They managed to identify elements in these articles which lead them to a positive or a negative opinion. On the positive side they appreciated if the article was objective and well written. They felt safe to handle the given articles as well prepared and trustworthy information providers. On the other hand they found some articles far too offensive or aggressive for their taste and they did not appreciate the casual style of writing in

some cases. To our surprise, we found that they might not consciously avoid fake news sites, but they do have the need to search and gather information safely. Some found these articles directly from sites of trusted media outlets, others used Google Search, or even Google Scholar for this task.

Lastly, we asked the students to fill out a quiz on the previously mentioned topics. We tried to motivate them by giving a symbolic prize to the student who reaches the best score (in the quickest way) in the form of a chocolate.

The quiz questions (and answers – the correct ones unlined) were the following:

1. How do you recognize fake news? (checklistt)
 - a. **from bad wording**
 - b. **there are no authors**
 - c. **there are no sources of information**
2. In what place does Hungary stand on the international list where researchers measure the freedom of the press in a given country?
 - a. 175
 - b. 13
 - c. **85**
 - d. 138
3. Which one of the following is NOT a risk to media pluralism?
 - a. political dependence
 - b. **strict regulations**
 - c. lack of social inclusiveness
 - d. concentrated market
4. Which one of the following is NOT a function of the media?
 - a. education
 - b. entertainment
 - c. mobilization of people
 - d. **manipulation**
5. What media must NOT be independent of?
 - a. **audience**
 - b. state
 - c. advertisers
 - d. media owners

Most of the students were able to give the right answers to the questions based on the previous lecture and discussion. Not all students had their smartphones with them, therefore only 69 of them participated in our quiz. The first question was a multiple choice one. From the 69 participants 36 signed the first, 51 the second and 59 the third answer as an indicator for fake news. After being mentioned in the lecture, 94% of the students guessed correctly the ranking of Hungary in the freedom of press list. The third question proved to be the hardest one. Only 35% managed to identify the 'strict rules' as the right answer for our questions. For both of the last two questions 45% answered correctly.

After the quiz some students were kind enough to fill our feedback form, 31 in total. The questions of the form were the following:

1. Did you find today's topic easy to understand? Rate it from 1-5, five is the best grade you can give.
2. How useful did you find today's workshop? Rate it from 1-5, five is the best grade you can give.
3. What was the most useful thing you learned today?
4. Is there anything you will do differently, or wish to apply in your life from what you heard today?
5. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about in connection to conscious media consumption?

We can proudly say that their feedback was positive. The responding students rated the accessibility of the material at 4.74 and the usefulness of the workshop to 4.8 on average.

The other three questions were open ended. The most useful thing they took home from the workshop appeared to be the techniques to avoid fake news, which turns out to be the most frequently mentioned factor too when it comes to changing their everyday practices in relation to information gathering. Other than that, the role of the state and the conscious consumer in the media landscape, and the personal importance of conscious media consumption were also mentioned as useful information.

They also named other topics they would like to hear about, which are the following: online shopping, consumption of entertainment, and manipulation through media.

In summary, according to the feedback these workshops proved to be informative, and on the other side, quite enjoyable to conduct. According to the schools' feedback the students enjoyed themselves and even their teachers managed to learn something new on conscious media consumption. At the end of the seminars we provided the schools with the lecture material for the students. We see the possibility to continue developing the material in a way that matches the needs in the students' feedback and probably include some interactive activity about manipulation and safety in the online space.





Polish highschool seminars

In the Polish part of the project, two workshops were held with students on the topic of media reception, especially in relation to local media. The workshops were held on November 16 and 25, 2022, in mixed groups with students from the final grades of elementary school and the first grades of secondary school (12–16 years). A total of 37 people participated in the workshops. Each workshop lasted two lessons (2 x 45 min.) The scenario of the Polish workshop was similar to the scenario of the workshop held in Hungary. However, some modifications were introduced to adapt the workshops' content to the Polish context. The workshop program was as follows:

1. Media and their functions
2. Media conditions:
 - a. Freedom and independence of the media
 - b. Activities of public and private media
 - c. Social responsibility
3. Local media in Poland – discussion of research results
4. Quiz of knowledge about the media in Poland and discussion of individual answers.
5. Question and answer session

The workshops' main element was a quiz on student knowledge about the media in Poland and a discussion of individual answers. The quiz consisted of 14 questions and was conducted on the Baamboozle platform (<https://www.baamboozle.com/>). Among the questions were both content discussed in the lecture part of the workshop (items 1–3) and issues not previously discussed, such as:

1. Which of the following is NOT a media function?
2. What is fake news?
3. What is clickbait?
4. Give an example of a local media (press, TV, radio) that operates in your area.
5. What is media pluralism?
6. What is the difference between a reporting and an opinion piece/commentary?
7. What is opinion journalism?
8. Which of the given media is public?

The quiz was group-based. The questions were projected on an overhead projector screen, and the presenter collected suggestions for 3–5 answers from the students who came up first. He then displayed the correct ans-

wer, discussed it, and answered any additional questions from the students. The students' correct answers were about 50% of the total responses. Some answers were partially correct and required minor corrections or completion by the instructor. The students' reactions to the quiz were positive, and from the instructors' observations, many questions surprised the students. The students positively received the instructors' reference to content discussed in Polish language lessons (as well as english language lessons), e.g. various forms of oral and written expressions. The references to these contents provoked more interest among the students as they wanted to demonstrate their knowledge of these contents.

The students' reactions show that they particularly liked the gamification element in the form of a quiz containing illustrations. They felt that presenting the media content in a more dynamic and group format focused their attention and intensified their interest more than during a simple discussion or knowledge test.





Conference summary

Projekt Polska and 21 Research Center held an online conference on the 30th of November on the topic of media consumption and media landscape in illiberal regimes. To advertise the event, we conducted a Facebook campaign of the event both in Poland and in Hungary.

The conference started at 18:00 CET, the professional part of the program contained brief summaries of our research findings both in Poland and Hungary, and a panel discussion. The panelists of the discussion were Polish and Hungarian media professionals from rural media outlets and media research and media law specialists. The topic of the discussion was their perceptions in connection to the research findings and the operation and possibilities of rural media outlets in both countries. Other than these programs at the conference we had the opportunity to welcome Daniela Matousova from the Friedrich Naumann Foundation who honored us with her words and thoughts on the project and the topic. Milosz Hodun gave an opening speech from Projekt Polska and Dániel Róna closed the program with his thoughts.

We also prepared a quick quiz for the conference participants as we found it a great way of mobilization during our school seminars. The participants had the opportunity to fill the quiz during the research presentations and the panel discussion. The questions covered the situation of independent media in Hungary and Poland.

After the opening speeches we introduced the opportunity of participating in the quiz to the audience, then Krzysztof Maczka and Ábel Bojár gave their presentations on the research findings.

After a short break we had a 45 minute long panel discussion. The invited panelists were Dr. Magdalena M. Baran (philosopher, managing editor of the monthly magazine *Liberté!*) – who unfortunately could not attend due to technical difficulties, Dr. Adam Choryński (sociologist, editor and publisher of local media outlets), Dr. Gábor Polyák (ELTE – Department of Media and Communication), and Bence Pintér (Senior Journalist – *úgytudjuk.hu*, Győr). Our questions to the panelists were the following:

1. In relation to your own expertise, did you find anything interesting or surprising about the outcomes of our research? Do you have any contradictory experiences?
2. In your experience, in what ways and through what channels do the-

se consumption habits affect the media landscape in Poland and Hungary? (legal environment, everyday operations, human resources)

3. In what direction/how should these rural media outlets adapt (their operations, their products or contents, even their advocacy) in order to stay in the market and strengthen the independent media in these countries?
4. Is there a way out of this current situation? Do you see any possible ways? Where do you see possibilities?
5. How do you think the ordinary consumer or audience is capable of providing help in the current situation?

The panel discussion turned out to be very educational and inspirational. The most interesting and maybe most important part of the discussion was about the possibilities and future of independent rural media outlets. All participants mentioned the need and the willingness to cooperate between smaller outlets in order to compete with bigger market actors (pro-government or not), and the use of social media as a possibility to build a stronger connection with their audience. These can be forward-thinking ways to strengthen independent media in both countries for they can lead to stronger professional connections and communities and a more conscious audience overall.

After the panel discussion we closed the mobilizing quiz for the audience and summarized the results. The questions were the following:

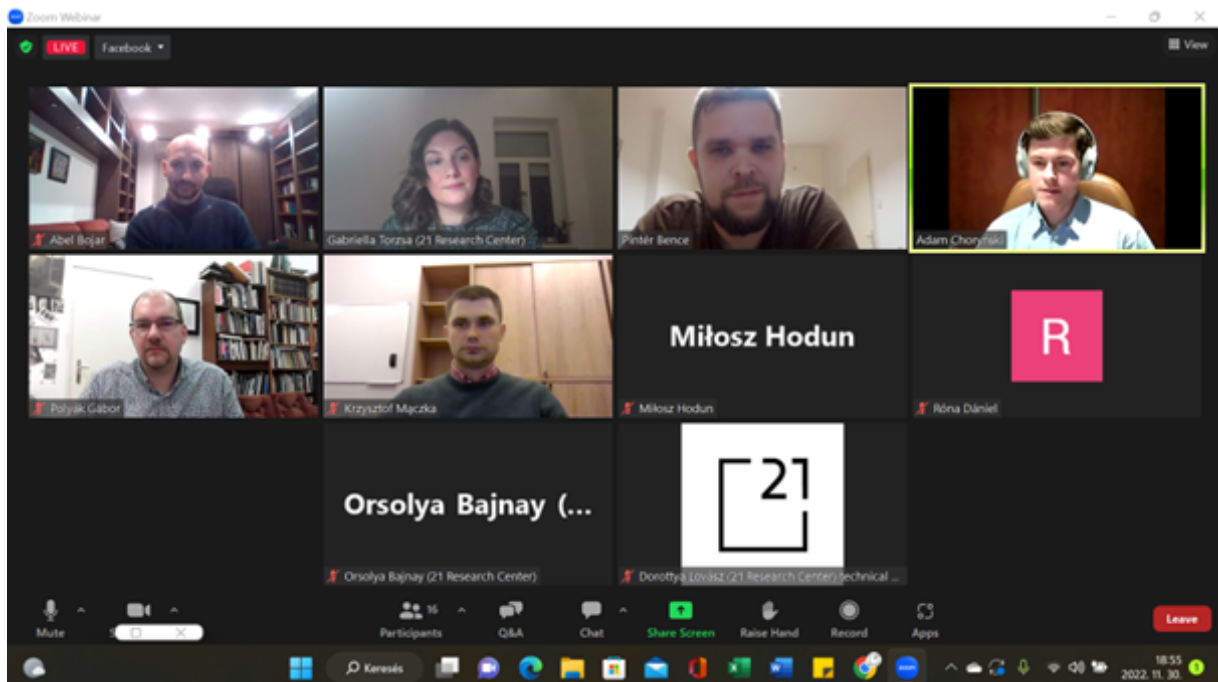
1. What is Hungary's and Poland's ranking on the Freedom of the Press list collected by Reporters without Borders (where 1 stands for the highest press freedom ranking)?
2. What is the second most visited news portal in Hungary?
3. And what is the second most visited news portal in Poland?
4. Approximately, how many people read these media outlets in an average month?
5. In which year were Népszabadság and Gazeta Wyborcza founded?

The first question proved to be the easiest one. 75 % of the participants guessed Hungary's ranking, and 50 % guessed Poland's ranking correctly. The second most visited sites in Hungary and Poland were Blikk and Onet, with only 17% and 18 % guessed correctly. At the 4th question we can see si-

milar percentages: in the case of Blikk, only 17% signed the right answer, but in the case of Onet 33% knew how many people read the site in an average month. The second most easy question was our last one. In both cases 55% knew that Népszabadság was founded in 1956, and Gazeta in 1989. After Orsolya Bajnay summarized these results to the audience, Dániel Róna closed the event. The host of the program was Gabriella Torzsa from 21 Research Center.

The audience number according to our statistics was 197. These people watched the conference for various lengths, and almost all of them used the Facebook event of the conference to watch it. 32 of these participants were from Poland and 101 from Hungary. The others participated from Germany, the USA, Belgium, and the Czech Republic.

In summary, we declare the event a success, and hope to be able to organize and participate in other events similar to this conference in the future.



Closing thought

This project of 21 Research Center and Projekt Polska took almost a year. In this year we managed to gain better, and deeper understanding of the everyday operations of rural media in both countries, of the consumer habits and managed to see the mechanisms of the media landscapes (especially rural media landscapes) in these two illiberal regimes. We of course had previous knowledge on the matter, but – as previously mentioned – most of the studies focus on the national media landscape without distinguishing or separating rural outlets and consumers based upon their localities.

This project managed to reveal both the needs of rural media outlets and the nature of their audience. We could see in depth how exactly the circumstances created by the state regulations and the governing parties and their 'halo' effects as well as the everyday operation of the outlets and the consumer habits of their audience. We could also understand better the possibilities ahead of small, independent media outlets.

In summary we would recommend further research on rural and national media professionals to map the possibilities of professional community building. We would also recommend broadening the scope of the research to the audience's or even the advertisers' openness for consumer and advertiser community building. Community building could be a way to educate both groups and a tool for strengthening professional relationships between various sized media outlets and to advocate the interests and importance of independent media in both countries.

Recognizing the importance of the topic and the education of the society we started participating in other projects and research in connection to the media landscape in the participating countries. We – as promised in our proposal – are going to conduct a media campaign before (and after) the 31th of December 2022. This campaign's aim is to educate everyday news consumers on the importance and operation of independent media, and the freedom of press. We will share different multiple-page posts on different social media surfaces of Projekt Polska and 21 Research Center.

We hope that with the conclusions of this research, and our educational and professional programs and campaign we could contribute to keeping this important topic in the Overton Window in both countries. In the name of both Projekt Polska and 21 Research Centre we humbly thank the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for their support and contribution to the realization of this almost year long project. The data we gathered and the interest of the professional community speaks for its necessity. We hope that we will have many more opportunities in the future to cooperate