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South East European Network for Professionalization of Media

ETHICS, TRUST, AND PUBLIC INTEREST SHOULD PREVAIL IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The Future of the Media in North Macedonia – Considerations by Key Actors

Vesna Nikodinoska

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, the media sphere in North Macedonia has recorded slow progress, due less to systemic reforms and more to partial shifts in regulation driven by lobbying efforts from the media community and international actors. Although international indicators of media freedom suggest a favourable environment for media operations, and point to an upward trajectory, the sector continues in practice to face persistent structural challenges. These include stagnation of the media industry, fragile financial sustainability, inconsistent adherence to professional standards, and an ongoing need to improve the socio-economic status of journalists.

Citizens understand the normative role of the media and journalism, yet many believe that, in practice, media independence is unattainable, perceiving journalism as a profession vulnerable to manipulation.

This analysis explores citizens' perceptions of the media and journalism, their views on the media market and its financing, as well as their media-use habits, levels of trust in the media, and perceptions of democracy in the country. It builds on the findings and trends identified in the 2024 research, which collected and analysed quantitative data on these issues.

The most significant development in the media sphere in North Macedonia during 2025 was the legal recognition of online media through their inclusion in the formal definition of media. This step is expected to introduce greater order into the online media environment, enhance transparency of ownership, and help strengthen professional standards. Under the pressure of new technological and informational trends, journalism and the media are undergoing transformation, in both form and content, as well as in the platforms used for distribution. This also entails shifts in the understanding of the role and function of the media, as well as their significance within society. Instead of serving merely as "transmitters" of information, now easily accessible through numerous other channels, the media are increasingly expected to strengthen their educational role, promote critical thinking among audiences, and prioritize the public interest.

Citizens understand the normative role of the media and journalism, yet many believe that, in practice, media independence is unattainable, perceiving journalism as a profession vulnerable to manipulation. The perception that media outlets are subject to political influence and dependent on public funds undermines their editorial autonomy and diminishes public trust. This dynamic reflects a broader societal pattern of mistrust in the system, shaped by complex political developments, high levels of corruption, and a persistent lack of institutional transparency.

Both younger and older citizens experience informational anxiety, driven by sensationalism, disinformation, and weak adherence to ethical standards. A general feature of the media landscape is the thematic and genre-based scarcity of content, which citizens perceive as politically one-sided, insufficiently creative, and lacking inclusiveness.

According to participants, the future of the media will be shaped by technological innovations and digital platforms, requiring new models of communication and adaptation to evolving audience habits, particularly among younger generations. Artificial intelligence will have a significant impact on content production; however, journalists will remain essential in verifying authenticity, ensuring credibility, and providing context.

The findings of the research confirm that the media and journalism in North Macedonia are undergoing a process of transformation. To strengthen media sustainability and professionalism, it is necessary to develop policies and mechanisms for independent financing, to modernize journalism education and newsroom operations, and to ensure continuous training for journalists to acquire the new skills required in the digital era. At the same time, increasing media literacy among citizens is essential as a precondition for countering manipulative content and for enhancing public pressure on the media to provide high-quality information and content.

The media remain a key pillar of democracy, yet their future will depend on how effectively they manage both internal and external influences. Under these circumstances, they must strive to preserve their financial and editorial independence, restore public trust, and reaffirm their social role—safeguarding the public interest through truthful, responsible, and professional reporting.

I.

INTRODUCTION

This research presents a qualitative analysis of citizens' views and opinions in North Macedonia regarding the role of the media and journalism in democratic societies, their use of, and trust in, the media, as well as their needs and expectations of the media and democracy in the future. The study also addresses the views of media professionals on the current state and trends within the media industry and market, building on findings from the first phase of the research *"Deprived media market, low ethical standards, need for effective legislation"* (Nikodinoska & Causidis, 2024).

The conclusions from the previous analysis, which was based on the collection and examination of quantitative data on trends in the media sector, indicate that the media market in North Macedonia is highly constrained and unable to ensure the development and long-term financial sustainability of media outlets.

The conclusions from the previous analysis, which was based on the collection and examination of quantitative data on trends in the media sector, indicate that the media market in North Macedonia is highly constrained and unable to ensure the development and long-term financial sustainability of media outlets. A growing trend has been observed in the flow of state budget funds into the media sector, fostering media clientelism and political influence over the media. Although the number of online media outlets continues to rise, the result is only a superficial form of media pluralism, while the quality of journalistic output and adherence to ethical standards remain at a very low level, particularly in the online sphere. Within the broader socio-political context, systemic corruption and lack of transparency further undermine trust in institutions, including the media. All these identified problems negatively affect not only on the production of professional media content but also citizens' access to quality information.

The aim of the second cycle of the research is to qualitatively examine the attitudes and opinions of citizens and media professionals and to compare them with the previously identified trends. For the purposes of this research, four focus groups were conducted with younger citizens (18–35), older citizens (36–65), and media professionals, as well as one control focus group that included citizens with high cultural and social capital and influence, whose work and engagement contribute to the country's cultural and intellectual development. Participants in this focus group analysed media trends from a broader societal perspective, with the intention of gaining deeper insights into the role of the media in contemporary democratic societies.

Three focus groups were held in Skopje, while the group with younger citizens took place in Stip. The focus groups were conducted during May and June 2025.[1] A total of 33 participants took part, ensuring representation by age,

1 More information about the focus groups and their organization can be found in Annex 1 of this report.

gender, education, social status, and demographic characteristics. To protect participants' privacy, both the younger and older citizens are presented anonymously.

The analysis offers recommendations aimed at contributing to the development of policies, measures, and activities that can help safeguard the democratic role of journalism and the media in the Western Balkan countries and Turkey. This activity is part of the regional project *"Our media: a civil society action go generate media literacy and activism, counter polarization and promote dialogue"*, supported by the European Union. The project is implemented by nine media organizations from the Western Balkans, Turkey, and Slovenia during the period 2023–2026.

II.

CITIZENS' OPINIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD THE MEDIA, JOURNALISM, AND DEMOCRACY

Participants in the focus groups demonstrated a clear understanding of the role of the media and journalism in society. While older citizens perceive the media as an integral part of the social structure, younger participants hold a more "fluid" understanding of their organizational and functional position, believing that today anyone can be a media outlet. Nevertheless, many also pointed out the media's negative influence in spreading sensationalism, disinformation, and even panic. Most focus group participants believe that the media in the country are not free, noting their political bias.

2.1. HOW CITIZENS UNDERSTAND THE MEDIA AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

Most citizens understand the media through their primary function—as a source of information on important issues or as a "voice of the people." Older participants also perceive the media as the "seventh estate" or "fourth power" in society, emphasizing their essential role in the social structure and their function as a "mediator between the authorities and the citizens." They expect the media to provide sufficient and comprehensive information, and to be present on the ground where events occur.

> In my opinion, the media represent the fourth estate in society. Institutions should be afraid of journalists. Unfortunately, that's not the case. Maybe it depends on the journalists' credibility, or on the pressure coming from state institutions. [...] I believe that the power of journalists is very significant, and of course, it should be used for good purposes. (Male, 37, Skopje)

Older participants also perceive the media as the "seventh estate" or "fourth power" in society, emphasizing their essential role in the social structure and their function as a "mediator between the authorities and the citizens."

Unlike the older participants, who predominantly perceive the media as a channel for transmitting information and as part of the social structure, several younger participants emphasized that "nowadays anyone can be a media outlet, especially considering the role of influencers" (Female, 25, Skopje). Younger citizens also identified negative trends, noting that the media are increasingly becoming sources (of information) on crime and dark news, "chasing sensation rather than informing about important issues," and are often perceived as corrupt (Female, 20, Gostivar).

One of the key roles of the media in society, as highlighted by participants in the group of citizens with high cultural and social capital and influence, is "to represent different groups of people and diverse viewpoints" (Eleonora Serafimovska, Institute for Sociological, Juridical and Political Research – ISSPI, Skopje). This underscores the participatory role of media in building stable connections with audiences and enabling their inclusion (Trpevska & Micevski, 2017). According to another participant from the same group, the media should work on raising public awareness and challenging stereotypical perceptions of different groups of citizens, citing people with disabilities as an example (Vlado Krstovski, NGO Poraka, Skopje).

Several focus group participants observed that the media also cause anxiety, incite panic and fear, and even evoke unpleasant emotions. These views were expressed in the context of media coverage of the nightclub fire in Kočani, a small town in North Macedonia, where more than 60 young people lost their lives earlier this year (*Deutsche Welle*, 2025).

> They seem like something people should be afraid of. The media no longer have the power to calm emotions in the public sphere or to keep under control the panic that arises among people after a certain event. (Female, 52, Skopje)

The informational anxiety that the media provoke among citizens is further reinforced by the perception that they circulate untruthful and false information. The media's capacity to rapidly disseminate information in today's technological and communication environment was also mentioned in relation to their potential to create and spread disinformation: "[The media] may not have much freedom, but they have great power to spread information—and disinformation as well. That in itself makes them a danger, especially for the older generations" (Female, 23, Skopje).

2.2. PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

All focus group participants, including the younger ones, believe that the media in North Macedonia do not fulfil the role they should play in a democratic society: to inform the public professionally, provide space for debate, and act as a watchdog over those in power. The relationship between the media and politics—or, more precisely, the authorities—is cited by citizens as the key reason preventing the media from performing their democratic function and placing the public interest at the centre of their work.

Some participants observed a tendency towards the domination of the information and communication space by the ruling political parties, which they attributed to several factors—most notably to the fact that North Macedonia is still a very young democracy, "a kind of hybrid regime."

Several citizens with high cultural and social capital and influence pointed to a broad trend of declining standards across all areas of society, from which the media are no exception (Martin Aleksovski, civil activist, Skopje). Some participants observed a tendency towards the domination of the information and communication space by the ruling political parties, which they attributed to several factors—most notably to the fact that North Macedonia is still a very young democracy, "a kind of hybrid regime." Under such conditions the media cannot serve as a true watchdog over those in power:

> In general, the entire system in the country provides very little space for the functioning or survival of alternative viewpoints—not only those of the opposition. It is very difficult for the media, in any format, to act as direct watchdogs over those in power, because there is a tendency [...] for the parliament and the judiciary to be subordinated to the ruling structures, regardless of their political origin. It is hard to expect the media to serve as that link. [...] And even when some of them try, it is difficult for them to survive in a system that prevents their financing and normal operation. (Simonida Kacarska, European Policy Institute, Skopje)

Citizens pointed out the existence of a superficial public debate in society—one that is most often dominated by "so-called analysts who serve as an extended arm of political parties and politicians" (Nina Caminski, Kaval Production, Skopje). One participant, herself a researcher of the media sphere,[2] noted that the media are increasingly becoming "spokespersons for politicians or mere transmitters of their messages":

> There is no room for debate, no criticism is opened, [the media] are not allowed to criticize [politicians]. Very few media outlets report harmful narratives accurately or open a discussion on how they should be addressed. (Eleonora Serafimovska, ISSPI, Skopje)

2 The participant referred to the research *The Gordian knot of harmful narratives in politics and the media*, conducted by a team of researchers from the Institute of Communication Studies, Skopje between 2024–2025.

Expressing their disappointment that the media do not provide space for the exchange of ideas, some participants testified that they had even been "excluded, bypassed, and prevented" from expressing their opinions in their respective fields of work (Frosina Parmakovska, Writer, Skopje).

2.3. PERCEPTIONS OF JOURNALISTS AND JOURNALISM, AND THEIR ROLE IN SOCIETY

Most participants recognized the responsibilities that come with the journalism profession and expect journalists to possess qualities such as "being objective, investigative, critical, and constructive, but also literate" (Male, 53, Kriva Palanka). According to one older participant, journalists bear great responsibility and "should serve as a public service for citizens—to inform and to convey their interests" (Male, 64, Skopje). Some participants believe that journalism has the power to bring about social change, although they consider such cases to be rare in Macedonia.

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Several participants felt that political and financial power centres have a strong influence on the independence of journalism, making it a "politically manipulative profession": "The independence of journalists in our country is very costly—and almost impossible" (Female, 36, Skopje). According to a few participants, professional and serious media outlets are a "rarity" or an "exception" in the country. Citizens noted that the media tend to show bias towards certain sides, believing that "our journalists (…) report one way when a party is in opposition and another when that same party comes to power" (Male, 64, Skopje).

Several participants observed a trend of bypassing the role of journalism, emphasizing that politicians have themselves become media and have taken over their function: "They inform, they do everything—there's no need to hear anything from the media anymore" (Eleonora Serafimovska, ISSPI, Skopje).

> [...] The power of money plays a huge role in shaping the image and work of journalists. They have become spokespersons for political parties, spreading only the information those parties want to be heard. (Male, 53, Kriva Palanka)

According to participants, these trends marginalize and diminish the significance and role of the journalism profession (Mladen Cadikovski, *TV 24*, Skopje).

Citizens across different focus groups expressed divided opinions regarding journalists' educational and professional preparedness. Some believe that

they “lack expertise (…) so there are hardly any truly professional journalists” (Female, 36, Skopje). Another participant noted that journalists are educated, but things “get distorted over time” once they enter the profession (Male, 53, Kriva Palanka).

The previous research showed that the number of students enrolling in media, journalism, and communication studies programmes has drastically declined over the past decade—from around 200 students ten years ago to only about 30 in 2023 (Nikodinoska & Causidis, 2024). In addition to the weak connection between academic programmes and the labour market, as well as the stress and low salaries in the profession, focus group participants cited other reasons for this negative trend, including the poor promotion of these study programmes, the risks associated with the profession, and political manipulation of journalists (Female, 36, Skopje). Young people see little perspective in journalism: “When it comes to making a living, there’s not much money in that profession. It’s risky, and the pay is low” (Female, 20, Gostivar).

2.4. PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DEMOCRACY, JOURNALISM, AND MEDIA FREEDOM

North Macedonia continues to face major challenges regarding key democratic parameters (*Freedom House*, 2023). Although the country has shown moderate progress in international indexes between 2021 and 2023, media freedom—one of the core indicators of democracy—has followed a positive trend over the past three years. However, persistent problems remain, including a lack of institutional transparency, an unregulated media market, and frequent attacks on critical journalism (Nikodinoska & Causidis, 2024). These trends are reflected in citizens’ perceptions, with the majority believing that democracy does not function properly and that the media are not free.

Focus group participants were unanimous in stating that, in practice, democracy is not at the level of European Union standards. According to several of them, “the transition period is taking too long, and what we need is to uproot the remnants of the past system—in other words, a restart of the state” (Male, 37, Skopje).

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Professor Eleonora Serafimovska believes that democracy is failing in several areas of society, and that the media are part of this broader picture, confirming the findings of the previous research (Nikodinoska & Causidis, 2024). According to her, although there are many initiatives—training courses are held, journalists are educated, and efforts are made to advance media literacy—these are “sporadic and lack the power to trigger a broader wave of change.”

The media's influence on culture, social cohesion, and national development is largely reduced to the enthusiastic efforts of individuals, stresses Frosina Parmakovska, a writer. She noted that it is very rare for the media to act as initiators of topics or to encourage citizens to take action in culture and other fields.

Younger participants also believe that democracy exists "only on paper," while corruption is a systemic problem that suffocates it. Most young people think that citizens are passive and unmotivated to raise their voices because they are sceptical that anything can truly change (Female 2, 21, Strumica).

Despite the positive trends in international media freedom indexes, the majority of citizens in the focus groups believe that the media in the country are not free. One participant noted that freedom of speech exists only partially but is often misused by political parties (Female, 43, Skopje). Several others emphasized the inability to express their own opinions, especially if they are not politically affiliated. "I think we have no freedom of speech at all. There is a fear of retaliation. Few people dare to speak out," said one participant (Male, 37, Skopje).

One participant from the group of older citizens, however, observed that "perhaps they even have too much freedom, as they allow themselves to act and write very unethically, even in cases of tragedy" (Female, 36, Skopje). This comment again referred to how citizens perceived media coverage of one of the country's most tragic events from the previous year, underscoring the need to strengthen journalistic professionalism in crisis situations.

Young participants believe that the media need greater freedom and protection, as they are under excessive pressure from ruling political parties (Male, 23, Kumanovo). They noted that censorship among journalists also affects democracy: "There is no democracy without freedom of expression and without hearing all the sides affected" (Female, 25, Skopje).

III.

MEDIA PROFESSIONALS' VIEWS ON TRENDS AND RISKS IDENTIFIED IN THE PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Media professionals in the focus group discussed the main trends identified in the previous research related to the state of the media and journalism, the media landscape, ownership and financing of media outlets, as well as media use and public trust in the media. Although international media freedom indexes show an upward trend for the country, media professionals observed that the increase in public funding for media, political influence in the media sphere, ineffective democracy, and high levels of corruption in the society all affect the independence of the media and the quality of the content reaching citizens.

3.1. MEDIA PROFESSIONALS' VIEWS ON STATE OF THE MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

According to media professionals, the improvement of the country's ranking in media freedom indexes is "primarily due to a change in the political climate and the liberalization of society in the media sector" over the past few years. However, they do not believe this reflects the real situation. The country lacks a comprehensive strategy for the media sector, and changes are being made only partially across different areas, driven by pressure and lobbying from media and international actors.

In support of the noted positive trends, one of the participants mentioned certain legislative changes, such as the 2023 amendments that classify an attack on a journalist as an attack on an official, as well as the 2022 reduction of penalties for defamation and insult.

> However, this was not the result of any systemic change in the way the media operate, because […] if there is not enough political will, and if an authoritarian government comes to power, that can very easily change. (Mladen Cadikovski, *TV 24*, Skopje)

Participants noted that self-censorship among journalists persists as a result of political clientelism and the economic conditions of the media market: "The media freedom ranking means nothing to us if we still have self-censorship, pre-arranged questions, [...] subtle pressure, and corruption among journalists" (Sanja Vasic, *Radio Free Europe*, Skopje).

Media professionals point to low salaries, deteriorating working conditions, and declining interest in studying journalism as key factors contributing to instability within the profession.

Media professionals confirmed the findings from the first phase of the research regarding to the socio-economic situation of journalists, pointing to low salaries, deteriorating working conditions, and declining interest in studying journalism as key factors contributing to instability within the profession.

They also emphasized that the socio-economic status of journalists concerns the conditions under which they work. In 2023, the salaries of more than half of journalists in the country were below the national average of 600 euros:

> Money matters. It's shameful to say that the average salary of journalists is around 30,000 denars,[3] which can be compared to working in a supermarket [...] Low salaries affect both the interest in studying journalism and everything that is happening to the profession [...] (Ivan Kuzmanovski, *TV Sitel*, Skopje)

Previous research showed that journalists employed at the public broadcaster earned more than those working in private media outlets (Nikodinoska & Causidis, 2024). Despite this, Aneta Andonova, Editor at the Public Broadcasting Service – *Macedonian Radio and Television (MRT)*, pointed out that the public broadcaster lacks sufficient staff. She attributes this to complex regulations and institutional barriers that restrict employment within MRT. In her view, this results in media staff being overburdened with work obligations, leading to reduced creativity, motivation, and self-confidence among journalists.

The decline in the number of students enrolling in journalism, media, and communication programmes was highlighted as one of the fundamental reasons for the deterioration of journalistic quality and ethical standards. Several focus group participants believe that young journalists are not very interested in working in the media, just as there is little interest in studying journalism. "That lack of interest in journalism studies is an indicator of the state of our profession," said Toni Mihailov, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the portal *Goce.mk* in Stip. However, one editor pointed out that "the education

3 30,000 denars is approximately 500 euros.

system is changing, and nowadays, people from almost any profession can work as journalists" (Erol Shaqiri, *TV 21*, Skopje). For that reason, he believes it is even more important for young journalists to adhere to ethical standards, emphasizing that at the beginning of their careers, they need "quality mentors who will help them advance."

To restore the reputation of the profession and attract young talent, it is essential to modernize journalism education, according to one editor—a view shared by most focus group participants. She believes this can be achieved by introducing courses and content that align with the new technological and information realities, such as "strategic communications, AI, digital marketing…" (Sanja Vasic, *Radio Free Europe*, Skopje).

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3.2. MEDIA LANDSCAPE, OWNERSHIP AND FINANCING OF THE MEDIA

Ensuring the financial independence and stability of media remains one of the key challenges in the media sector. The number of traditional media outlets continues to decline in favour of the rapid growth of online media. It is estimated that around 300 media outlets operate on the market in North Macedonia, two-thirds of which are online (Nikodinoska & Causidis, 2024).

However, this trend does not signify an improvement in media pluralism; on the contrary, it contributes to further market fragmentation. "[…] because perhaps only about 10% of online portals, which under the new Law fall into the category of online media, are in fact real media outlets, which are founded, managed, or operated by journalists. Everything else is pure 'business'" (Verica Jordanova, *Inovativnost.mk*, Skopje). This situation creates financial distortions in the media market and reduces effective pluralism in terms of content diversity and quality.

The economic potential of the media advertising market, estimated at around 20 million euros, is insufficient to ensure the long-term financial independence and stability of the media. For this reason, media professionals express concern about their financial sustainability, particularly following the withdrawal of foreign assistance, and believe that the sector is facing an "even more difficult situation" in the future.

> The market is very small, while there are too many media outlets. As long as this remains the case, the situation will stay at the same level; that is why nothing changes. Even if a (new) media law were to be adopted, I am not sure how much it could alter the circumstances, given that around 100 media outlets—TV stations, radio stations, and

> another 200 online portals—are expected to survive on 20 million euros [...], which is extremely difficult and unsustainable. (Mladen Cadikovski, *TV 24*, Skopje)

The previous research also points to the negative trend of increasing budget funds flowing into the media through paid political advertising during election periods, as well as through government campaigns—an issue that media associations have long been warning about. The Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services[4] allows central and local authorities, starting from January 2025, to conduct government campaigns financed with 0.1% of the state budget, which may endanger media independence and foster media clientelism. As an example, one participant pointed to the dependence of local media on municipalities: "Between 90% and 95% of local media survive on funds provided by mayors." (Toni Mihailov, *Goce.mk*, Stip)

The establishment of a Media Pluralism Fund is seen as one of the ways to secure resources that would support independent media and free journalism "which would gain access both to the public service and to private media."

> There is no systemic consideration of the self-sustainability of the media and independent journalism... It is well known that [the media] are dependent on funds from political advertising and hidden forms of advertising [...] I have the impression that there is a lack of synergy among the media, civil society organizations, donors, media editors, and experts in the field. We need to reflect on how to support independent journalism and how to enable the media to become self-sustainable. (Marina Tuneva, Media Expert)

The establishment of a Media Pluralism Fund is seen as one of the ways to secure resources that would support independent media and free journalism "which would gain access both to the public service and to private media," according to Mladen Cadikovski, Editor at *TV 24*. He also points to the need to amend the provisions on media concentration in order to consolidate the market, citing examples from other countries where, for instance, "telecommunication operators often are founders (financiers) of the TV stations." This recommendation is also reflected in the previous research, which notes that the legal framework concerning the protection of ownership pluralism is outdated and proposes liberalization to foster the development of the media market.

3.3. REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENS IN THE MEDIA

Participants in the focus group with media professionals acknowledged that politics and politicians are overly present in media content. Despite the large

4 Law on Amending and Supplementing the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (28 February 2024).

number of media outlets, they believe that there is a lack of diversity in content and that citizens are insufficiently represented. The reasons, they note, lie in the poor financial situation of the media, as well as in their relations with politics.

Several participants in the focus group observed that the media are increasingly deviating from the public interest and, instead of citizens, often place politicians at the centre of their coverage:

> [...] We have slowly become servants of politics; the ordinary citizen is no longer our concern [...] on all TV stations we only have statements from the Prime Minister, from the opposition, from ministers [...] we produce debate shows, and the main stars are again the politicians—wherever you turn, it's them, while there is nothing about the people. (Erol Shaqiri, *TV 21*, Skopje)

Media professionals agreed that the media should adopt a broader understanding of topics of public interest—ones that should not be limited solely to politics, but should also include those who are marginalized—and that they should make greater efforts to engage younger audiences. To achieve this, one participant emphasized the need for "greater transparency and cooperation with the civil sector, with academia, or collaboration with faculties that educate future media professionals" (Marina Tuneva, Media Expert). An editor shared the experience of producing programmes in his media outlet dedicated to marginalized groups—"the poor, vulnerable individuals, single mothers, and persons with disabilities"—to which the audience responded positively, as the media took the initiative to assist citizens. (Erol Shaqiri, *TV 21*, Skopje).

Some participants also noted that the difficult economic situation in the media sector is reflected in the functioning of local and regional media, which, according to the previous research, were identified as economically unstable and lacking sufficient professional and human resources to produce quality content. "Local journalism needs to be revitalized; (we should not allow) smaller media outlets to be forgotten," warned Tuneva.

IV.

USE OF MEDIA AND TRUST IN THEM

Research indicates that older citizens still primarily obtain information from television (Nikodinoska and Causidis, 2024), in contrast to younger audiences, who predominantly rely on online sources. Participants in the focus groups pointed out that media consumption habits are shifting in favour of online media, regardless of age. However, trust in these media remains low among all focus group participants, due to their lack of professionalism, the dissemination of false information, and their sensationalist approach.

4.1. MEDIA USE

Young participants primarily obtain information online—through social media, news portals, online editions of certain television stations and newspapers, podcasts, and foreign or specialist websites. Most older citizens in the focus group also stated that they increasingly get their information from the internet and social networks, and that they rarely watch television. This finding contrasts with previous research, which in recent years has shown that older citizens predominantly follow news on TV (Nikodinoska and Causidis, 2024).

Among all citizens, informational anxiety is evident, particularly regarding television news: "I refuse to watch the news unless something major happens" (Female, 36, Skopje); "Young people prefer very short news and just one sentence about what's most important. Instant news." (Female 1, 21, Veles).

Some younger participants believe that today "anyone can transmit information, and you don't have to be a journalist to do that" (Male, 25, Skopje), citing podcasts (by Kristijan Landov, Anekta, *Infomax*) as examples which, in their view, "have already become an information channel" (Female, 20, Gostivar). An older participant noted that young people lack critical understanding of content, as they follow influencers "without knowing who that person is and what their profession is," underscoring that this represents one of the issues that will have to be addressed in the period ahead (Female, 52, Skopje).

An older participant noted that their own habits regarding information sources have also "matured" over the years, prompting them to be more selective.

However, she added: "we all generally get our information online" (Female, 52, Skopje). A pensioner from Skopje emphasized that he has not watched television for a long time: "We, older people, have also somehow switched to our phones and primarily get our information from Facebook" (Male, 64, Skopje). Unlike the younger participants, older citizens did not mention podcasts or influencers as sources of information. Among the many available sources, nearly all interlocutors singled out the news aggregator *Time.mk* as their starting point for accessing information.

Media professionals also observed that citizens' media habits are shifting in favour of more frequent use of online media. Many of them noted that the development of social networks and the internet have become a significant factor in diminishing the role of traditional media—an evolution that, in their view, carries both positive and negative implications.

> Television may be the largest and most influential medium, but the impact of online media cannot be overlooked—media in which it is unknown who the owner is, who the editor is, who writes, what is being written, or who is commenting. The online space is rife with offensive and discriminatory comments that the administrators of these portals do not manage at all. (Verica Jordanova, *Inovativnost.mk,* Skopje)

As a positive aspect of social networks, one participant highlighted the inability or limited ability of the authorities to establish autocratic control over social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter—unlike traditional media, where such control can occur, sometimes even "through the use of threats and bribery."

Trust in the media in North Macedonia is low, forming part of a broader societal trend of distrust in the system, stemming from complex political developments, high levels of corruption, and the lack of institutional transparency.

4.2. TRUST IN THE MEDIA

Trust in the media in North Macedonia is low, forming part of a broader societal trend of distrust in the system, stemming from complex political developments, high levels of corruption, and the lack of institutional transparency. As reasons for this, citizens and media professionals point to a range of negative practices they observe in journalism and in the media—among them the perception that "today's journalism is reduced to speed over truth," that many articles are republished without prior verification, that stories lack the presence of two sides, the insufficient representation of investigative journalism, as well as the inability for a story or information to reach the public "because someone has decided so."

As noted in the previous research, distrust is more pronounced toward online media and social media, a finding that is also reflected in the statements of the interlocutors:

> The harmful influence comes much more frequently from portals and online media […],[5] even though they possess considerable power and influence. As in all other areas of society—business, health, culture—as standards decline and the modes of operation deteriorate, the media are no exception. (Martin Aleksovski, Civic Activist, Skopje)

Neither do young citizens—who predominantly obtain their information online—perceive online portals as verified or trustworthy sources of information, citing several reasons: "the risk of spreading propaganda and falsehoods" (Male, 25, Skopje); the absence of professional journalists (Female, 20, Gostivar); the fact that news items lack (signed) authors; that some portals "are registered outside North Macedonia and bear no responsibility for defamation" (Male, 23, Kumanovo); or because "they spread panic" (Female, 23, Skopje). Most of them emphasized that they additionally verify information from social media by checking traditional media, consulting family members and friends, and even using ChatGPT.

Highlighting the important role of public service broadcasters within the media system, one media professional emphasized that, in the future, the public service should assume "a leading or an even more dominant role in the effort to open space for journalists and restore trust."

A young participant, highlighting the advantages of online media, emphasized that they "should serve as a corrective to traditional media, as they are fast and should work on bringing news closer to citizens." Instead, however, portals are flooded with "sensationalism, gossip, and tabloid content," which is not only a local phenomenon but also a global trend. Civic activist Dejan Dokuzovski noted that many citizens do not watch news at all, but rather follow trivial and low-quality information on portals and social networks, which in this way merely generate clicks. On social media, as Mladen Cadikovski, Editor at *TV 24*, observed, "anyone can present themselves as a journalist, and this diminishes trust in journalism overall."

Although it appears contradictory, trust in traditional media is higher among both younger and older interlocutors, despite the fact that the majority stated that they increasingly follow online media: "I trust traditional media, and less so online media" (Male, 25, Skopje); "I still think that television has the most verified information and does not manipulate" (Female, 43, Skopje). Participants across multiple focus groups singled out Macedonian Television as one of the credible media outlets: "it has improved significantly, and I trust the content of the public service" (Male, 53, Kriva Palanka); "I am a 'fan' of *MTV* and *Macedonian Radio 1* and *2*" (Eleonora Serafimovska, ISPPI, Skopje). Highlighting the important role of public service broadcasters within the

5 Online outlets were formally recognized with the amendments to the Law on Media in April 2025, through their inclusion in the legal definition of media.

media system, one media professional emphasized that, in the future, the public service should assume "a leading or an even more dominant role in the effort to open space for journalists and restore trust" (Mladen Cadikovski, *TV 24*, Skopje).

Participants also identified several other media outlets they trust, such as TV Telma, the investigative desks of the *Investigative Reporting Lab – IRL*, the programme Kod, the local bureaus of *Deutsche Welle* and *Radio Free Europe*, as well as certain specialist portals (for example, *Fakulteti.mk*). Some additionally mentioned foreign media outlets where they cross-check information (*The Guardian, BBC, Al Jazeera*).

V.

MEDIA NEEDS AND DEMANDS OF CITIZENS

Citizens across all focus groups expressed disappointment with the thematic and genre diversity, the production quality, and the oversaturation with political topics in media content. Weak creativity, lack of initiative, and unoriginality were among the criticisms highlighted. Citizens are dissatisfied with the programming offer, describing it as a "moussaka scheme"—"a portion of news, a portion of Turkish series."

Citizens are asking for thorough analyses and debates in the media space, as well as more content related to culture, geopolitics, science, education, film, and European integration.

Both younger and older citizens observed that the media contain too much politics, at the expense of content from all other areas—culture, geopolitics, science, education, film, and European integration.

> We are far from the basic things—geopolitics, in-depth analyses; I cannot find that here, with few exceptions. I get informed from foreign news and podcasts, from some university professors. If I rely on our media, I will not see anything essential on the topics that serious analysts were discussing just a month ago. (Frosina Parmakovska, Writer, Skopje)

Young citizens pointed out that there are not enough media products intended for them—content prepared in a creative and engaging way, such as materials on innovative trends, research, and technology. "We need fewer Turkish series, more educational programmes, but produced for today's younger audience," one interlocutor stated (Female, 36, Skopje).

Citizens are asking for thorough analyses and debates in the media space, as well as media professionals who know "how to present well, starting from the visual aspect, diction, manner of presentation, and professional standards." Emphasizing that current content is burdened with "the heaviness we already live in," interlocutors—both older and younger—believe that a "more positive approach and pleasant information are needed, as encouragement that something good can also be achieved" (Nina Caminski, Kaval Production, Skopje).

The disappointment of the interlocutors was also evident regarding content related to strengthening the country's cohesive fabric and the development of the nation: "There is not a single programme on science. How do we expect

to develop the nation—to move forward in any aspect—if there isn't even one simple science programme? We are lagging behind in culture, and there is no science at all, zero." (Eleonora Serafimovska, ISPPI, Skopje). Culture as a topic was mentioned across various contexts in the discussions of all focus groups—from its minimal presence in media content to the lack of professional staff specialized in covering these areas.

Interlocutors believe that media content lacks an inclusive approach—that is, the inclusion of different social groups that would effectively reflect the diversity within society. Thus, Simonida Kacarska, an expert in the field of European integration, considers that although we live in a multiethnic society, diversity is one of the key social issues that is insufficiently represented in the media:

> I miss us talking about the diversities in this country. The issue of disability, for example, to discuss it in the context of the country's future. And culturally and linguistically, we operate in two different media spaces, just as we operate in two different political spaces. If you ask me what the biggest challenge for sustaining the state is—in my view, it is language. (Simonida Kacarska, European Policy Institute, Skopje)

The previous research found that marginalized groups (women, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, members of the LGBTQ community) are insufficiently represented, and that accessibility to the media for persons with disabilities is particularly problematic (Micevski and Trpevska, 2024).

> The media need to change their approach. […] The issue is not how many or what kinds of contents are produced, but rather that an inclusive approach is necessary for these individuals. Why shouldn't there be persons with disabilities in morning shows, before or after the news, in economic programmes? Will any journalist think of young people with disabilities, their perspectives, whether there are accessible grants for them […]? (Vlado Krstovski, NGO Poraka, Skopje)

Citizens attribute the reasons for the low quality of media content to the lack of professional and human capacity within newsrooms, as well as to the insufficient integrity and professionalism of journalists:

> Not all media outlets have enough journalists specialized in covering culture, social policy, especially issues concerning persons with disabilities. You cannot expect the same journalist to follow ten different topics, to apply a critical approach, and to produce content that will drive change. For example, inclusive education for persons with disabilities—there is no journalist who has done that [the story] properly. (Vlado Krstovski, NGO Poraka, Skopje).

Political influences are an additional factor that "narrows" the diversity of media content. As an illustration of the limited presence of different opinions and viewpoints in the media, citizens and media professionals pointed to the practice of featuring only "approved experts," emphasizing that there are about fifty people "who appear everywhere." "There are no interlocutors who are willing to take on a role in society — professors, genuine experts […]. Everyone is somehow focused on their own interests […] and they do not want to appear in public," said Mladen Cadikovski, Editor at *TV 24*.

As an illustration of the limited presence of different opinions and viewpoints in the media, citizens and media professionals pointed to the practice of featuring only "approved experts," emphasizing that there are about fifty people "who appear everywhere."

However, several participants saw the responsibility for the low-quality programming not only in the media, but also in the audience itself, which is interested in "sensationalism, gossip, tabloid content" (Dejan Dokuzovski, Civic Activist), "crime reports and show business" (Female, 25, Skopje), or is "insufficiently educated" to recognize falsehoods and manipulation in the media (Male, 23, Kumanovo). This supports the argument that the media offer the audience what it wants to watch. Yet, since one of the fundamental functions of the media is education, "if we do not offer citizens" quality content (Eleonora Serafimovska, ISPPI, Skopje), the situation will not change.

Several interlocutors pointed out that this is a result of both older and younger generations not being sufficiently media literate, highlighting the need for programmes that would raise the level of media literacy and critical thinking. In this way, the audience would be better able to assess media content and exert pressure on media outlets to provide higher-quality programming.

Citizens—particularly young people—are not well acquainted with the mechanisms through which they can respond to the content offered by the media. Older participants said that they sometimes report offensive comments under posts on social networks (Female, 36, Skopje) or contact the media when they encounter a local problem (Female, 45, Skopje). However, the active use of self-regulatory mechanisms was not mentioned as an option.

VI.

THE FUTURE OF THE MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

Participants in the focus groups view the future of the media primarily through the lens of information-technological changes that are reshaping media and journalism, altering the ways content is produced and used, and influencing the entire media ecosystem. Sustainable financing of professional journalism and independent media remains an open question for media professionals as well, who point to several possible mechanisms—each carrying potential risks in terms of stability and undue influence.

Participants see short-form news as the news format of the future due to "the short attention span of young people, who consciously do not follow the news." For this reason, they point to the need for the media to try "to win over the audience through more innovative formats, because it is clear that the old ones are not working."

6.1. THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGICAL AND INFORMATION CHANGES ON JOURNALISM AND THE MEDIA

All citizens are convinced that the media and journalism will continue to exist in the future, but they will need to adapt to new information-technological trends that will influence the form of media products, the platforms for content distribution, and the advancement of skills among media professionals.

> The population is ageing, and in 5–10 years the media will become so irrelevant that they will need to think about new ways and tactics to attract younger audiences. Not only television and radio, but even portals will become traditional media. […] Additional modernization is needed — I don't know where this is going — perhaps short 20-second news items for young people, for example. (Dejan Dokuzovski, Civic Activist, Skopje)

Participants see short-form news as the news format of the future due to "the short attention span of young people, who consciously do not follow the news" (Eleonora Serafimovska, ISPPI, Skopje). For this reason, they point to the need for the media to try "to win over the audience through more innovative formats, because it is clear that the old ones are not working" (Marina Tuneva, Media Expert, Skopje).

Given the falling number of students enrolling in journalism departments, participants highlighted a contradiction: although the fields of mass communications and the media are developing, young people show little

interest in these study programmes. The concern raised by one participant relates first to the question of "who will be a journalist" in the future (Eleonora Serafimovska, ISPPI, Skopje), and then to how prepared media professionals will be for the new challenges ahead:

> Out of 20 employees, we have only two who possess digital skills, and we cannot operate without them. There need to be more such people in television, as young audiences are moving online. Our profession has changed […] We are all facing difficulties in hiring young people. It's not that there is no interest, but they simply do not know… (Sanja Vasic, *Radio Free Europe*, Skopje)

Most participants expect that artificial intelligence (AI) will have a significant impact both at the level of media outlets and newsrooms, and at the individual level in terms of the skills journalists will need to practice the profession in the future. Tuneva believes that newsrooms in North Macedonia are lagging behind in introducing and using artificial intelligence, and that they have not developed a strategy for its application. Given that AI can serve as a helpful and supplementary tool in journalistic work, yet journalists currently use it incidentally and without proper knowledge, this underscores the need for AI literacy among journalists themselves. For this reason, she recommends building capacities within newsrooms and enhancing journalists' skills so they can keep pace with the newest trends in the profession.

Young people are sceptical about the future of the media, especially in light of artificial intelligence, and they place greater expectations on alternative formats such as podcasts and influencers. Nevertheless, they believe that journalism will not disappear, because nothing can replace the human being: "It may replace some journalists, but not those in the field" (Female, 23, Skopje); "Even AI makes mistakes, and only a human will be able to check those mistakes" (Female, 25, Skopje).

6.2. THE FUTURE OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTER

The discussion on the future of the media also addressed the question of the survival of the public service broadcaster, Macedonian Radio and Television, as a cornerstone of the media system—an institution that has for years faced challenges related to financing and independence. One participant emphasized that since we have already decided to maintain a public service within the media structure, its reform and long-term sustainability should not be neglected; instead, efforts should be invested in strengthening its role and protecting it from pressure:

> In an ideal scenario […] the public service should set higher standards of operation: […] there is neither motivation nor initiative at the level of policymakers to open this issue, to open the question of media regulation. (Simonida Kacarska, European Policy Institute, Skopje)

Several participants across nearly all focus groups emphasized their trust in the public service broadcaster, and therefore called for strengthening its role (Mladen Cadikovski, *TV 24*, Skopje). Kacarska noted that these issues, however, will ultimately need to be resolved in the context of the country's negotiations with the EU.

6.3. FINANCING OF JOURNALISM AND THE MEDIA

Participants in the focus groups understand that, in order to protect the independence of the media and journalists, independent funding sources are necessary. Although donations and subscriptions were mentioned as independent mechanisms for financing the media in the future, the majority of citizens are still not prepared to pay out of their own pocket: "Given our mentality, if we need to subscribe — for example, *Fokus* offers such an option — we will not want to do it." (Martin Aleksovski, Civic Activist, Skopje).

Although donations and subscriptions were mentioned as independent mechanisms for financing the media in the future, the majority of citizens are still not prepared to pay out of their own pocket.

Some older citizens believe that the reason for this reluctance is the lack of trust in the media, stating that they would rather pay for a foreign outlet than a domestic one (Female, 52, Skopje). Others were categorical that "the media have an obligation to inform," and that they are already financed by other structures (Male, 53, Kriva Palanka). One older participant emphasized that if citizens were to pay, the media would be able to inform impartially and objectively, as they would not be under pressure from political parties (Female, 43, Skopje). Several interlocutors noted that the quality of media content would be a key condition for providing financial support. Among the young participants, some expressed support for the option that "citizens pay a symbolic amount" or "choose themselves whom they want to support." Content and outlets engaged in investigative journalism received strong support from citizens: "I would give support, even a donation, for courageous journalism." (Female, 36, Skopje).

Although they understand the risks associated with potential influences, several older citizens believe that "it is better for the media to receive public funds, rather than depend solely on companies," and that they should be financed "by citizens or from the state budget, like *MRTV*." There were also opinions that "each ministry could allocate part of its budget to produce programmes that would cover topics" within its respective field (Female, 36, Skopje).

The Media Pluralism Fund, as an independent mechanism, was nevertheless mentioned as an option in all focus groups, in the context of its potential to contribute to improving the sector (Mladen Cadikovski, *TV 24*, Skopje). The media community has long advocated for this solution, which envisages support for media content of public interest. So far, it has not received support from the Government, although the group of media professionals expressed confidence that political will exists. A participant in the group of citizens with high cultural and social capital and influence agreed that "there should be public money for media products of public interest," but warned that such funds must be allocated and spent in a transparent manner (Vlado Krstovski, NGO Poraka, Skopje).

The Media Pluralism Fund, as an independent mechanism, was nevertheless mentioned as an option in all focus groups, in the context of its potential to contribute to improving the sector.

Although donor funding is viewed as an opportunity to support independent journalism, all participants agreed that such funds are becoming increasingly scarce in the sector and cannot be expected to provide long-term and sustainable financing. One participant noted that donor funds are part of the system for ensuring support for professional journalism, but emphasized that better coordination is needed among the media, civil society, donors, media editors, and experts in the field in order to arrive at effective solutions.

Given the difficult financial situation of the media advertising market, as well as the decline of traditional models of media financing, one of the participants highlighted several possibilities for funding the media in the future:

> (...) there will be three ways of financing the media—the state may fund them, with a set of protective mechanisms that would ensure impartiality and professionalism and prevent influence over editorial policy, as well as arbitrary allocation of funds; citizens may pay a subscription; and/or large technology companies (especially in relation to AI) may pay the media for using their archives/materials, both for daily use and for their continuous use in training AI models. (Darko Duridanski, Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers, Skopje)

6.4. REDEFINING THE ROLE OF MEDIA

Citizens understand that with technological and communication changes, all information becomes easily and quickly accessible, which in turn transforms their media habits. For this reason, several participants believe that the main role—especially of "mainstream" media—is no longer simply to inform, since online media and social networks have taken primacy in that area. They emphasize that the media need to redefine their role:

> It is no longer necessary to watch the news in the morning to hear some information; I can do that on social networks. The primary function of the media should be education—they should encourage and educate, more education than information. (Eleonora Serafimovska, ISPPI, Skopje)

Pointing out that "generations of young people do not know how to think critically," participants believe that it is crucial for society to prepare them to protect themselves from the flood of information reaching them. As one of the ways to develop critical thinking, participants identified media literacy, digital literacy, and artificial intelligence literacy as essential skills for navigating the information chaos faced by all generations of citizens—from everyday life to voting in elections (Eleonora Serafimovska, ISPPI, Skopje). "If the media want to have a positive and socially useful role, they, together with experts, should educate citizens. They need to assume the role of educators of the public," Serafimovska argued, adding that journalists themselves should be discussing and opening debates on this issue.

VII.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings confirm that citizens recognize the essential role of the media and journalism in a democratic society and view them as fundamental pillars of the public interest. However, across all focus groups, there was a pervasive sense of pessimism regarding their actual functioning, reflecting a broader societal context marked by political polarization, corruption, and economic instability. Despite generational differences in how the media are understood, the significance of the media as a prerequisite for the functioning of democracy remains uncontested across generations.

Participants reaffirmed the findings of previous research regarding the systemic dependence between the media and political power centres, clientelism, and the chronic problems that undermine the development of a professional and market-oriented media sector. The prevailing perception is that journalism does not operate in a free environment, while media independence is viewed as an unattainable ideal. These insights point to a pronounced distrust in the system, including toward the media, driven by political dominance over the public discourse and the poor economic situation, both of which affect the functioning of the media.

The media professionals who participated in this research were critical of the partial and short-term measures implemented in the sector, emphasizing the need for systemic and strategic reforms. The development of a comprehensive media strategy aligned with European standards was identified as a starting point for improving the media environment. Within this process, key priorities include stabilizing the media market, improving the socio-economic position of journalists, and establishing transparent and sustainable financing models. The Media Pluralism Fund was highlighted as one potential mechanism for independently financing media content of public interest, provided that it incorporates safeguards to ensure political independence.

From the perspective of media needs, citizens demand significantly higher-quality, more inclusive, diverse, and educational content, as well as more critical and investigative journalism, since existing outdated programming models do not reflect the information needs of contemporary audiences. New communication and technological trends are reshaping audience habits—

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particularly among young people—creating a need for media outlets to adapt to digital platforms and multimedia formats. This underscores the necessity for changes both at the editorial level and in strengthening the knowledge and skills of journalists and media professionals.

In a context where sensationalism, disinformation, and unprofessional reporting are on the rise, both citizens and media professionals emphasize the importance of media, digital, and artificial intelligence literacy as prerequisites for protection against manipulation. Developing a critically oriented audience—one that can recognize and value professional journalism and actively advocate for societal change—is essential for the effective functioning of both the media and democracy. The environment in which professional media and journalists are increasingly overshadowed by social networks and other digital actors—now the dominant sources of information for young people—requires media outlets to revisit and reinforce their fundamental role in educating the public.

According to the research participants, the future of the media will be shaped by technological innovations and digital transformation. Digital platforms are already redefining the role of traditional media, while artificial intelligence simultaneously introduces new opportunities and new challenges. In this context, professional standards, transparency, and the public interest must remain at the centre of journalistic practice.

Based on the analysis of the opinions and attitudes of citizens and media professionals, the following recommendations emerge:

• Through an inclusive process involving all relevant stakeholders the Government and the Ministry of Digital Transformation should initiate and prepare a media development strategy. This document should address the key challenges and future opportunities for improving the media sector in line with European regulations and standards, offering clear guidance for reforming media policies, developing the media market, advancing digital transformation, and strengthening professional standards.

• All relevant actors in the media sector should support the establishment of regular mechanisms for coordination and consultation among media outlets, the academic community, civil society, and institutions, as a precondition for the effective implementation of media policies.

• The Ministry of Digital Transformation, in cooperation and consultation with the media community, should initiate the establishment of an independent fund for supporting media pluralism, intended for financing high-quality media content of public interest. This mechanism should include clear procedures and criteria for selection and support, ensuring transparency and independence from political influence.

• Media and professional organizations, in cooperation with the relevant institutions, should implement continuous training programmes for journalists and media professionals aimed at strengthening their digital competencies, media and digital literacy, and the ethical use of artificial intelligence in the production of content for multimedia platforms.

• Media and professional organizations should provide training on inclusive journalism and ethical reporting for journalists and media professionals, with the aim of increasing professional sensitivity and enhancing diversity in media topics.

• Professional media organizations and media outlets should strengthen professional standards and ethical practices and adapt them to the new digital environment. Media outlets should consistently apply these standards regardless of the platform on which they operate.

• Media outlets should invest efforts in creating original, inclusive, diverse, and educational content in multimedia formats intended for all audiences, especially young people. It is necessary to abandon outdated formats and programming schemes and to develop content that reflects the complexity of contemporary social processes, while ensuring greater representation of marginalized groups.

• The media, in cooperation with professional media organizations, should work actively and continuously on improving the socio-economic position of journalists, which includes better working conditions and their legal protection, as well as increasing salaries and regulating employment contracts. This will contribute to reducing precarious work and creating a motivating work environment for journalists, as well as attracting new professionals to the field.

• Media outlets and the public service broadcaster should continue to develop and promote investigative journalism, which enjoys high levels of public trust and represents a key mechanism for safeguarding the public interest and encouraging transparency and accountability of institutions.

• The public service broadcaster should strengthen its role within the media sphere by consistently adhering to professional reporting standards, producing high-quality and diverse programming, and developing formats that respond to the needs of different audiences, including young people and underrepresented groups.

• Media professionals within the public service broadcaster should receive continuous training in the use of digital production tools and the creation of multimedia content tailored to different audiences and platforms. This is essential for its long-term relevance and fulfilment of its public mission.

• Journalism, media, and communication study programmes should modernize their curricula by introducing more practical training, integrating courses related to digital journalism, artificial intelligence, and multimedia, as well as establishing formal partnerships with media outlets, in order to attract more students and prepare them for newsroom work already during their studies.

• The Ministry of Education and the Bureau for Development of Education, in cooperation with the civil society sector, should integrate media, digital, and artificial intelligence literacy into the school curriculum, enabling young people to develop from an early age critical thinking skills and the ability to identify manipulated content and disinformation in the media.

• Civil society, the media, and public institutions should implement programmes and activities aimed at developing critical thinking, media literacy, and digital literacy among citizens of all ages.

• Professional media organizations, in cooperation with relevant institutions, should establish long-term mechanisms to support local and regional media — the most vulnerable segment of the media ecosystem — through dedicated financial programmes, technical assistance, newsroom training, and the development of content that reflects and serves local communities.

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Annex 1 – Description of the focus groups

Table 1: **PARTICIPANT DATA FOR THE FOCUS GROUPS**

City and age group	Date	Male - female ratio	Level of political engagement	Level of education	Average age	Media consumption habits
Stip 18–35 years	27/05/2025	3M/5F	All participants always vote in elections; 7 out of 8 occasionally take part in protests or sign petitions; 7 out of 8 are not formally active in a political party, association, trade union, or similar organization.	Secondary school – 4 University degree – 4	19.1	Online media and social media
Skopje 35–65	16/05/2025	3M/6F	All participants always vote in elections; 6 out of 9 occasionally take part in protests or sign petitions, 2 never, and 1 always; 7 out of 9 are not formally active in a political party, association, trade union, or similar organization.	Secondary school – 2 University degree – 4 Postgraduate degree – 3	48.4	TV, online media and social media

Focus group 1 with older citizens, 16 May 2025, Skopje

Participants:
1. Male, 53, Kriva Palanka
2. Female, 42, Krushevo
3. Female, 36, Skopje
4. Male, 64, Skopje
5. Female, 64, Skopje
6. Female, 52, Skopje
7. Male, 37, Skopje
8. Female, 43, Skopje
9. Female, 45, Skopje

Focus group 2 with young citizens, 27 May 2025, Stip

Participants:
1. Female 1, 21, Ivankovci (rural), Veles
2. Male, 23, Kumanovo
3. Female 2, 21, Strumica
4. Female, 23, Skopje
5. Male, 25, Skopje
6. Female, 20, rural, Gostivar area
7. Male, 2, Stip
8. Female, 25, Skopje

Focus group 3 with citizens with high cultural and social capital and influence, 17 June 2025, Skopje

Participants:
1. Eleonora Serafimovska, Professor, ISPPI, Skopje
2. Simonida Kacarska, Director, European Policy Institute, Skopje
3. Frosina Parmakovska, Writer, Skopje
4. Dejan Dokuzovski, Civic Activist in the media sector and Director of IREX, Skopje
5. Nina Caminski, Film Producer, “Kaval” production, Skopje
6. Martin Aleksovski, Civic Activist, Skopje
7. Vlado Krstovski, Project Manager, Poraka – a civic, parental, national disability and non-profit organization

Focus group 4 with media professionals, 19 June 2025, Skopje

Participants:
1.Aneta Andonova, Editor, Public Broadcasting Service – *Macedonian Television*, Skopje
2. Erol Shaqiri, Editor, *TV 21*, Skopje
3. Mladen Cadikovski, Editor, *TV 24,* Skopje, and President of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia
4. Marina Tuneva, Media Expert, Skopje
5. Sanja Vasic, Editor, *Radio Free Europe,* Skopje
6. Ivan Kuzmanovski, Editor, *TV Sitel*, Skopje
7. Toni Mihailov, Deputy Editor-in-Chief, *Goce.mk,* Stip
8. Verica Jordanova, Editor-in-Chief, *Inovativnost.mk*, Skopje
9. Darko Duridanski, Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers – SSNM, Skopje

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vesna Nikodinoska holds a Master's Degree in Global Communications from the American University in Paris. She works as Programme Manager and Researcher at the Macedonian Institute for Media (MIM) in Skopje.

ETHICS, TRUST, AND PUBLIC INTEREST SHOULD PREVAIL IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The Future of the Media in North Macedonia – Considerations by Key Actors

This publication is the result of research undertaken as part of the project **"Our Media: A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism, counter polarization and promote dialogue."** The second research cycle was conducted in the thematic framework titled "The Future of the Media in the Western Balkans and Turkey" in 2025 and focused on analysing the views and opinions of media professionals regarding the current situation and trends in media and democracy in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey.

The project **"Our Media: A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism, counter polarization and promote dialogue"** is jointly implemented by nine media development organizations from the Western Balkans and Turkey, with the financial support of the European Union. The coordinator of the three-year project is the Foundation Mediacentar Sarajevo. Partners in the project are the Albanian Media Institute in Tirana; Bianet in Istanbul; the Macedonian Institute for Media in Skopje; the Montenegro Media Institute in Podgorica; the Novi Sad School of Journalism; the Peace Institute in Ljubljana; the Press Council of Kosovo in Pristina; and the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM).

SEENPM
South East European Network for Professionalization of Media