

# PROGRESSIVE VOICES?

Attitudes and perceptions of civil society organisations and young people in Central and South-Eastern Europe

## KEY FINDINGS



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# INTRODUCTION

This short brief covers the key findings of research conducted in eight countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czechia, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovakia – involving civil society organisations and young people.

The research was conducted within the project “*Countering Disinformation in the V4 and the Balkan Region: Mapping Needs, Building Capacity and Generating Civic Activism*” which aims to:

- increase communication and outreach capacities of civil society organisations that focus on countering disinformation, supporting media literacy and increasing public awareness on crucial topics
- increase media literacy and/or awareness of disinformation among youth through the empowerment of civil society organisations and active involvement of young people in entertaining and engaging online communication activities



## WHAT WAS OUR RESEARCH ABOUT?

Linking research covering young people to civil society organisations (CSOs) might not seem suitable at first sight. However, when looking deeper into both current and historical developments it is possible to discern two defining elements that these groups have in common. Both CSOs and the young are perceived as bearers of change and hope who must overcome obstacles for their goals to come true. At the same time, these groups strongly overlap as it is very common to have CSOs full of young motivated people determined to change the world.

Be they aspiring leaders, inventors or businessmen, young people are generally considered the best prospects for a better future. Whenever there is uncertainty or desperation within societies, the weight of expectation for saving the day is often transferred to the younger generation. That's because it is usually young people who are most determined to make their voices heard and take a stand on various issues.

Similarly, civil society organisations are often perceived as trying to "save the planet" or "fix the system", particularly in the absence of effective state institutions. On the other hand, many CSOs often experience criticism, repercussions or obstacles from those they dare to criticise. This often results in cuts in funding and support. For their part, young people are often perceived as impertinent and inexperienced which can result in their ideas being omitted from discussions.

Therefore, in order to have a healthy and active civil society it is important to comprehend the needs, key influences, motivations and obstacles of both young people and CSOs. This knowledge can contribute to better policy measures, cooperation and the establishment of whole-of-society responses. Following this premise, this GLOBSEC-implemented project focused on two key goals for developing a better civil society:

- ▶ Increase the impact and reach of civil society organisations' activities
- ▶ Understand the information consumption habits of young people and identify who and what influences them

The following pages provide:

- i. key recommendations for stakeholders interested in helping civil society organisations
- ii. key findings for stakeholders interested in working with young people to build the leaders of the future

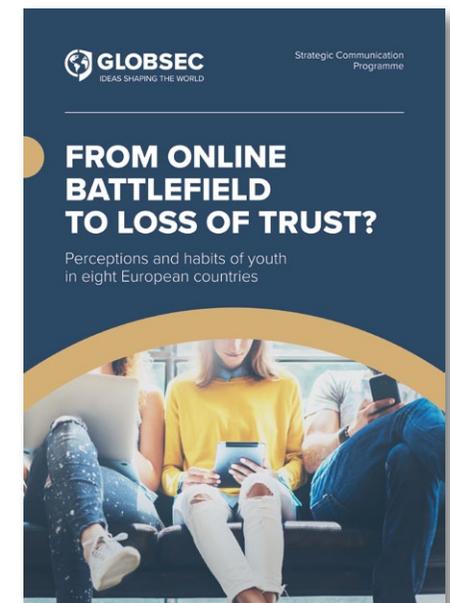
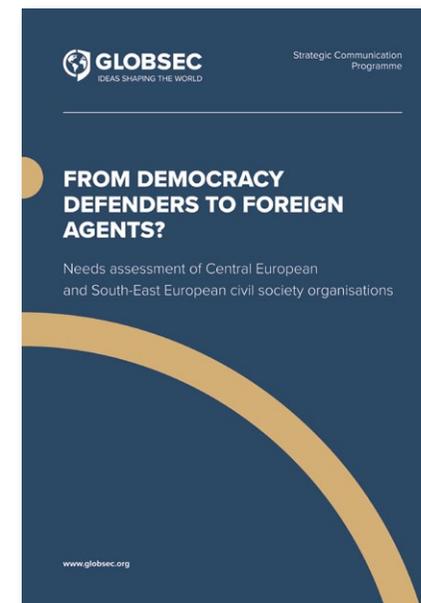
## HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

Eight partner organisations conducted interviews with civil society organisations to identify their key obstacles and needs in the area of communication. This was accompanied by focus group discussions with students aged between 18 and 24 years and desk research on public attitudes and the disinformation landscape.

The results provide a unique combination of data and insights that enable readers to understand more deeply the dynamics of the region's civil society organisations and disinformation scene. Key findings also cast light on young people's use of the internet and social media.

It is anticipated that this data will help to shape future communication activities towards youth in the region, as well as more precise and targeted support for civil society organisations. The reports also emphasise the need for country-specific approaches from potential donors who should also take into consideration the different dynamics and complexities of the region.

To find out more, we encourage you to read our reports *From Democracy Defenders to Foreign Agents?* and *From Online Battlefield to Loss of Trust?* ●



# CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE DONORS AND STAKEHOLDERS: HOW TO IMPROVE REACH AND IMPACT

1. Provide communication training – the higher the communication capacities of the organisation, the wider the reach of their activities and impact.
2. Dedicate resources for graphic designing and social media tools – sponsored content, annual fees for graphic tools, license purchase of software for graphic development and video-creation.
3. Before providing resources for professional software, carry out training for relevant staff members in developing visual messaging/videos.
4. Provide long-term or annual grants focusing on the same issue. This enables organisations to develop capacity and expertise in a particular field, which they can pursue and build upon for several years.
5. Provide guidance to CSOs or their representatives on crisis management in case of cyberattacks, concerted media/information warfare attacks or massive coordinated activity by trolls or other hostile actors.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS: HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

1. Dedicate attention and energy to develop a communication strategy. Defining goals and milestones, as well as the means to reach them, will make it easier to communicate with the audience, also in the case of staff changes.
2. Develop a protocol for transfer of know-how and go-to documents for the next generation of your colleagues summarising your experience and lessons learned.
3. Identify and use free easy-to-use online content production tools, (canva.com, infogr.am, etc.).
4. Follow social media trends and updates by subscribing to digital marketing companies' newsletters – these often constitute a free and accessible source of tips, which can quickly maximize the reach of your outputs.
5. Establish cooperation with a PR/marketing agency or IT companies that are often capable of providing pro-bono tailored training.
6. Think big and try to connect and join forces with other actors from various social spheres – many institutions and actors might have similar goals.
7. Network – a lot of international initiatives whether on digital communication or debunking have been established in previous years – join their ranks and become involved in an international community.
8. Develop protection measures and crisis-management scenarios for cyber-attacks, concerted media/information warfare attacks or massive coordinated activity by trolls or other hostile actors.
9. Create your own blog on an already-established platform or online portal, which already has a large and constant number of visitors (e.g. Medium), where you can promote your outputs and attract many readers.

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For further information, please read our *From Democracy Defenders to Foreign Agents?* report available on our website. ●

# YOUNG PEOPLE: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND PERCEPTION OF DISINFORMATION

## 1. YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE REGION TEND TO DISTRUST THE MEDIA

Most of the young people in 8 countries analysed seem not to trust the media. They also claim to be always double-checking information before they believe a particular story to be true. When searching for information, the young prefer and use predominantly online sources – websites, news applications or social media platforms over traditional media as TV, radio or newspapers. News apps were a popular source of information for the young in a number of countries.

## 2. DOMESTIC MEDIA WERE MOSTLY PERCEIVED AS BIASED AND UNDER POLITICAL INFLUENCE

While a lack of trust in the media was a common conviction for young people in all countries, it is possible to observe some differences in the perceptions between domestic and foreign media. In general, the young were aware of political attempts to control domestic media and, thus, tended to have more trust towards media with foreign ownership, which, in their eyes, decreases the possibility of being biased towards certain political parties or governments. The Czech Republic was the only country in which the public broadcaster was perceived as very credible and independent. The foreign media was seen sceptically only by young Poles who doubted their ability to report accurately about domestic situation in their country.

## 3. YOUTH IS AWARE OF DISINFORMATION, BUT DOES NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND ITS SCOPE

While the young in all countries were aware of information manipulation activities and the intentional spread of disinformation, not all of them clearly and fully understand the scope of these activities' impacts.

Awareness was mainly demonstrated by young peoples' claims to double- or even triple-check information before deciding whether something is true or false. Similarly, mindfulness of clickbait headlines and avoiding stories with sketchy titles was also mentioned. The spread of intentionally misleading or biased information was not automatically connected, in the minds of young people, to foreign subversive efforts by external actors. On the contrary, disinformation and "fake news" were predominantly perceived solely in terms of actors seeking economic profit. In many countries though, the young are acquainted with information manipulation and propaganda from political representatives. This was noted especially in Hungary, Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnicity plays an important role in the perception of whether particular media is perceived as objective and trust-worthy. It was also the only country where hate speech was raised as a common issue lacking effective counter-measures.

**“You can tell one story in very different ways. It matters where you put the emphasis as it can alter your narrative.”**

## 4. DISTRUST IN THE SYSTEM LEADS TO PASSIVITY

Another finding is that young respondents lack interest in actively participating to make a difference in building up their societies. In some countries, we observed inherent distrust of media or politics. This distrust often leads the young to search for "alternative" news sources or explanations of political situations offered by disinformation outlets.

The young respondents generally claimed not to actively report disinformation on social media. What is more, Macedonian participants argued that ignoring disinformation reduced their reach. While seeing how easily false news can be spread on social media, the participants declared not to perceive social media platforms as a trustful source of information. Therefore, some admitted to being purposely cutting the time they spend on these platforms to limit their exposure to such content.

## 5. THERE ARE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF MEDIA LITERACY: SELF-PERCEPTION IS DIFFERENT TO THE REALITY

A significant difference between the young participants from 8 countries was observed in their media literacy and understanding of how information can be manipulated. A negative outlier among the countries were the young people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, who thought that videos or images give more credibility to information than a text vulnerable to manipulative interpretations. While the spread of disinformation via textual content is indeed easily achievable, image modifications and video adjustments to spread false or manipulated information is similarly common, with many examples to be found online. This notion was pointed out by young Serbs, who declared that modified videos are the hardest to verify and clearly identify whether they portray accurate information.

## 6. FRIENDS AND FAMILY ARE STRONG OPINION-SHAPERS

Friends and family members seem to play an important role in information verification. The respondents often claimed that if they did not know whether to trust a particular piece of information, they relied on the opinions of their friends/peers or family members. In all countries, information shared or commented on by friends was considered a respectable source for young people. Often, they admitted they started paying attention or attributing relevance to a piece of news only after seeing that it had been shared by their friends. In addition, the young people in Serbia declared to follow comments and online discussions to understand public perception.

## 7. DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES OVERLAP IN THE REGION

Narratives supporting anti-immigration, anti-European Union, anti-NATO; anti-multiculturalism and Western “decadence” are commonly spread in all 8 countries analysed. Disinformation narratives attempt to influence the geo-political orientation of these countries and to stir distrust of NATO and the EU. Furthermore, disinformation narratives utilise social-economic, historical or ethnic divisions and vulnerabilities of societies. Therefore, in Poland, anti-Ukrainian narratives are possible to observe: in Serbia, nationalistic and narratives supporting Orthodox values and culture are dominant and influential; in Bosnia and Herzegovina, disinformation narratives exploit on ethnic divisions and inherent distrust among the ethnic groups.

## 8. THE INTERNET IS THE YOUNGSTERS’ BEST FRIEND

Young people in all countries admitted spending several hours per day online. Google as a search engine and Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram and YouTube as social media platforms serve both as an important source of information and a space for social interaction to dominate the market of young minds in the countries analysed. Activity and presence on these platforms are linked to all aspects of their lives – their work, school, but also serve as a hobby. Accounts on several social media platforms were thus a natural means for the interviewed young to stay in touch with their peers, while the preferences of social media platforms changed with age and type of content young people shared online. While social media were still mentioned as an important source of information, the young generally claimed not to trust these platforms.

Young people were most interested in content that is funny and connected to their interests. The most common topics of interest mentioned are lifestyle, entertainment, sports, music and art. Many, however, also claimed to be using online sources to educate themselves and get practical tips.

## 9. FACEBOOK IS ON A DECLINE WHILE MESSENGER IS ON A RISE

Facebook has been among the most widespread social media platforms among the young since its enormous boost in popularity in early 2010’s. However, the discussions showed a decline of usage among younger respondents due to several factors.

Facebook was mostly named as one of the primary sources of information about events, organisations and current issues. For many, it is considered a necessity – the young use it as a tool for the exchange of information connected with their school or work, and use it as a platform for study groups. However, the young claimed either not to – or very rarely – share content on Facebook, although claiming they receive information from their friends who post and share content. This is a paradox, since the young claimed to often rely on information shared by their active friends, yet few admit to ever posting or sharing content. This further confirms the importance of friends and family in opinion-shaping and information consumption.

**“We have usually one friend who regularly shares [information] on Facebook.”**

Facebook Messenger was identified as the number one platform for the communication and exchange of information. Moreover, many participants stated they preferred to share news directly to friends through Messenger rather than posting things online on their walls. In fact, in some countries, Messenger was named as the most used social media platform.

Increased commercialisation of Facebook and the lack of transparency of its algorithms have significantly decreased the trust of the respondents towards this platform. Increasingly negative perceptions by young people towards Facebook were observed: being aware of “information bubbles” and the negative echo-chambers it can create, they are consciously – and increasingly – limiting their time spent on Facebook. Many participants in the discussions considered Facebook to be obsolete and criticised it for being “over-advertised” in terms of having too many ads appearing on the wall as posts, as well as in the videos. As a consequence, many young people in all countries characterized themselves as “passive” actors on this social media platform, or are considering to leave it completely.

**“I do not use Facebook because it has too many advertisements and things which do not interest me are constantly appearing.”**

## 10. YOUNG PREFER “REFRESHING AND PRIVATE” INSTAGRAM

Instagram was generally the first choice among younger high school students. Many prefer Instagram to Facebook due to its simplicity and clarity compared to the latter’s complicated algorithms and commercialisation. Instagram was often considered refreshing and innovative, and praised for its less politicised nature reflected in the topics that young people actively follow and seek out. In all countries, Instagram’s top topics were mostly connected to lifestyle and everyday life of public personalities and friends. Related to that, the platform was often regarded as more private where one can control what and whom to see relatively easily.

The perception of Instagram was, however, not unified across the countries analysed. Czech respondents were not favourable to it, because, according to their perception, its options and usability for multiple purposes were too limited. On the other hand, young Macedonians preferred Instagram to Facebook due to its simplicity. Young Hungarians thought of it as a more private and intimate social media platform. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, having an Instagram

account was perceived as a hobby. Some young Serbs declared to have up to 3 Instagram profiles with each having a different audience and purpose. Young Slovaks especially liked the short expiration time of Instagram Stories, which they often use to publish most intimate information and moments.

## 11. YOUTUBE IS A SOURCE OF FUN AND EDUCATION

While music and entertainment are predominant reasons why young people watch YouTube, this platform plays an important role in self-education in all countries analysed.

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For further information, please, read *From Online Battlefield to Loss of Trust?* report available on our website. ●



## PARTNERS

The research was conducted by the following organisations



ALFA Centar  
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**Montenegro**



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