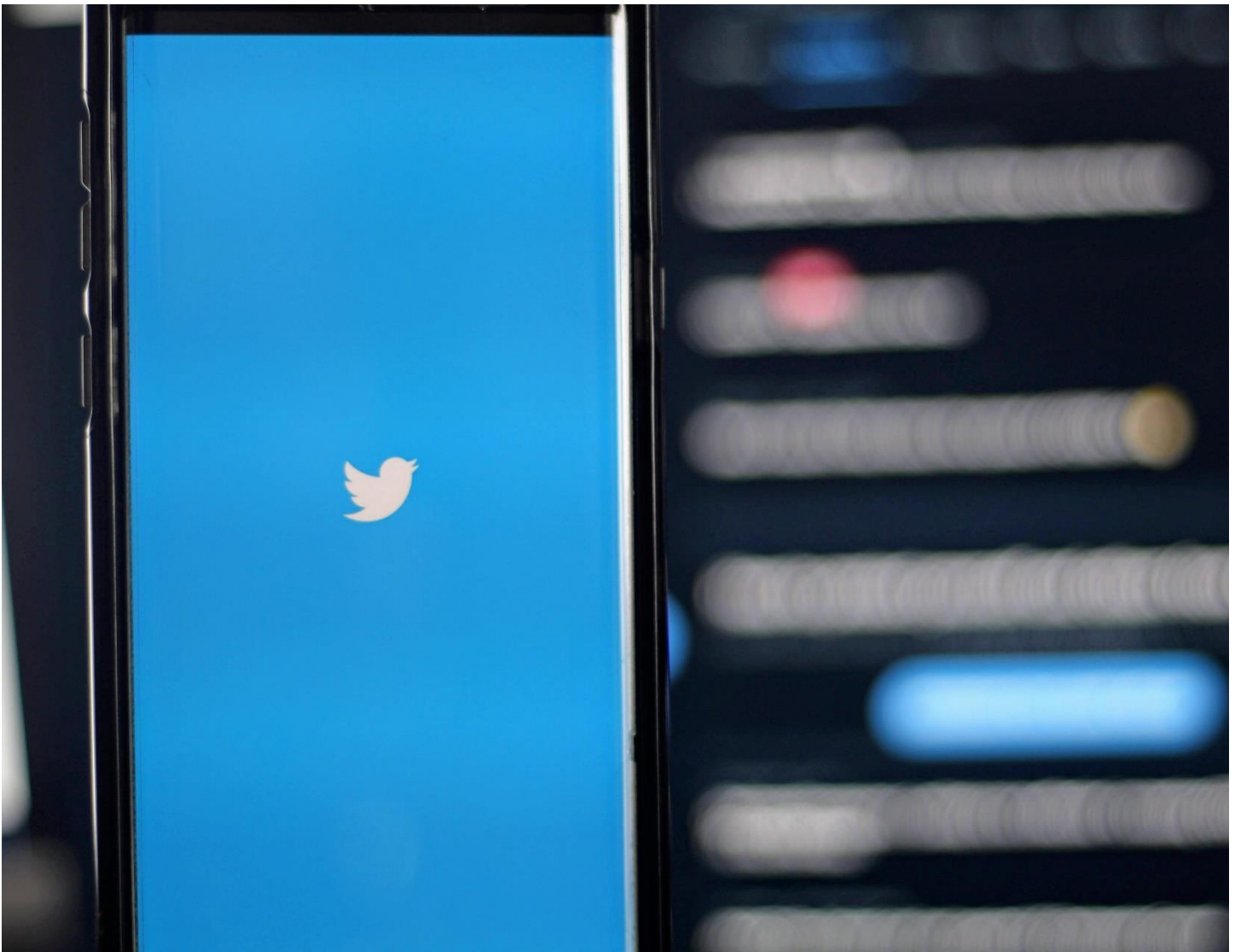


MEDIA COUNCILS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

YEAR IN REVIEW

BLANQUERNA FOUNDATION

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INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the objectives set for the Media Councils in the Digital Age project, the Digilab research group of the School of Communication and International Relations Blanquerna - URL has conducted a survey of 2,400 people. The countries represented in this questionnaire are Hungary, Belgium and Spain, with 800 representatives in each case. The sample has a correct representativeness in terms of gender and oscillates around 50% in all countries with also similar distribution by age. Regarding the age groups for each country, 7 points is the widest difference detected.

This questionnaire is part of a project funded by the European Commission to study citizens' perceptions on media and press councils, as well as media reporting on COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents' participation is completely anonymous and has involved an intervention of less than 15 minutes. The data collected has been processed in an aggregate way.

RESULTS

Awareness and knowledge about media/press councils

Results from the survey show that around **a third of respondents are aware of the existence of media/press councils** (see Figure 1), with small differences between Spain, Belgium and Hungary.

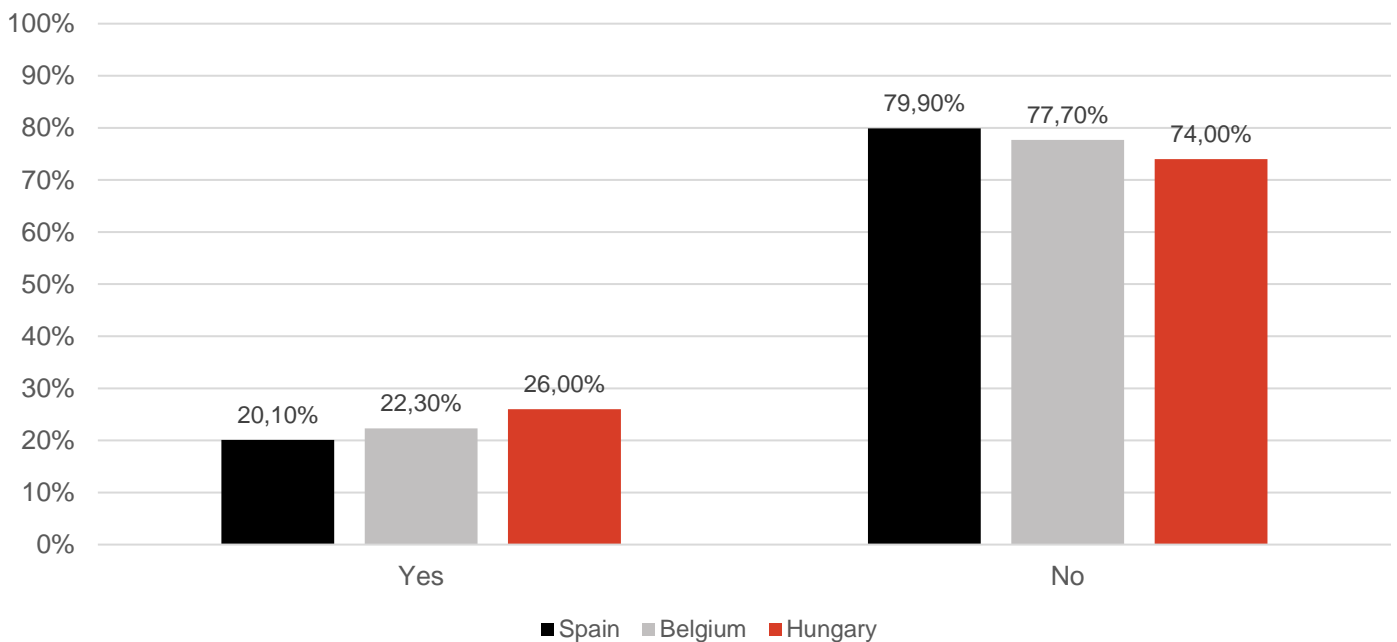


Figure 1. Do you know any media councils in your country?

Considering only those affirmative answers, it was asked also if respondents were aware that they can file complaints to report to media/press councils' journalistic information that violates the ethical principles of journalism (see Figure 2). More than 74% in each country answered no. Therefore, **there is a big number of citizens that despite being aware of the existence of media or press councils, they do not fully understand their function** or the role that citizens can play in relation with complaints related with ethical principles of journalism.

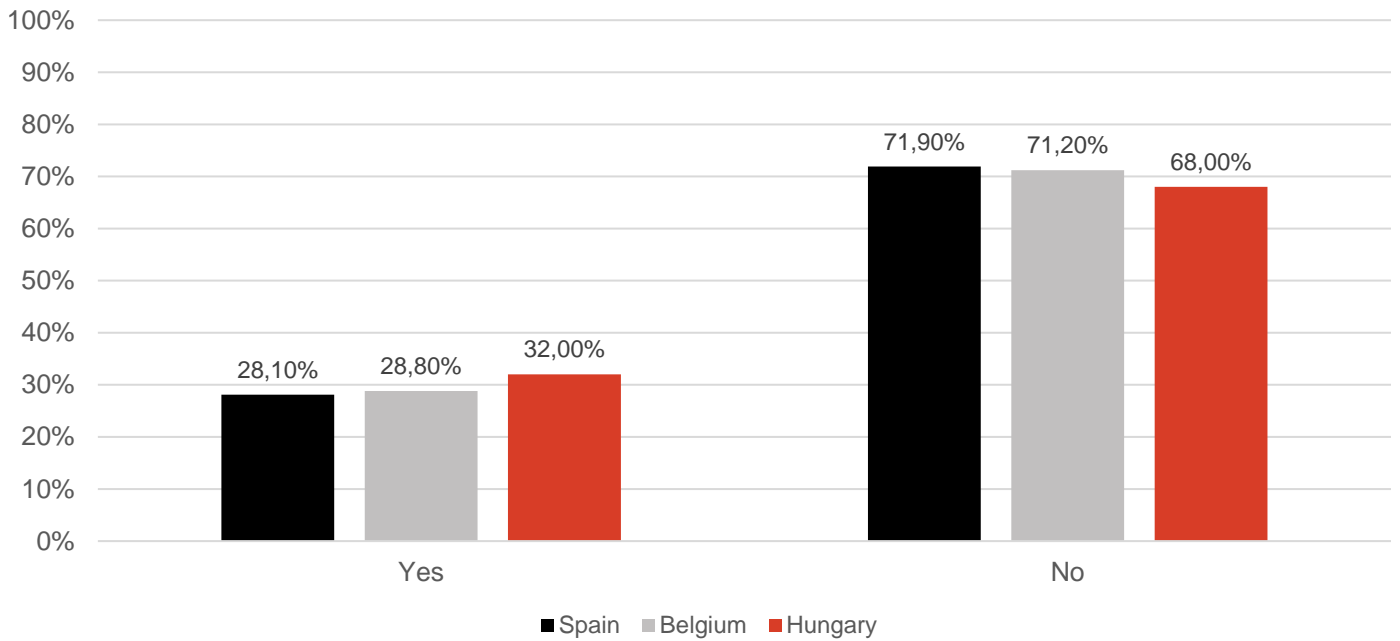


Figure 2. Do you know that you can file complaints to report to media councils’ journalistic information that violates the ethical principles of journalism?

In relation with how many citizens have filed a complaint, we got here really low numbers. For example, just a 6% of Belgians that answered “Yes” in the former question about if they were aware they could issue complaints have actually done it. In Hungary, just 1,4% (see Figure 3).

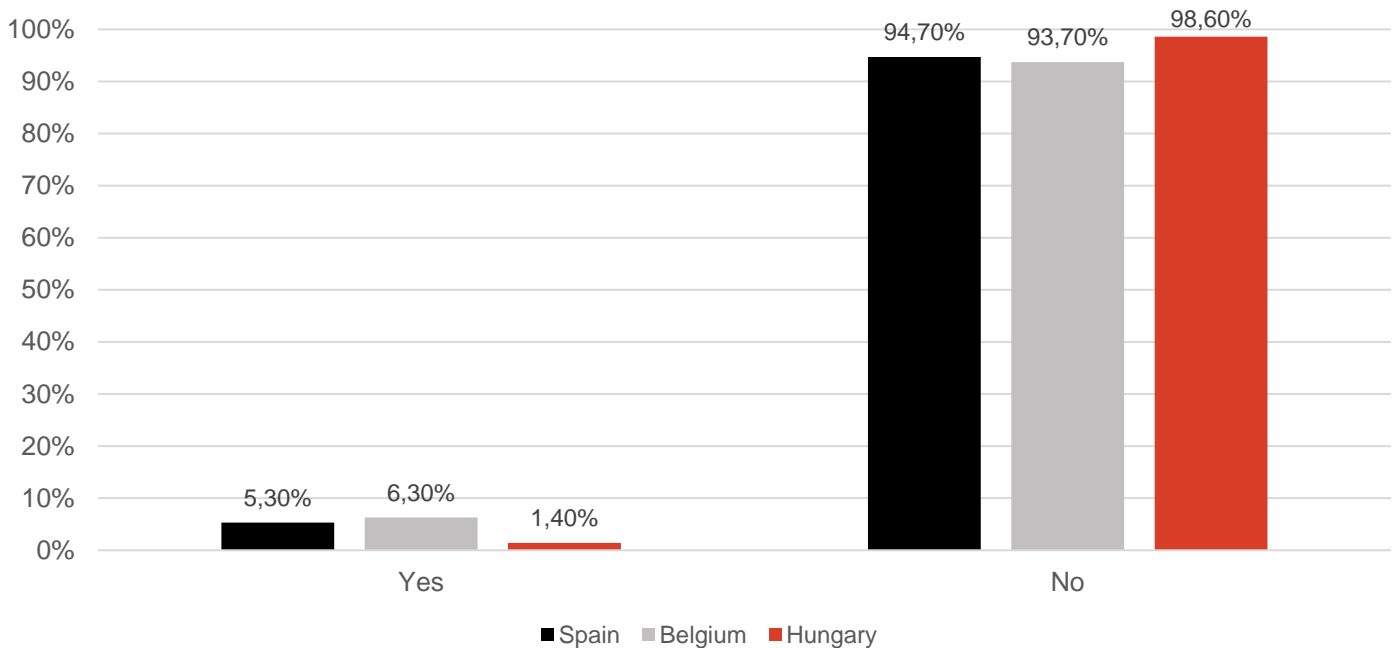


Figure 3. Have you ever done it?

INFORMATION AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Regarding how European citizens perceive media coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic we present here some of the key results. One of the most relevant findings was about how media coverage of COVID-19 implied a reduction on media trust. We asked here: 'Value from 1 to 5 the trust/credibility degree you grant to news media, with 1 being no trust or credibility and 5 high trust or credibility'. This question is divided into the perception regarding the situation before the pandemic, on the one hand, and nowadays, on the other.

Spain

The political situation in Spain is represented by a progressive coalition government made up of the PSOE (center left) and UP political parties (left). Since June 2018, the President of the Government is Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), after the governance of Mariano Rajoy and his right-wing party (PP) (2011-2018). Far right is increasing its presence in the country through the VOX party, and its president Santiago Abascal. For example, in last elections to govern the autonomous region of Castilla y León VOX has won 13 seats in 2022, 12 more than in 2019. The growth of far right can be also seen in the more extreme positions defended by other right wing parties, which contributes to a growing polarization.

Firstly, regarding the pre-pandemic situation (see Figure 4) Spaniard's trust levels show high percentages with a relevant number of citizens having a good or great confidence in the media (43,5%). However, as occurs with the rest of the countries considered, most responses fall in an intermediate zone (37,50%).

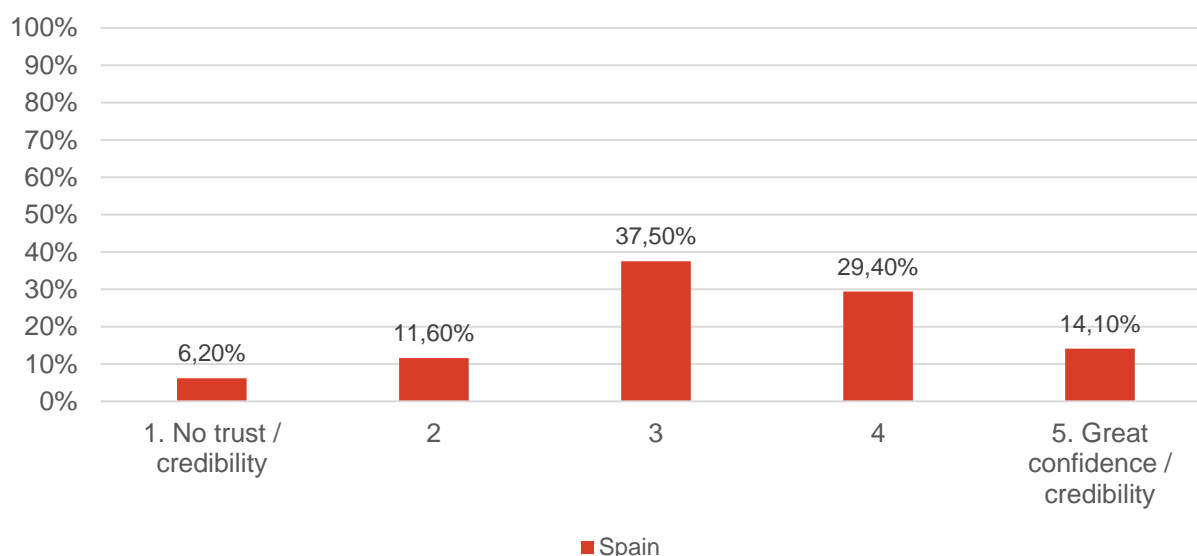


Figure 4. Value from 1 to 5 the trust/credibility degree you grant to news media, with 1 being no trust or credibility and 5 high trust or credibility (before the pandemic)

If we consider the situation nowadays, **we can see how distrust on news media has increased after COVID-19 outbreak** (see Figure 5). In this sense, the lowest levels of trust, represented by points 1 and 2, increase by 13.50% compared to the situation before the pandemic. If before the pandemic the overall trend was to moderately trust media, after the outbreak the situation has radically changed.

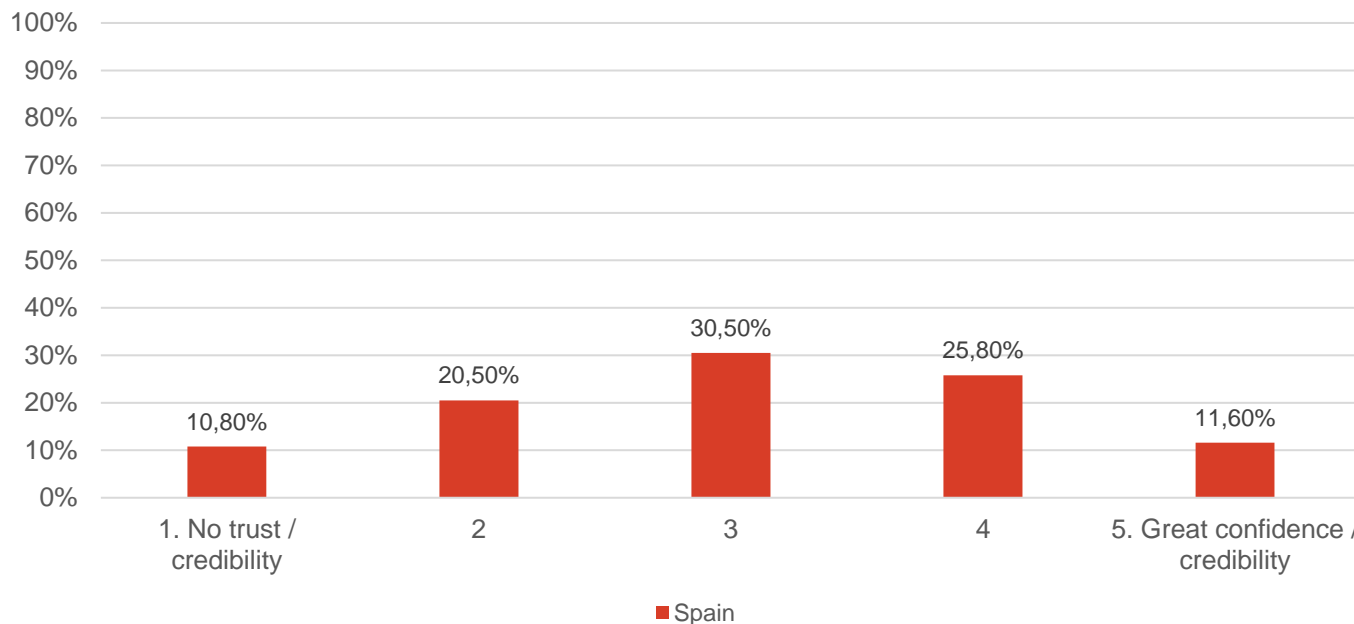


Figure 5. Value from 1 to 5 the trust/credibility degree you grant to news media, with 1 being no trust or credibility and 5 high trust or credibility (nowadays)

Analyzing more in detail citizens' perceptions on media reporting about COVID-19 pandemic, **respondents in Spain agree or strongly agree that media have offered too much information about the pandemic** (see Figure 6). As we can compare, citizens in three countries show similar opinions regarding if news media have provided too much information related to COVID-19, with Spaniards being the more critic in this regard. The respondents who have this perception the most are those who affirmed to be informed preferably through printed media.

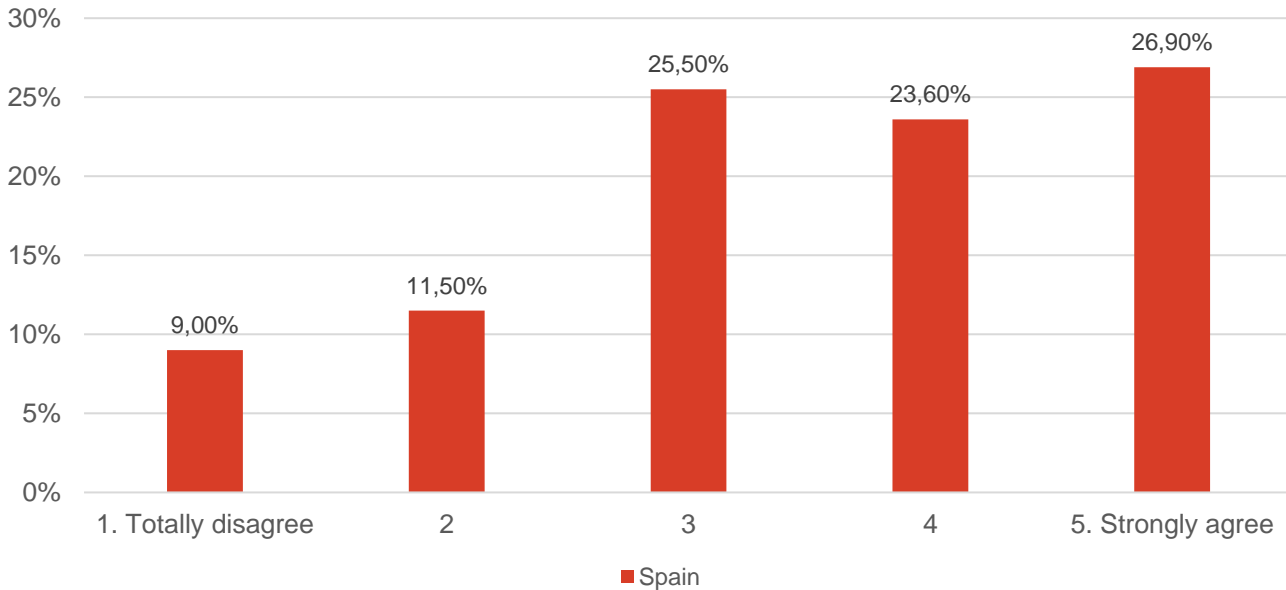


Figure 6. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: In general, the media has provided too much information about the coronavirus pandemic

Results are much more different among countries when we ask if the media have been conditioned by their editorial line when reporting on the coronavirus pandemic. In general terms, results show different patterns in each country. The people who think the most in that way are Spaniards (see Figure 7). According to the ideology of the respondents, Spaniards find few differences between the poles, with a consensus that ideology conditions when reporting on the coronavirus.

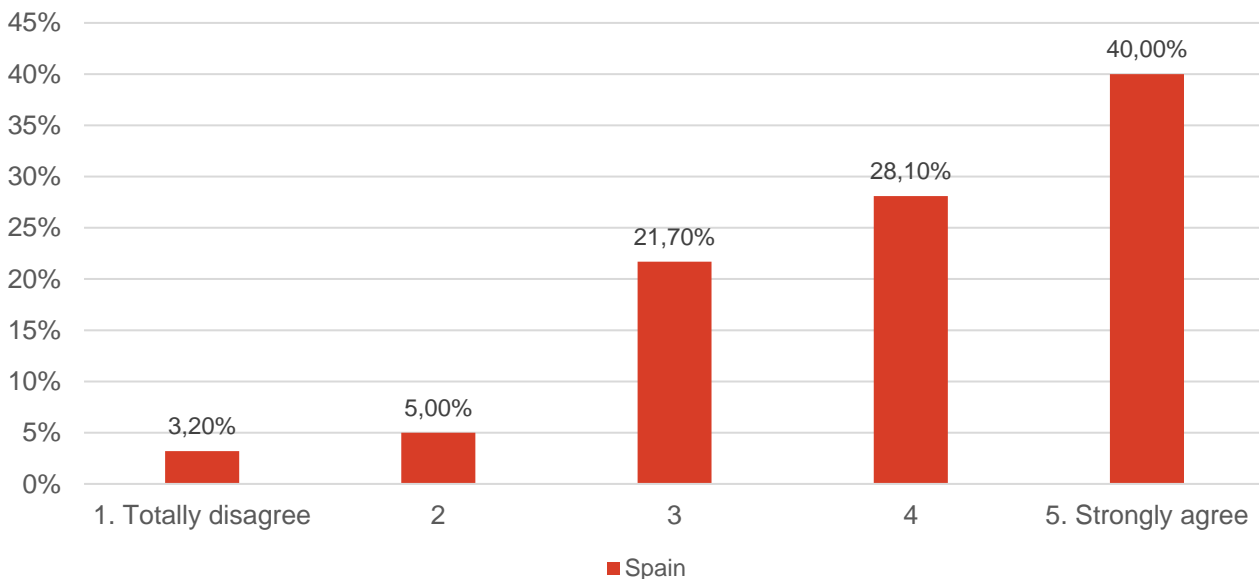


Figure 7. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: In general, the media have been conditioned by their editorial line (ideology) when reporting on the coronavirus pandemic

Another interesting aspect to consider is whether “In general, the media have treated the pandemic in a sensational way and unnecessarily generated social alarm” (see Figure 8). Most Spanish citizens agree or strongly agree with this statement. It is worth mentioning that this idea obtains relatively similar results in all age groups.

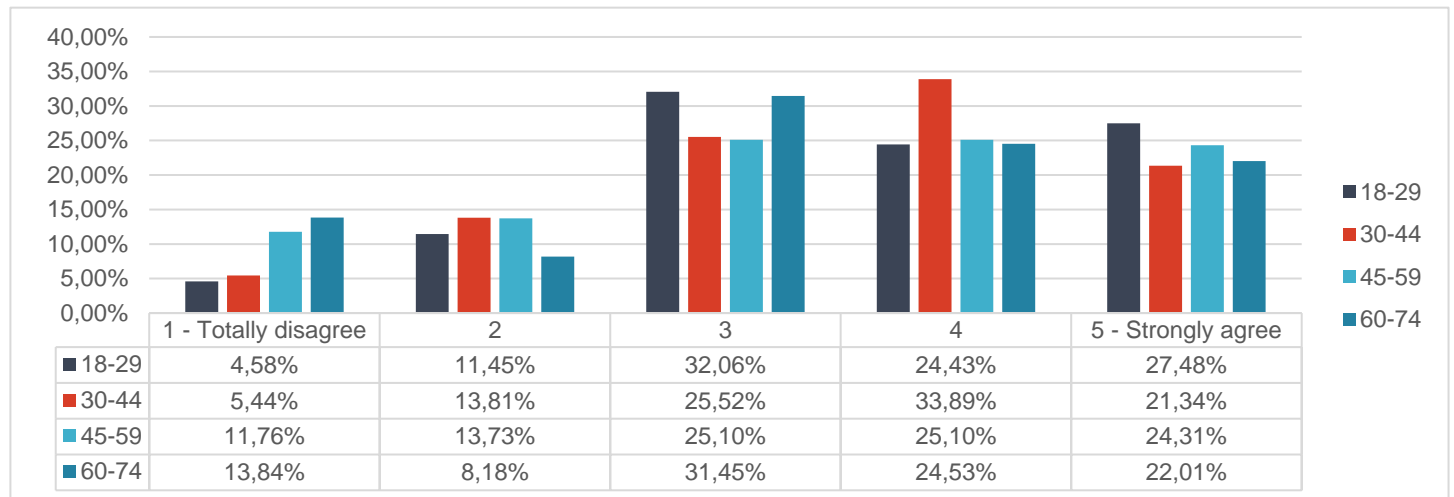


Figure 8. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: In general, the media have treated the pandemic in a sensational way and unnecessarily generated social alarm

Continuing with the relationship of citizen trust in the media, respondents were asked about the degree of agreement with the following statement: "The media and journalists have contributed to spreading denial speeches about COVID-19" (see Figure 9). More than 40% of Spaniards agree or strongly agree this question. This is the situation of more than 60% of those surveyed who say they obtain information preferably through the printed media. They are followed by those who use social networks as the main way of obtaining information, with more than 50% of those surveyed located between points 4 and 5.

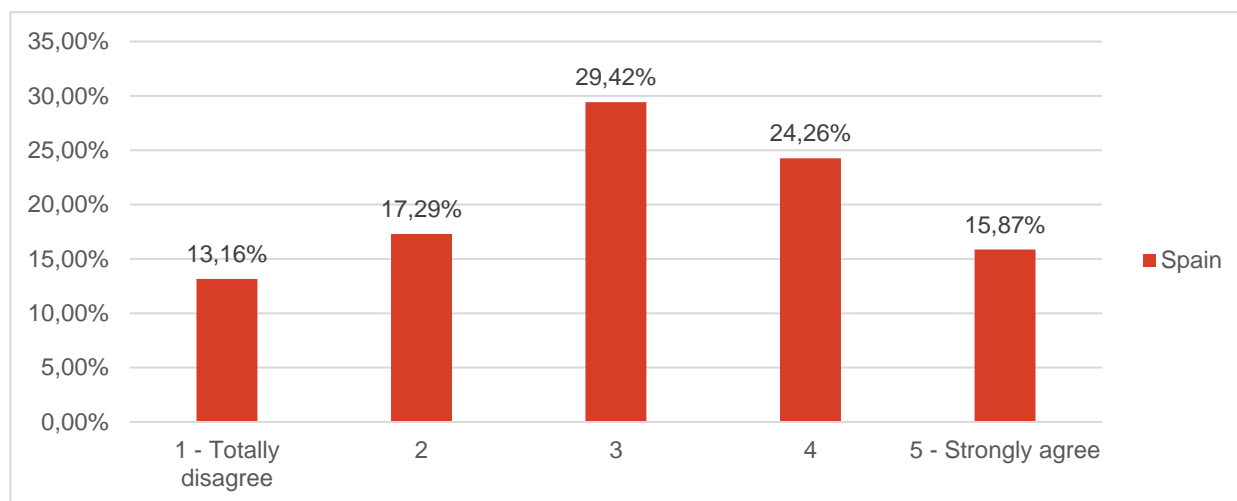


Figure 9. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: The media and journalists have contributed to spreading denial speeches about COVID-19

Belgium

Belgium is a federal constitutional monarchy in which the king is the head of state and the prime minister, Alexander de Croo, Flemish liberal, is the head of government in a multi-party system. This situation occurred in September 2020, after 16 months of a caretaker government. Through a coalition of seven parties, the current government sided with the Flemish nationalists who won the majority in Flanders.

In relation with media trust before COVID-19 outbreak Belgium shows high levels of trust, with 44.6% of its citizens in the higher cohorts (values of trust 4 or 5). A moderate level of trust gathers 34% of respondents while around 17% opted to respond they distrust media.

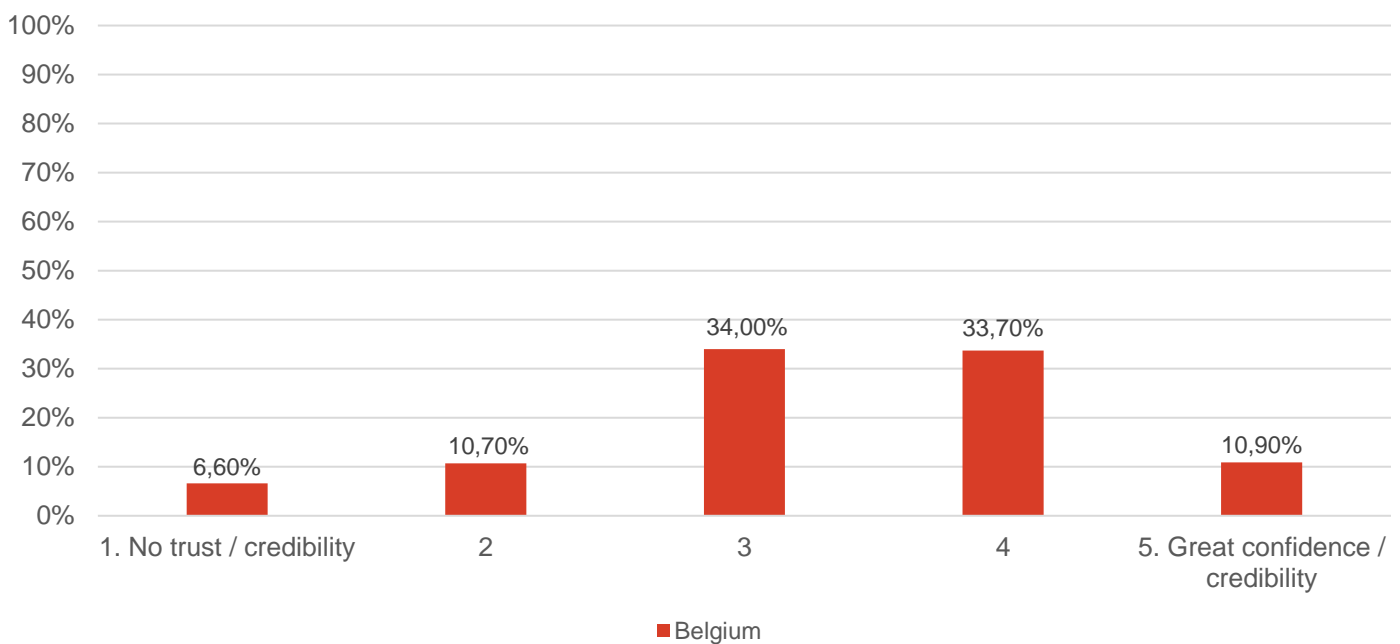


Figure 10. Value from 1 to 5 the trust/credibility degree you grant to news media, with 1 being no trust or credibility and 5 high trust or credibility (before the pandemic)

On the other hand, this perception of trust in the news media by the respondents also varies after the COVID-19 outbreak (see Figure 11). In this sense, the lowest level of trust gets a score of 24.70%. This figure implies an increase of 7.40% in relation to the opinion prior to the pandemic. The moderate level of trust, represented by value 3 loses also around 6%.

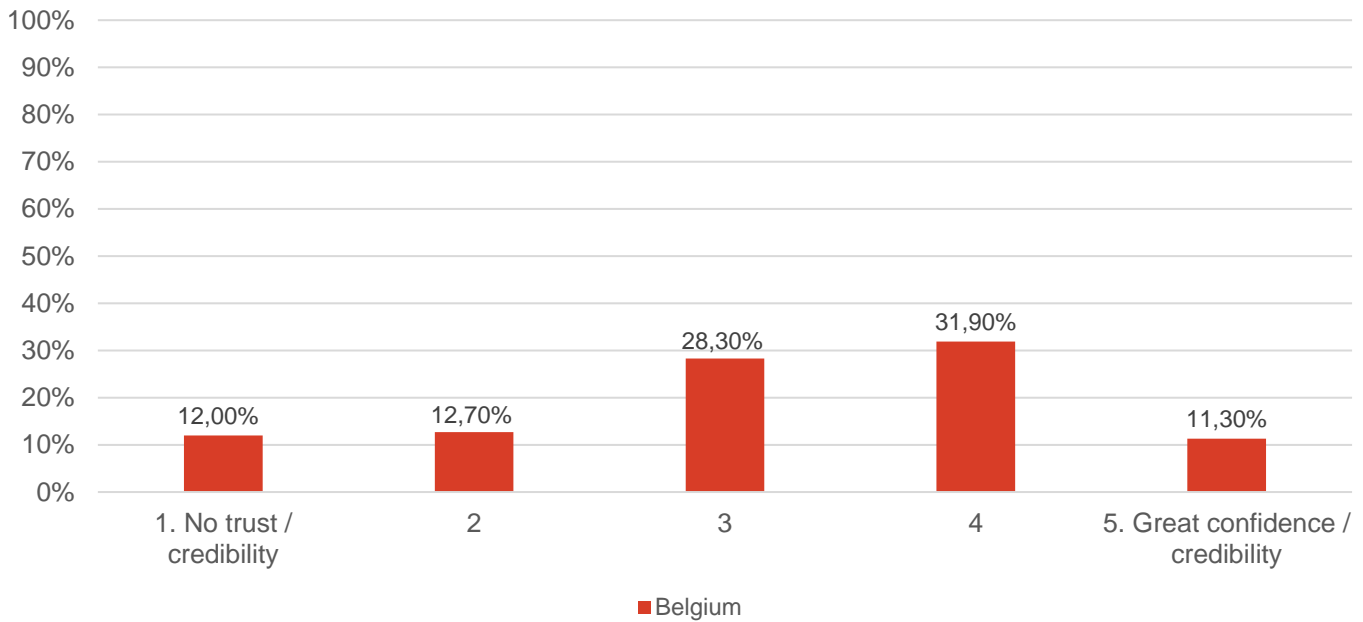


Figure 11. Value from 1 to 5 the trust/credibility degree you grant to news media, with 1 being no trust or credibility and 5 high trust or credibility (nowadays)

This change of mind by Belgian citizens can be corroborated by the following statements. More than 52% think that, in general, the media has provided too much information about the coronavirus pandemic (see Figure 12). In this sense, this change is carried out by those who most consume 'other television programs' rather than television news, with more than 70%. They are followed by those whose news consumption is produced preferably by social networks, with more than 60%.

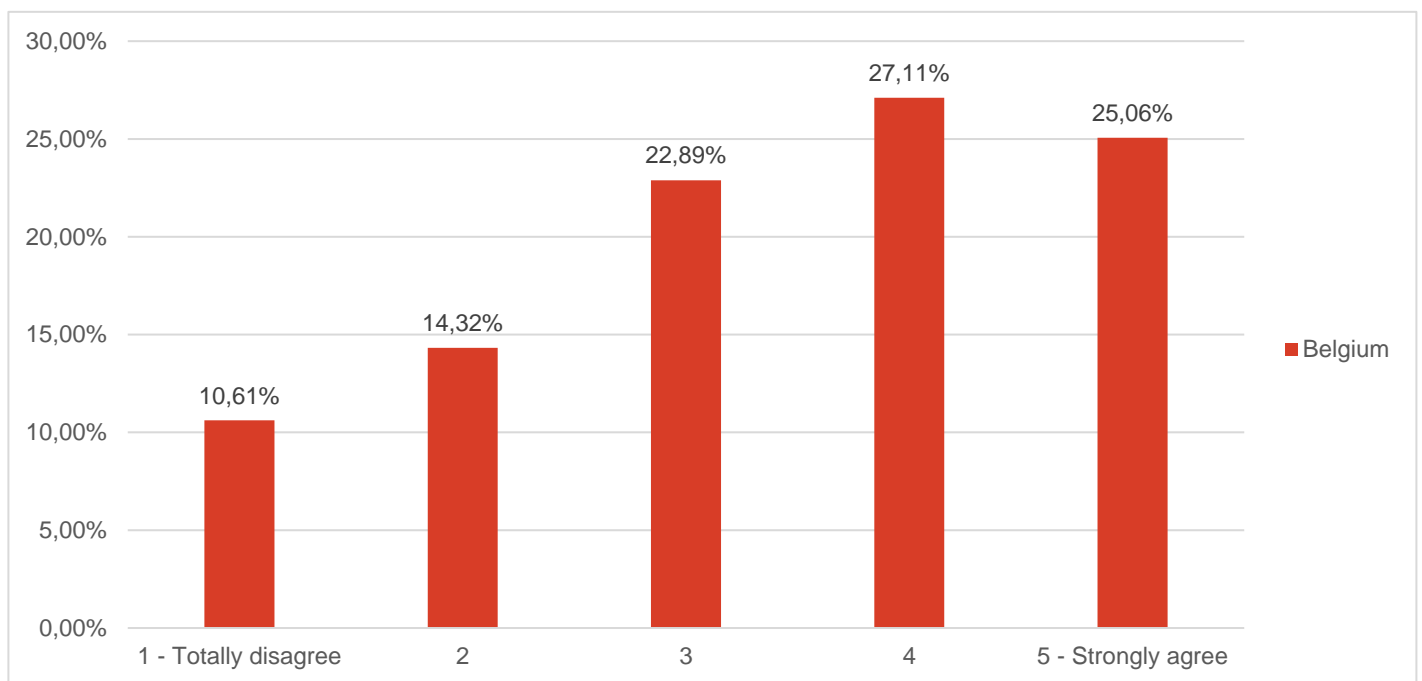


Figure 12. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: In general, the media has provided too much information about the coronavirus pandemic

Regarding **if media have been conditioned by their editorial line when reporting on the coronavirus pandemic**, in general terms, almost 50% of Belgians agree or strongly agree with this statement (see Figure 13). However, 17.60% disagree or totally disagree, which implies more than 9 points compared to the Spanish case. According to the ideology of the respondents, Belgians who are ideologically at the extremes on a score of 1 to 7 obtain similar results. In this sense, ideology does not seem to affect this perception.

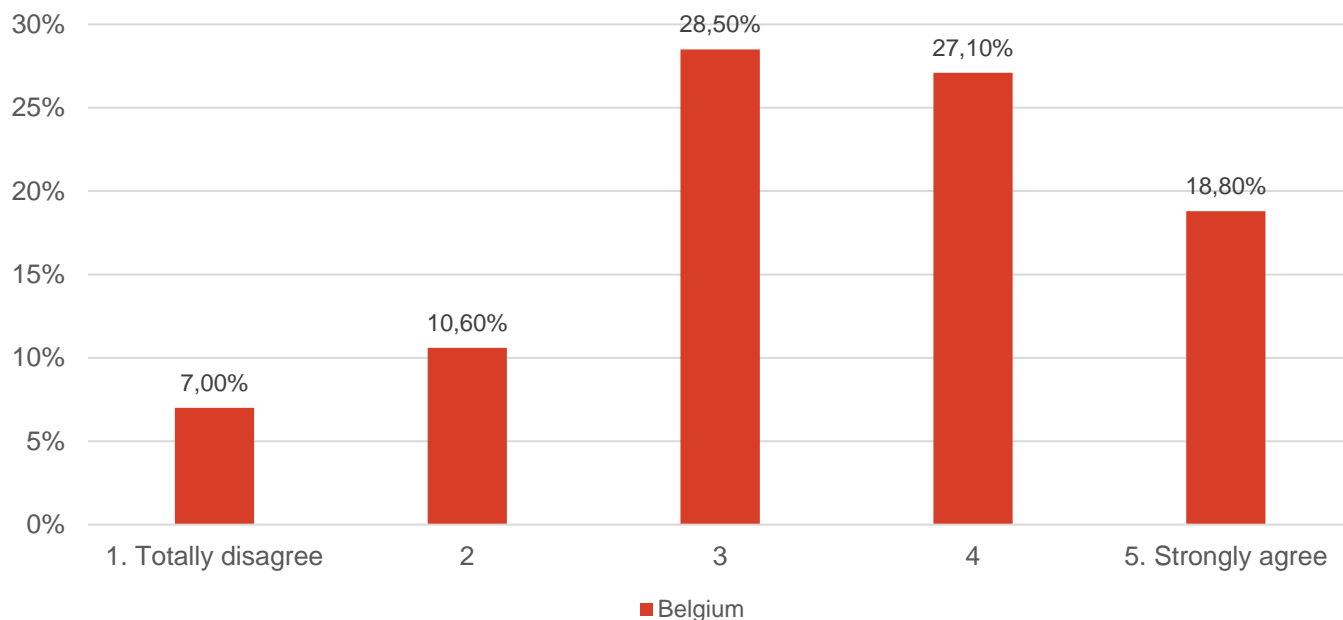


Figure 13. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: In general, the media have been conditioned by their editorial line (ideology) when reporting on the coronavirus pandemic

Other aspect that has been considered is whether “In general, the media have treated the pandemic in a sensational way and unnecessarily generated social alarm” (see Figure 14). Most Belgians citizens agree or strongly agree with this statement. In this sense, the age groups that represent the youngest and the oldest show a lower percentage in terms of their assessment at intermediate levels.

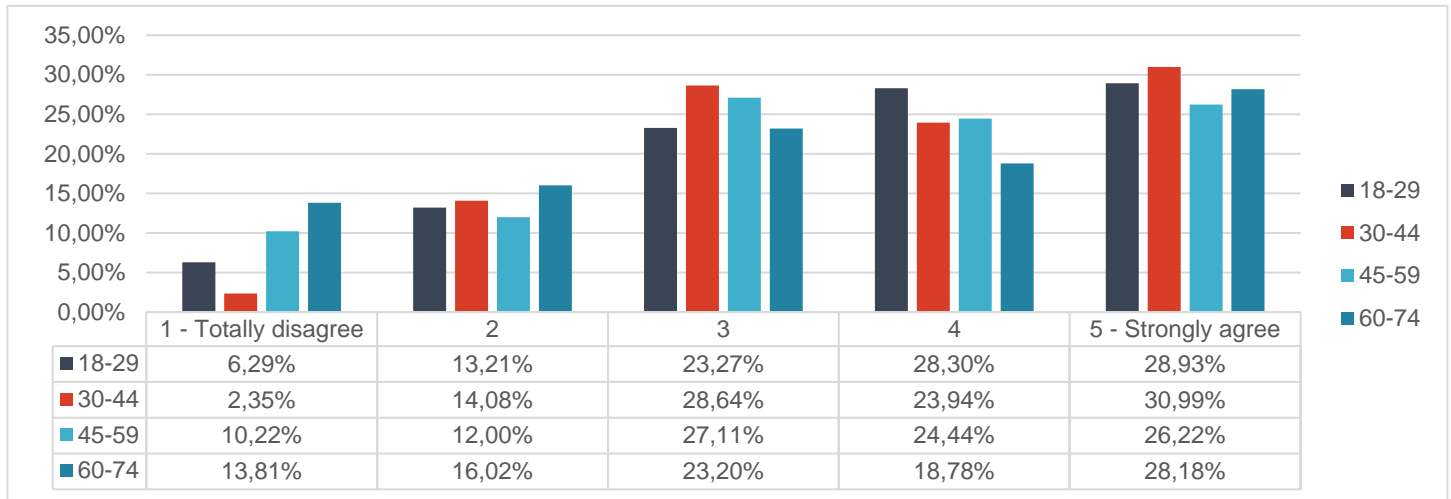


Figure 14. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: In general, the media have treated the pandemic in a sensational way and unnecessarily generated social alarm

Another statement that serves to understand the perception of Belgian citizens is the degree of agreement with the following statement: "The media and journalists have contributed to spreading denial speeches about COVID-19" (see Figure 15). As in the case of Spain, just over 40% of Belgians agree or strongly agree this question. This is the situation of more than 55% of those surveyed who say they obtain information preferably through the social networks. They are followed by those who use television news and digital newspapers as the main way of obtaining information, about 42% in both cases.

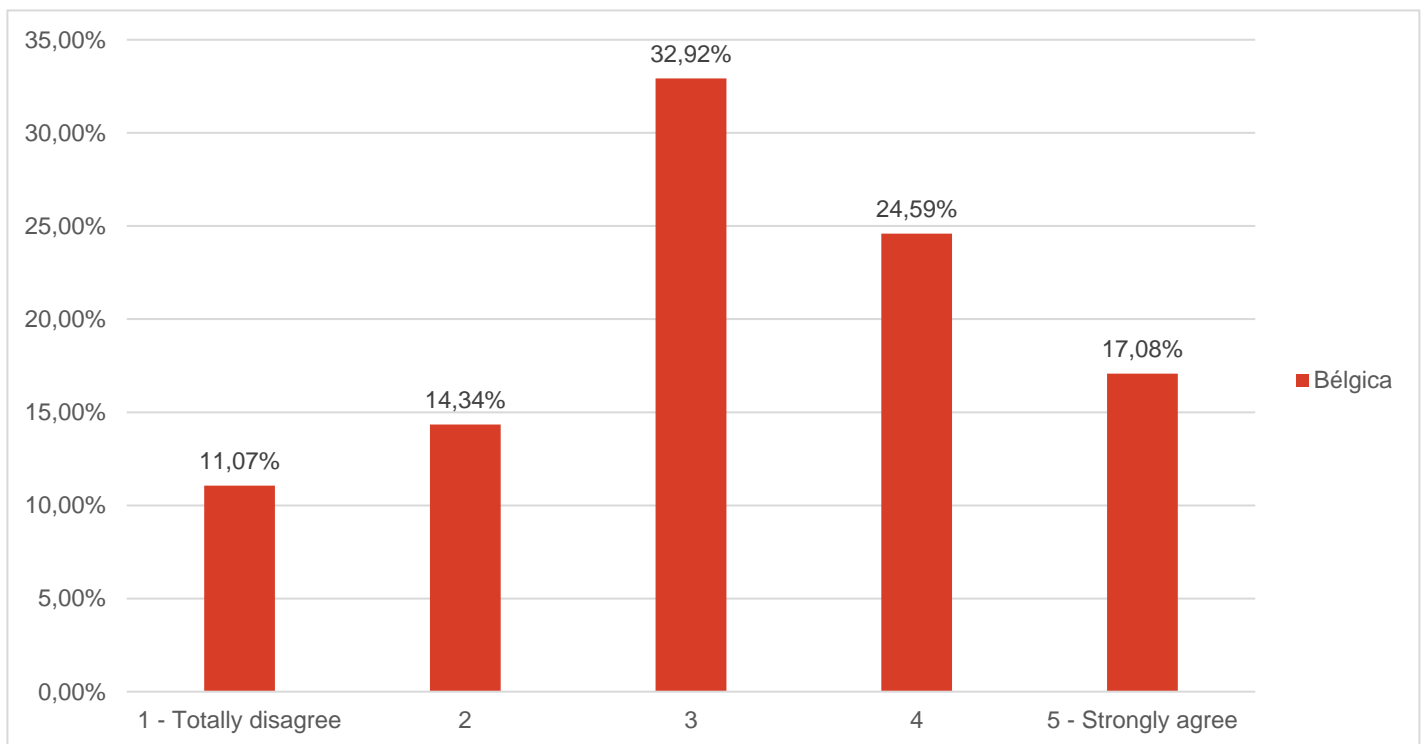


Figure 15. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: The media and journalists have contributed to spreading denial speeches about COVID-19

Hungary

Hungary is a parliamentary constitutional democracy. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, of the ruling conservative nationalist Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union party, won his third consecutive election in April 2018. Viktor Orbán is one of the most controversial heads of government in Europe due his anti-immigration and anti-minority policy, as well as his challenges to the EU during the pandemic.

Hungary is the country that shows lower levels of trust before the pandemic (see Figure 16). This translates into just 22.90% of respondents trusting media, while 46.80% positioned themselves in the intermediate option of trust, value 3.

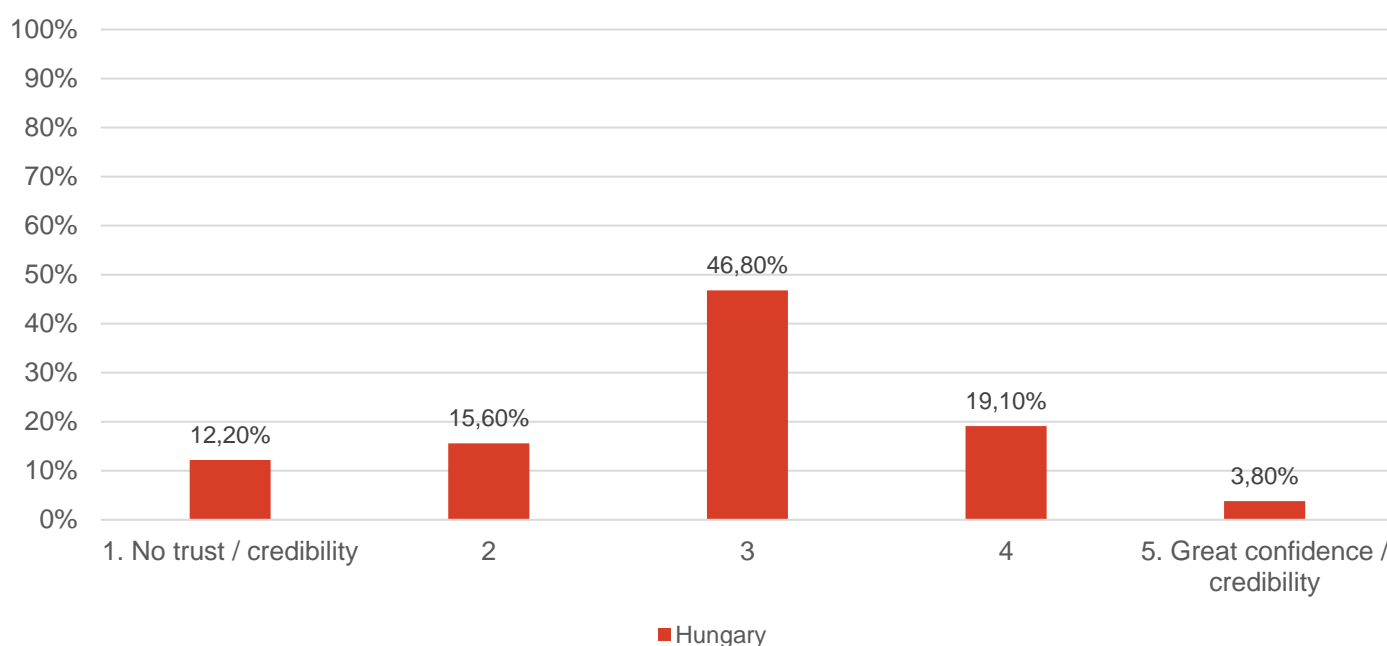


Figure 16. Value from 1 to 5 the trust/credibility degree you grant to news media, with 1 being no trust or credibility and 5 high trust or credibility (before the pandemic)

Regarding the changes of mind generated in media trust after the pandemic, 40% of citizens distrust news media (see Figure 17). This represents an increase in distrust of 11.20%.

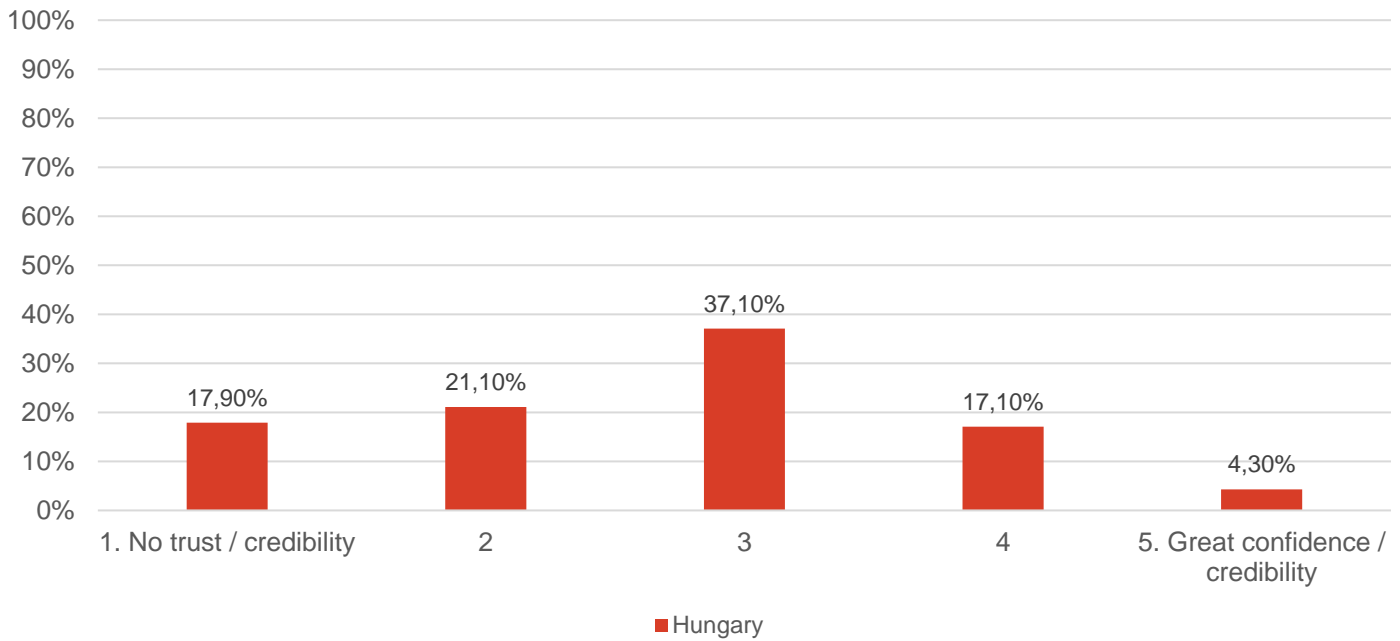


Figure 17. Value from 1 to 5 the trust/credibility degree you grant to news media, with 1 being no trust or credibility and 5 high trust or credibility (nowadays in Hungary)

As for whether the media has provided too much information about the coronavirus pandemic (see Figure 18), Hungary is the country with the highest degree of disagreement with this statement with 32.10%.

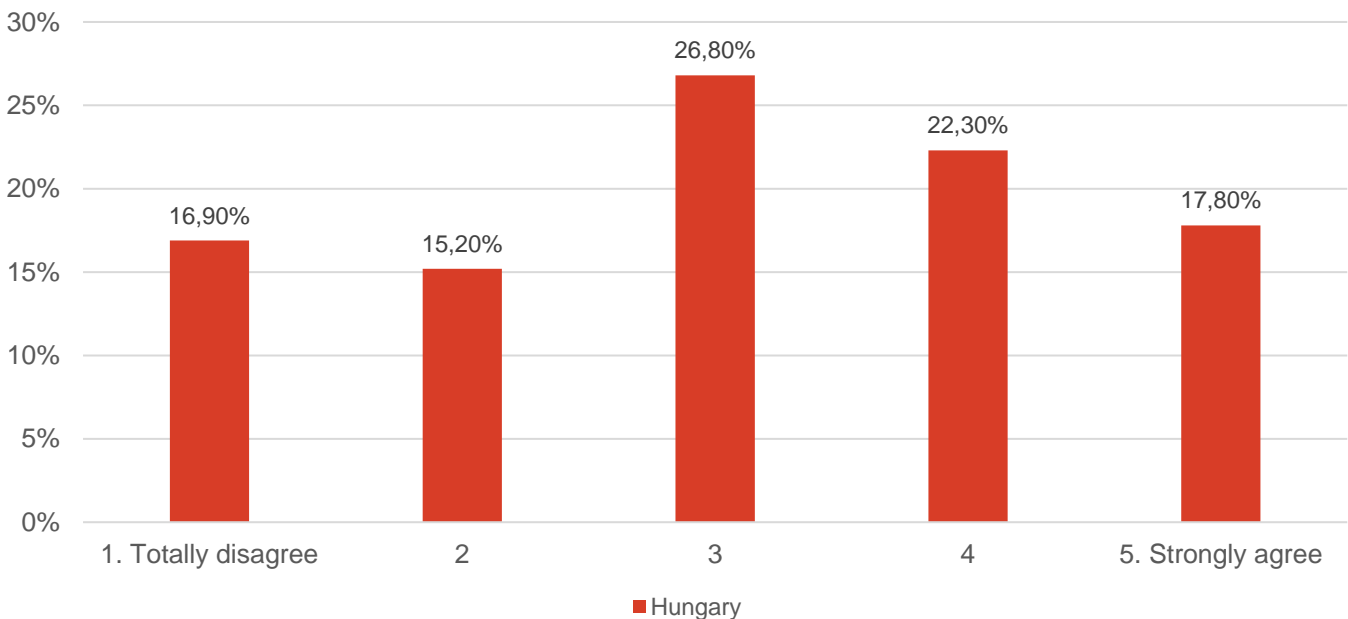


Figure 18. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: In general, the media has provided too much information about the coronavirus pandemic

As with Spain, 58.70% of Hungarians agree or strongly agree with the statement that the media have been conditioned by their editorial line (ideology) when reporting on the coronavirus pandemic (see Figure 19). In this sense, 30.23% of those who identify ideologically with the extreme left say they do not agree at all. The assessment of those who are ideologically positioned on the extreme right in this regard is 21.15%. In this sense, the difference is not as evident as it appears with respect to the 26.92% of those who identify ideologically with the extreme right and who say they totally agree, compared to the 4.65% of those who ideologically position themselves in the extreme left. Political polarization in this sense is an important aspect to take into account, related with the right wing government and its positions during the outbreak. No notable differences have been detected in terms of the type of preferred media consumption.

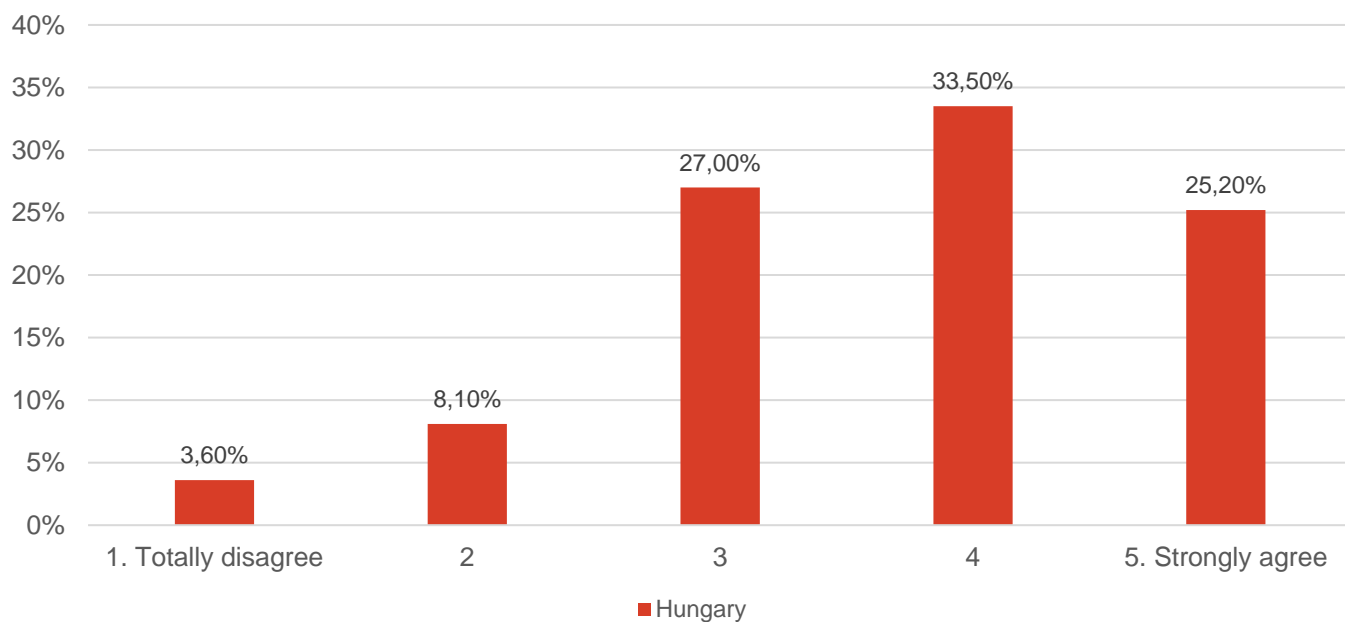


Figure 19. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: In general, the media have been conditioned by their editorial line (ideology) when reporting on the coronavirus pandemic

Most Hungarians citizens agree or strongly agree that “In general, the media have treated the pandemic in a sensational way and unnecessarily generated social alarm” (see Figure 20). In this sense, Hungary represents the case with the highest percentage of strongly agree in all age groups.

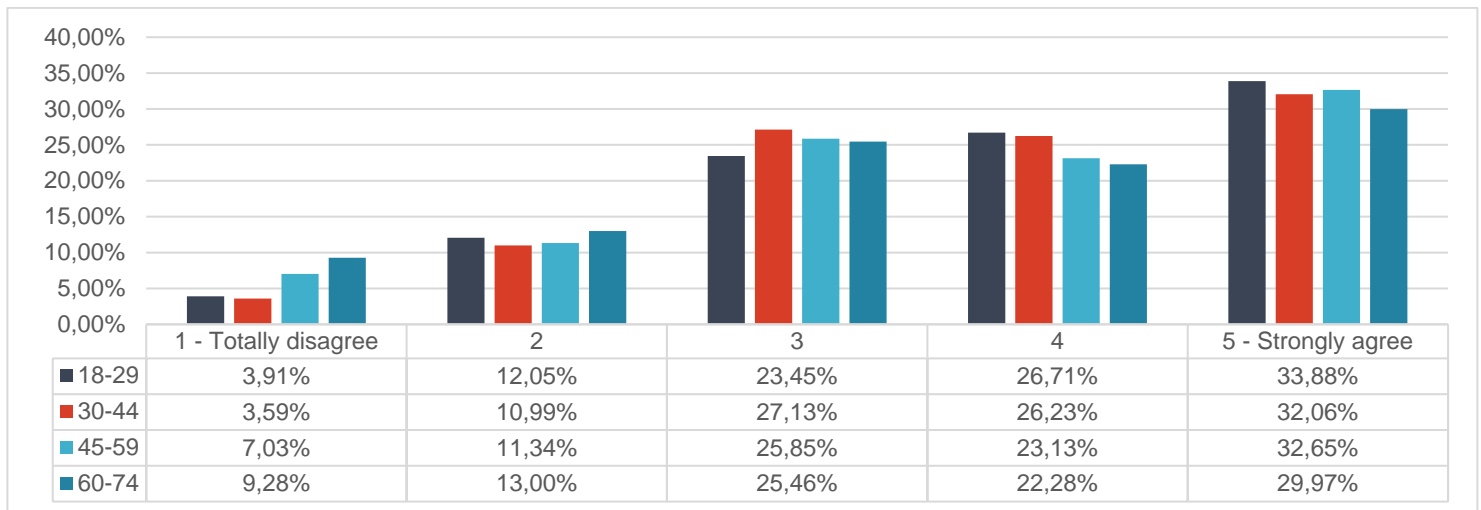


Figure 20. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: **In general, the media have treated the pandemic in a sensational way and unnecessarily generated social alarm**

As is the case in Spain and Belgium, around 40% of those surveyed agree or strongly agree with the statement that "The media and journalists have contributed to spreading denial speeches about COVID-19" (see Figure 21). Unlike in the other countries, this opinion is more relevant in those that are informed mainly through the radio, followed by those that do so through printed newspapers. In this sense, it is worth highlighting the role of traditional media and the perception of these by Hungarian citizens.

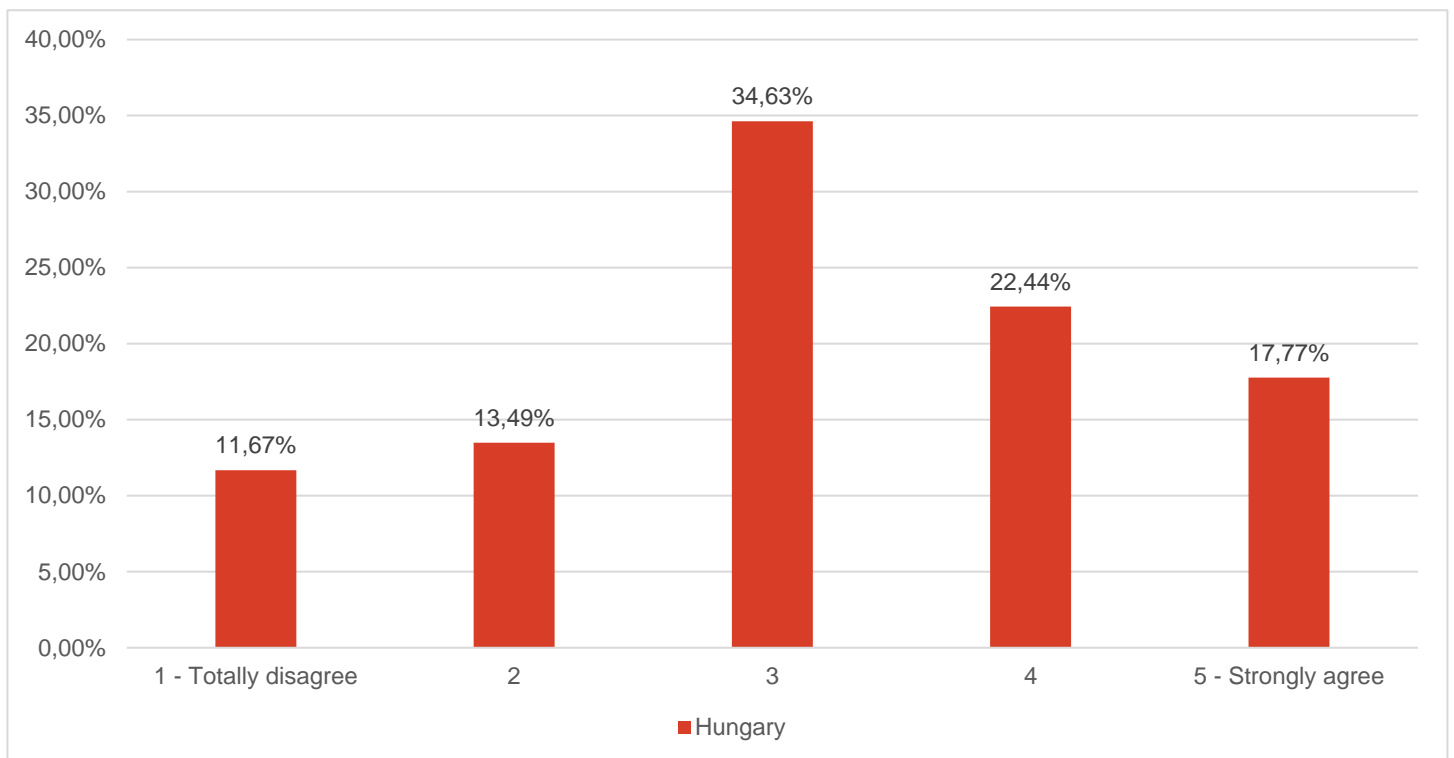


Figure 15. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 not agreeing at all and 5 strongly agreeing, the following statement: **The media and journalists have contributed to spreading denial speeches about COVID-19**

Once the data corresponding to each country has been analysed, we now undertake a comparative study between the results obtained by different questions applied to the surveys in Spain, Belgium, and Hungary.

In this way, respondents were asked as follows: "Value from 1 to 5 the level of credibility/trust that you gave to the media before the pandemic." This same question applied to the current situation. The answers that arose to both questions have been correlated with the following question: "On the following ideological scale, where do you stand?" Respondents had to mark their political orientation on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being the maximum expression of the political left and 7 the maximum expression of the political right.

Ideology seems to be a relevant factor in shaping citizens' attitudes towards news media before and after the pandemic, playing different roles in each country. Figures 20 and 21 represent these trends.

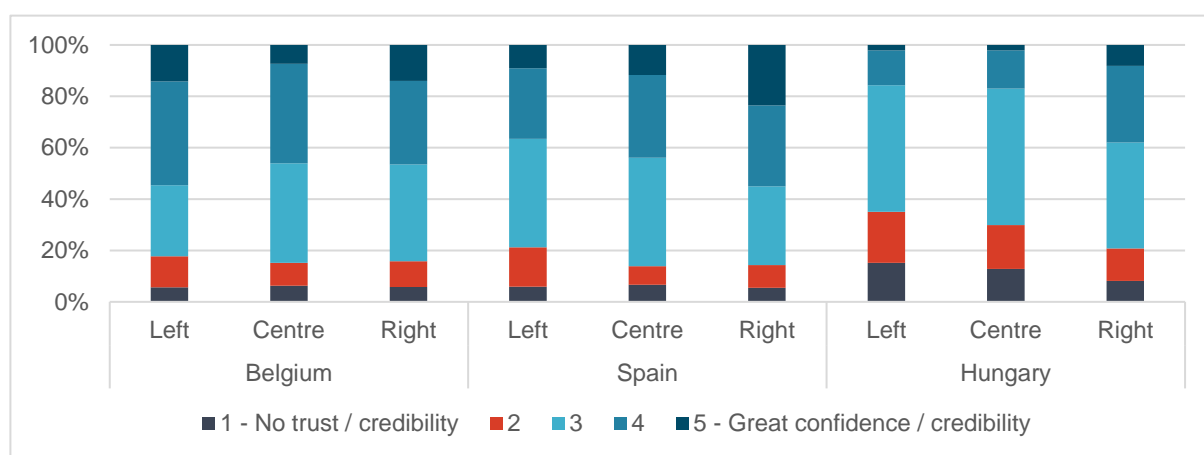


Figure 20. Trust on news before pandemic by country and ideology

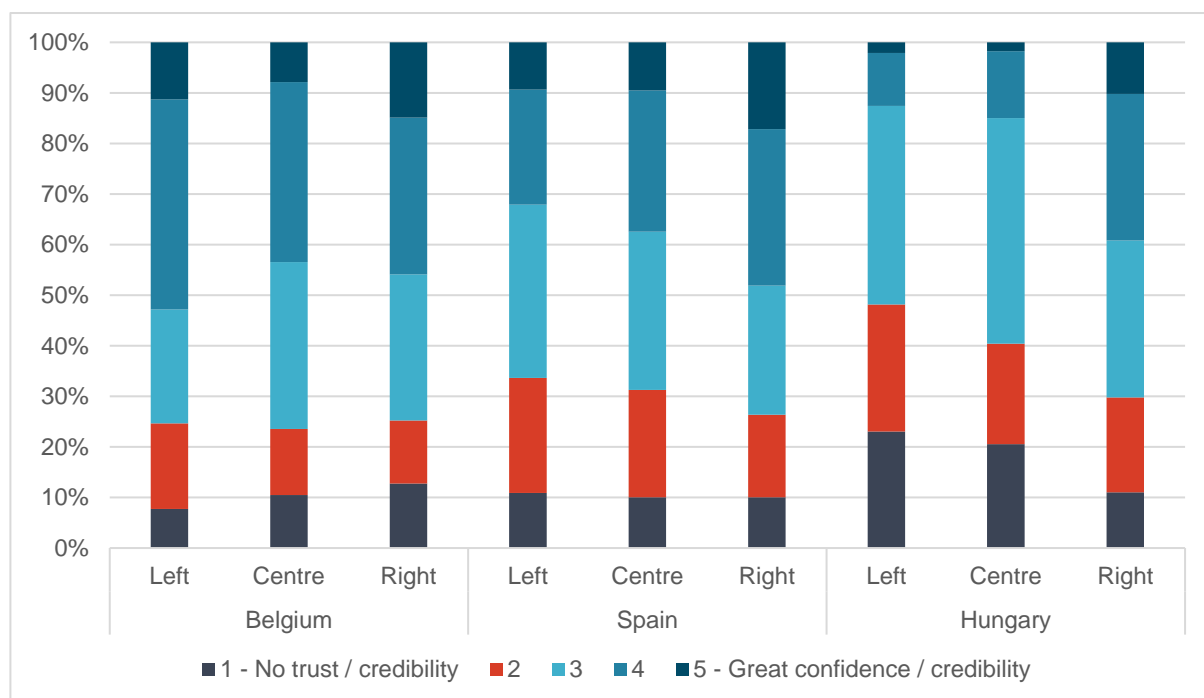


Figure 21. Trust on news after pandemic by country and ideology

Respondents were asked to rate from 1 to 5 the level of credibility/trust they gave to the media before the pandemic and nowadays. For practical purposes, the results have been grouped into three self-exclusive categories. Regarding ideology and trust on **media in Spain before the pandemic** (see Figure 20), **there is a great difference between those citizens ideologically situated on the far right and those on the far left.** Those on the right have a lot of confidence in media, while those on the left are totally or partially suspicious. In Belgium the situation is different. People on the left are as confident as they are distrustful. In Hungary the maximum levels are in the middle. However, there are also differences between left and right. The left distrusts while the right show much more confidence.

If the situation is analyzed after COVID-19 outbreak (see Figure 21) we can see how in Spain people on the left distrust news media more than before the pandemic while right-wing people decline in their high levels of trust. Similarly, in **Belgium** the level of distrust in the left increases compared to the situation before the pandemic, but **remains a country where trust on news media remains much higher than the others. Lastly, Hungary is the country where trust on news media by ideology after the pandemic shows much different behavioral patterns:** the loss of confidence increases somewhat in general terms, while the level of confidence increases in those whose ideology is positioned on the right, being the left much less trustful. This may point towards a more polarized public sphere where citizens on the left tend to see news media as ideologically positioned. In this sense, it can be argued that trust in the media at an ideological level is related to the government of each country.

Results from Belgium shows that those with a right-wing ideology strongly agree that reporting has been ideologically biased while in Hungary, however, the contrary is the case, being left wing citizens the ones who tend to support the most this statement.

Ideology is an important predictor of perceptions about the impact of disinformation.

Another key finding of our survey has been in relation to the impact of COVID-19 related disinformation. As it can be seen in Figure 22 most citizens (around 70%) in Spain and Hungary affirms to have received such content. This is much lower on Belgium, where just 50% affirms so.

No differences by gender have been found, and in all countries, we have seen that the perception to have received disinformation content diminishes by age, with younger citizens (18-29) tending to affirm to have received more. If studied by ideology, in Spain and Hungary those more at the left tend to perceive higher levels of disinformation while in Belgium are those more to the right, although in all ideological positions Belgium shows much lower levels of perception on the impact of disinformation. In all countries statistics tests show that ideology is an important predictor of perceptions about the impact of disinformation (see Figure 23).

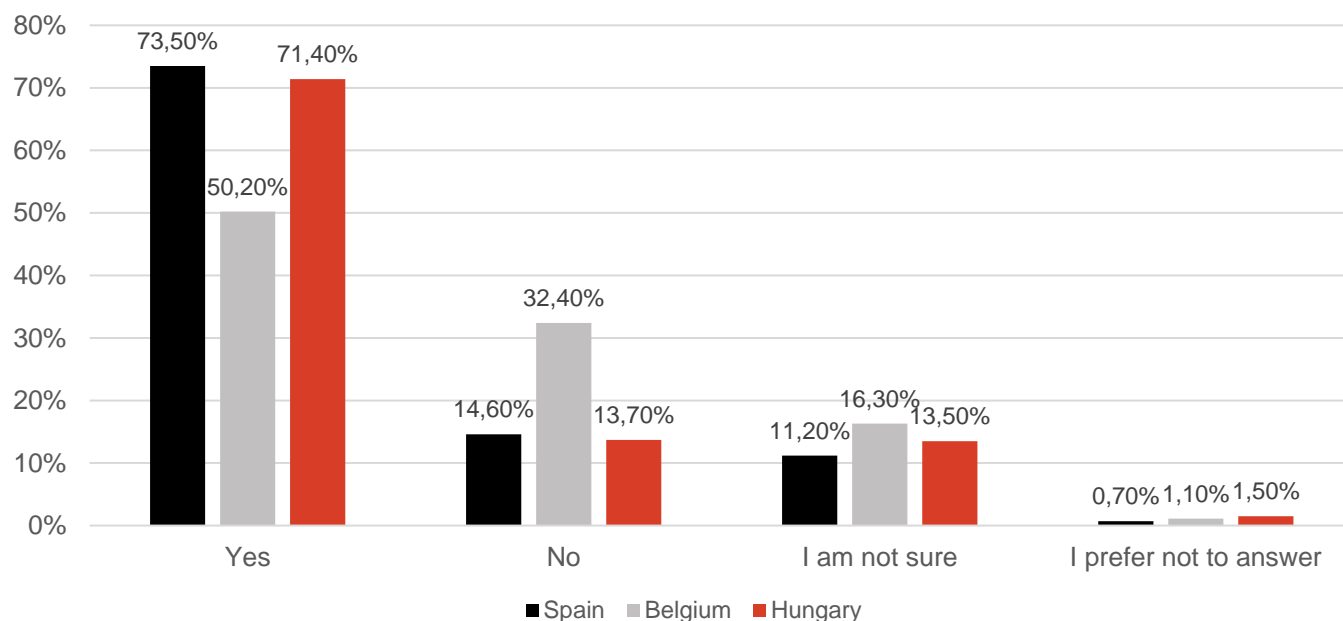


Figure 22. Received disinformation content about coronavirus

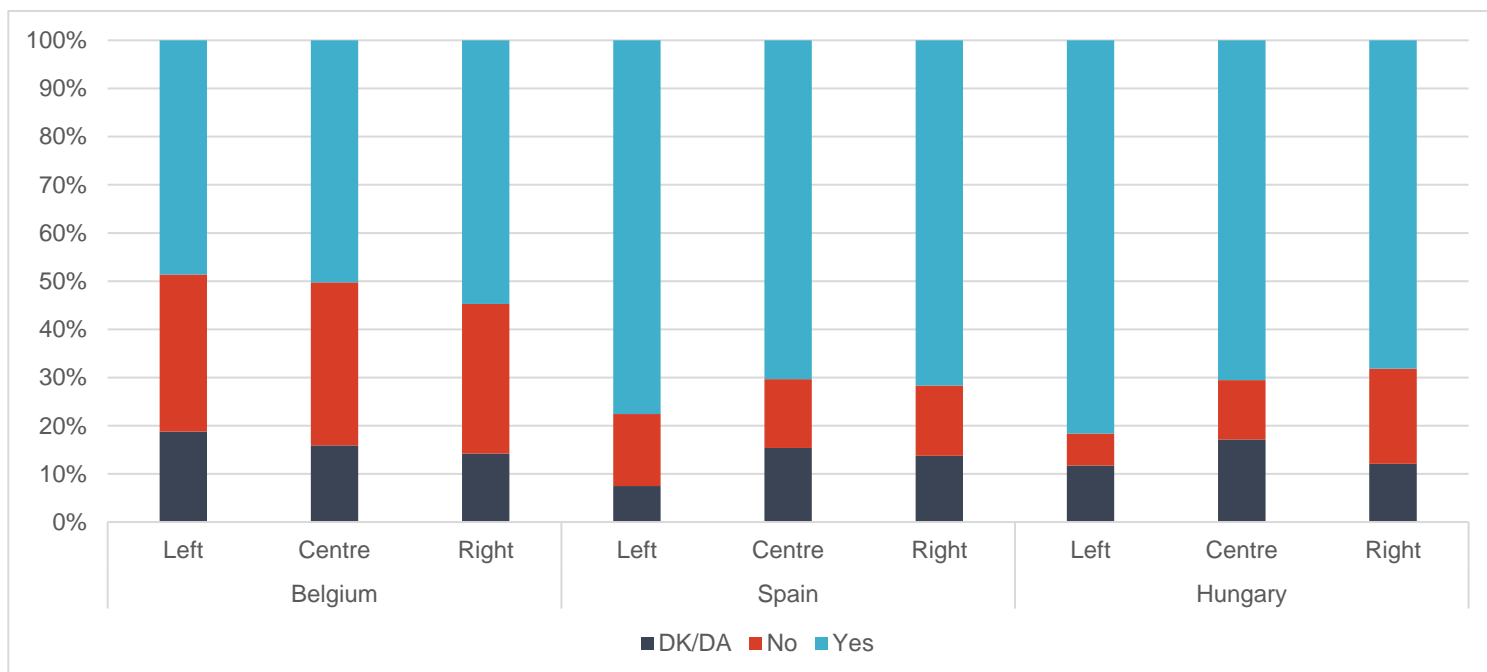


Figure 23. Received disinformation by country and ideology

Along these lines, to those people who responded affirmatively to 'Did you receive fake news or disinformation content about coronavirus?' the following question was asked: 'How did you receive fake news or disinformation content about coronavirus?' In this regard, more than one answer was possible. It can be seen how other TV shows appears as the most marked option in each of the countries. It is especially remarkable how this occurs in Spain. It is worth remembering that the category of other TV shows fits those morning and evening magazines where information and entertainment are hybridized, giving way to a more colloquial language and the treatment of soft news. Similarly, the role of digital newspapers stands out, especially in Hungary. Also relevant is the low number of cases associated with social media, even below radio (see Figure 24). The graph does not show two categories that have been considered and that represent a very low percentage in each of the countries surveyed: 'other people' and 'others'.

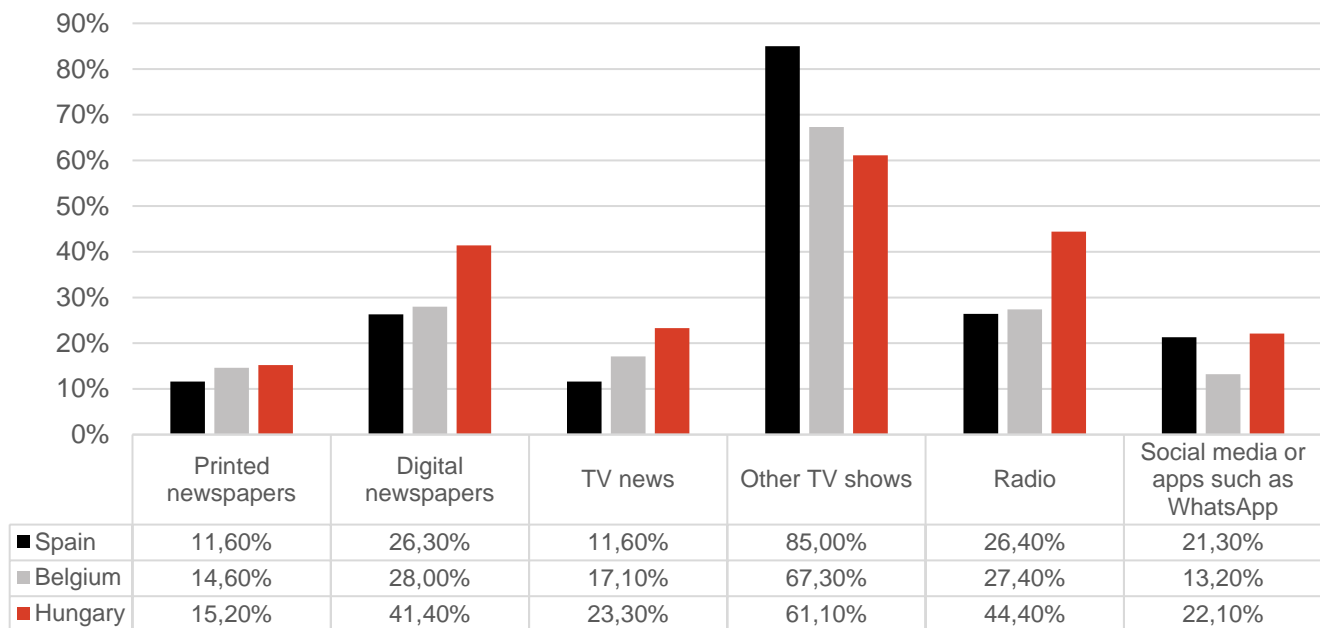


Figure 24. How did you receive fake news or disinformation content about coronavirus?

Lastly, **most of respondents in all countries affirm to check if the content received is suspicious to be fake or misleading (around 80%). Most respondents do that through Google (around 50% in all countries). The use of fact-checkers is limited in Belgium or Spain (around 17%) but higher in Hungary (30%).**

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

- Overall decrease in trust on news after outbreak. Although it does not affect the same all countries and each one entered covid with a different situation, the actual perspective about trust on news is overall negative.
- Apart from growing distrust, there are more specific issues that citizens complain related with news media coverage of covid:
 - **Spain:** It is the country where the level of distrust in the media has increased the most with respect to the course of the pandemic. This can be explained considering that it is also the country where the media is considered to have been most influenced by its editorial line when reporting on the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, this complaint does not remain exclusively in the media. Respondents also point directly to the speeches made by journalists. In this sense, there is a significant perception of information saturation regarding Covid-19.
 - **Belgium:** Respondents in this country show an increase in mistrust of the media before the pandemic and nowadays. This does not directly affect the general values of trust in the media. In other words, it is those who had an intermediate opinion and who preferentially consume other types of television programs other than news programs, in addition to social networks, who represent this change. In addition, the previous sources of information consumption also explain why almost 50% of those surveyed think that the information is full of sensationalism.
 - **Hungary:** Hungarians are the ones who show the least degree of agreement with the idea of information saturation during the pandemic. Despite this, they are the ones who most detect sensationalist techniques in the way in which the media have treated the subject. In this sense, Hungary is a good example to consider the perception that the media have been conditioned by their editorial line when reporting on the coronavirus pandemic. For this, it is essential to remember that the Hungarian government has made controversial decisions regarding its position during the outbreak.

- High levels of perception of being exposed to disinformation. Bigger in those countries with higher distrust on news media. We found here that the higher the previous situation of distrust, the higher is going to be the perception of having received disinformation about covid-19. Apart from media trust, another aspect that influences the perception of receiving disinformation is ideological positions. This has different effects in each country that can just be explained in relation with the political situation in each country and the party in government.
- Overall low levels of awareness about media and press councils. More efforts need to be done in all countries in order for citizens to know more about this self-regulatory bodies.