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Essay

Journalists as liars, servants, and sell-outs? On the declining trust in the media in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Marína Urbániková

Abstract: Trust, a key ingredient for the functioning and survival of the media, has been gradually eroding in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This essay argues that while some sources of that decline stem from broader social and cultural factors, others can be found in the media and journalists themselves. In both countries, the key reasons seem to be similar: commercialization and oligarchization have given rise to a sceptical attitude towards the media and journalists and it has generated suspicion that they act in the interests of economic and political actors rather than in the interest of the public. In addition, the rise of “alternative” media that spreads disinformation, hoaxes, and propaganda, together with attacks against journalists by top political representatives, further stimulate and strengthen the public perception that journalists are biased and corrupt, and that the media cannot be trusted. The more pronounced decline in trust observed in Slovakia can be explained by lower institutional trust at the societal level, the suspected greater inclination of Slovak journalists towards activism, weaker public service media and its less stable position, and a smaller market that may make it more difficult for various social groups to find a media outlet to represent them.

Keywords: Czech Republic, distrust, journalists, media, news, oligarchization, Slovakia, scepticism, trust

Author information:

Marína Urbániková is an assistant professor at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism and at the Judicial Studies Institute at Masaryk University, Czech Republic. Her research interests include the topics of gender and journalism, journalistic autonomy, journalism cultures, public service media and its independence, the security and safety of journalists, journalism education, and public confidence in the media and journalists. She is currently the principal investigator for the project *Rethinking the Role of Czech Public Service Media: Expectations, Challenges, and Opportunities (2021-23)*, which is supported by the Czech Science Foundation. She has published in, among others, the *European Journal of Communication*, *Journalism Practice*, and *International Communication Gazette*.

For more information: <https://www.muni.cz/en/people/182258-marina-urbanikova>

Email: m.urbanikova@mail.muni.cz

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Trust in the media, which is an essential ingredient for the functioning and survival of that industry, has been gradually eroding in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in recent years (European Commission, 2022a; Newman et al., 2022). According to some surveys, the level of trust is among the lowest in the world. For example, the 2022 edition of the Reuters Institute Digital News Report states that only 34% of Czechs and 26% of Slovaks claimed that they “trust most news most of the time” (Newman et al., 2022), which ranks the Czech Republic 37th and Slovakia 46th out of the 46 countries included in the report (Slovakia shares last place with the United States). Why this acute lack of trust?

In this essay, I argue that, while some sources for the declining trust stem from broader social and cultural processes and factors, other reasons can be found in the media and the journalists themselves. In both countries, the key reasons seem to be similar: commercialization and oligarchization have given rise to a sceptical attitude towards the media and journalists and a suspicion that they act in the interests of economic and political actors rather than in the interest of the public. In addition, the rise of “alternative” media that spreads disinformation, hoaxes, and pro-Russian propaganda, together with attacks against media and journalists by the top political representatives, further stimulate and strengthen the public perception that journalists are biased and corrupt, and that the media cannot be trusted. The more pronounced decline in trust observed in Slovakia can be explained by the lower institutional trust at the societal level, the suspected greater inclination of Slovak journalists towards activism, weaker public service media and its less stable position, and the smaller market where it may be more difficult for various social groups to find a media outlet to represent them.

Trust in what: the overall news, the news people use, the media, or the journalists?

Before delving deeper into the possible explanations for the low trust in the media in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, a brief methodological note is due. Assessment is complicated by the fact that different surveys — depending on the wording of the questions — produce quite different findings. The results vary according to whether respondents are asked about their overall trust in the news or their trust in the news that they use (Newman et al., 2022), their trust in individual media types (European Commission, 2022a), or their trust in journalists (Volek & Urbániková, 2017a). Apparently, trust in the media, in general, is higher than trust in the news, and trust in the news seems to be higher than trust in journalists, all of which suggests that the public is more likely to trust impersonal institutions than their staff and products.

First, the Eurobarometer survey regularly examines people's trust in different media types in European Union (EU) countries: the written press, radio, television, the internet, and online social networks. Because the internet and social networks cannot be considered standard media that produces its own content, the following analysis

focuses only on trust in the first three media types. As depicted in Figure 1, the average amount of trust in the written press, television, and radio in 2022 was 59% in the Czech Republic and 50% in Slovakia. Compared to other EU countries, the Czech Republic is well above the EU average of 51% and Slovakia is at the average (European Commission, 2022a). In any case, the Eurobarometer results paint a less gloomy picture. They do not suggest that public trust in the media is catastrophically low in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, nor that the situation is significantly worse than elsewhere in the EU.

The second source of longitudinal comparative data, the Digital News Report, which is published annually by the Reuters Institute, examines trust in the news (Newman et al., 2022). As shown in Figure 1, trust in the news is lower than the trust in media in both countries, as measured in the Eurobarometer. Understandably, people have more trust in the news that they use (i.e., 39% in the Czech Republic and 37% in Slovakia in 2022) than in the news overall (i.e., 34% in the Czech Republic and 26% in Slovakia in 2022). However, the difference is smaller than one might expect. This raises the question: why, given a wide range of media offerings, do people not use the media that they trust? For instance, people have the least trust in the tabloids, like *Nový Čas* (29%; Slovakia) and *Blesk* (18%; Czech Republic), which are, nevertheless, the most widely read newspapers in both countries (Median SK, 2022; Median & STEM/MARK, 2022). Thus, people are interested in tabloid content, but they also know it is not trustworthy quality journalism.

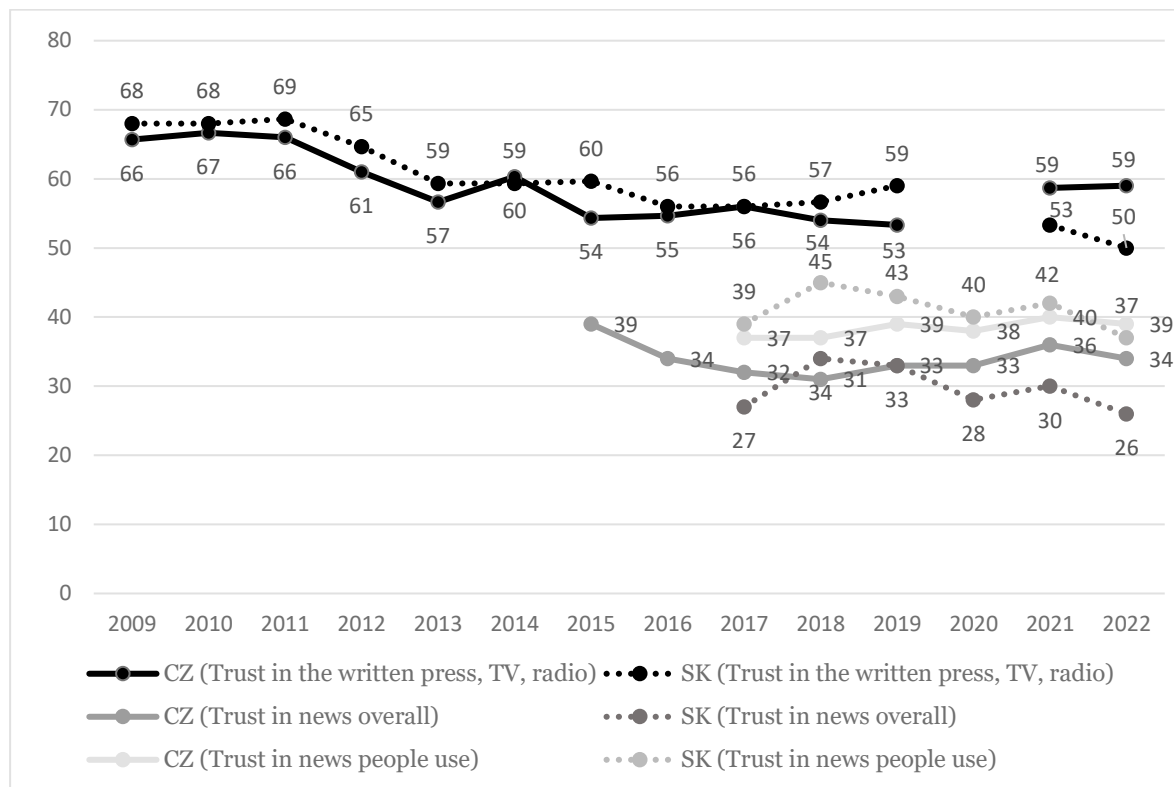
Third, the journalists themselves inspire even less public trust than the types of media and the news. In this respect, only data for the Czech Republic are available, but these show that, in 2016, only 29% of the Czech population declared that they trusted journalists, which is a staggering drop from 47% in 2004 (Volek & Urbániková, 2017a). This suggests that institutions and organizations are perceived as more trustworthy than the (fallible) flesh-and-blood people who work in them (Volek & Urbániková, 2017a).

In general, it is questionable to what extent the reluctance to declare trust in surveys is an expression of active distrust of the media, journalists, and their work, and to what extent it is merely a manifestation of a certain scepticism and critical thinking, and a sign of media literacy that forces us to question all the information that we receive. In other words, in line with Cook and Gronke (2005), we should distinguish between distrust (i.e., that the media and journalists do something wrong), mistrust (i.e., a doubt based upon suspicion), scepticism (i.e., the unwillingness to believe without conclusive evidence), and cynicism (i.e., contemptuous disbelief in sincerity or nobility). When the public is warned daily about the dangers of fake news and disinformation, and when a large part of society (89% of Czechs and 79% of Slovaks) thinks that “the existence of news or information that misrepresent reality or is even false” is a problem in their country (European Commission, 2022a), how could they, in good conscience, agree with statements such as “I think you can trust most news most of the time” (Newman et al., 2022)? Simple survey questions fail to capture

these nuances. A question that asks whether people trust the news they consume does not address this issue because people also consume content they do not trust and media exposure does not always go hand in hand with media trust (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). Perhaps a more telling survey question would be whether respondents are able to find at least some news source that they can trust in the current offerings.

Regardless of the exact wording of the questions, two conclusions can be drawn from the available surveys. Trust in the media, their products, and the producers in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia has been gradually declining over the last 15 years. Also, the decline is noticeably more pronounced in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic. The remainder of this essay provides possible explanations for this development.

Figure 1: Trust (in %) in the media and in the news in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (2009-22)



Source: Eurobarometer 2009-22 (overall trust was calculated as a simple average of the proportion of respondents who declared trust in the written press, television, and radio; the dataset compiled by the European Broadcasting Union was used for data from 2009-21 – EBU, 2021; data for 2022 were taken from Standard Eurobarometer 96 – European Commission, 2022a); Reuters Institute Digital News Reports 2017-22 (Newman et al., 2022; Štětka, 2022; Newman et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2017).

Trust in the media as part of general trust in institutions

First, trust in the media, a key social institution, is, to some extent, linked to trust in the social establishment and political institutions, such as the government, the parliament, and the presidency (Ariely, 2015). In this respect, both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as former Eastern Bloc countries, have to deal with the legacy of the past political regime (which was certainly not built on trust) and the political and economic upheaval of the 1990s (Mishler & Rose, 2001). This cultural habit of distrusting public institutions and fellow citizens still persists to some extent (Hájek et al., 2020), especially when the new institutions have, at times, served the interests of political and business leaders rather than the citizens.

In addition to the historical legacy, institutional trust (including trust in the media) is negatively affected by political and economic shocks (Sapsford & Abbott, 2006; Torcal, 2014). When society is hit by the consequences of political or economic crises, people may directly or indirectly blame politicians and the “system” as a whole (Caïs et al., 2021). There has been no shortage of exceptional situations in recent years. Citizens have had good reasons for concern and uncertainty: the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the related massive immigration, rising inflation, skyrocketing energy prices, an unstable government in Slovakia, and high polarization in the Czech political scene. This, in turn, affects the perception and assessment of the whole system, including the media.

These factors result in relatively low interpersonal and institutional trust, especially in the case of Slovakia. The level of interpersonal trust in both countries is below the EU average and well below the average in the Western countries (36% in the Czech Republic, 33% in Slovakia, 46% in the EU, 52% in the “old” EU member states; see Boehnke et al., 2018). Interestingly, institutional trust, which was computed as the average of trust in nine public institutions¹ (European Commission, 2022b), is above the EU average in the Czech Republic (58% vs. 53%) but considerably lower than the EU average in Slovakia (a mere 40%). The higher level of interpersonal and institutional trust in the Czech Republic compared to Slovakia goes hand in hand with the higher level of trust that the Czech public has for the media and the news, as described above.

Citizens’ dissatisfaction with the state of society spills over into their distrust of the media and journalists, especially when they are seen as part of the establishment (Ariely, 2015) and not as a force that stands for “ordinary people”. Moreover, distrust of the media can be compounded by the distrust of experts in some segments of the population. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have played a significant role here because it has led to an overall decline in institutional trust across all of the EU members, with low trust particularly among unvaccinated people who use social media as their preferred news source (Ahrendt et al., 2022). Restrictive measures and

¹ Health and medical staff, the army, the police, regional and local public authorities, the justice, public administration, the parliament, the government, and political parties.

vaccination against COVID-19 have become the subject of controversy and they have led to strong social polarisation, especially in Slovakia, where vaccination rates are the third lowest in the EU (ECDC, 2022). In such an atmosphere, even the simple pursuit of objectivity, which is the first commandment of professional journalism, is sometimes perceived and interpreted as betrayal and abetting the adversary.

To summarize, the historical legacy of low institutional and interpersonal trust, coupled with political and economic upheavals, can lead to a more cautious attitude on the part of citizens and a reluctance to express confidence in the news and the media because they are seen as part of the (unreliable) system. This brings us back to the need to distinguish between scepticism and active distrust.

Attacks on journalists by populist politicians

Second, when it comes to trust in the media, politicians and other actors play a significant role. The model that has played out in Hungary, Poland, and the US, where politicians persistently attack the media and try to delegitimize them, has long been applied in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as well. Moreover, these attacks often come from the highest political offices, such as the prime minister and the president. In the Czech Republic, examples include former president (and former prime minister) Václav Klaus, who claimed that “journalists are the greatest enemies of humanity” (Dolejší, 2011) and the current president (and former prime minister) Miloš Zeman, who declared that “journalists are morons, dung and feces” (Adamek, 2015) and lamented that “Czech journalists have not yet been exterminated” (Kopecký, 2018).

Slovak politicians do not lag behind. Robert Fico, the former three-time prime minister, was known for his complicated relationship with journalists, calling some of them “dirty anti-Slovak prostitutes” and a “gang of Soros pigs”, in both cases playing on right-wing extremist positions and the latter with clear antisemitic traits. His successor Igor Matovič continued the trend of attacking the journalists (Katuška, 2022).

There is hardly another profession against which the Czech and Slovak political leaders have waged such a massive and concentrated attack in recent years. Although the media condemn this pressure, it cannot be said that these statements disqualify the politicians in the eyes of the public because those views are in line with the current populist wave of aversion to elites, which includes journalists. Rather, this rhetoric fuels public distrust and contempt and very likely affects the trust in the media and journalists. As a consequence of turning the journalists into punching bags, they become the targets of threats and attacks. In Slovakia, it culminated in the murder of the Slovak investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018 (Urbániková & Haniková, 2022).

Serving the commercial and political interests: commercialization and oligarchization

Third, another source for the decline in public trust in the media can be found in the transformation of the media market and the changing patterns of media ownership. To start, most of the advertising revenue no longer goes to the media houses but to digital giants like Google and Facebook (Mosco, 2019), which is a global trend. The audience is increasingly moving into the digital space, but, at the same time, they are only slowly getting used to the idea of paying for content online (Newman et al., 2022), and the media is desperately trying to come up with a viable and workable paywall system. To retain readers, listeners, and viewers, and thus advertisers and at least some advertising revenue, some media have resorted to traditional means of tabloidization and they are turning to the production of simple, appealing, and superficial content — or so it seems to the public. It is tabloidism that is the most common negative characteristic of journalists in the eyes of the Czech public: almost half of the public is convinced that Czech journalists are too “tabloid” as opposed to “serious” (Volek & Urbániková, 2017a). Thus, even though the public likes to consume tabloid content (the daily tabloid, Blesk, is continuously the most widely read newspaper in the Czech Republic; see Median & STEM/MARK, 2022), they do not value this type of journalism.

Oligarchization is another significant trend that has changed the Czech and Slovak media scene and, consequently, the level of public trust (Štětka et al., 2021). After many years when foreign owners owned the leading media organizations, they have gradually fallen back into the hands of domestic elites (Štětka, 2012). Currently, the vast majority of the key Czech and Slovak media outlets are in the hands of local businessmen (they are owned by, e.g., PPF Group that belongs to the late Czech businessman Petr Kellner; Agrofert which is indirectly controlled by the Czech businessman and ex-prime minister Andrej Babiš; Czech Media Invest, J&T Group, and Penta Group which belong to groups of Czech and Slovak businessmen; Economia which belongs to the Czech businessman Zdeněk Bakala; Synot Investment Limited which belongs to the Czech businessmen Ivo Valenta and Michal Voráček; and Grafobal Group which belongs to the Slovak businessman Ivan Kmotrík).

The local owners are usually major domestic economic and, in some cases, political players. Given the low profitability of the media sector, it seems likely that, for at least some of them, the purchase was motivated by the need to have a tool to influence public opinion and promote their interests. For instance, in 2015, the co-owner of the Penta Group admitted in an interview that the group began to buy Slovak media in bulk in order to make it more difficult for others “to attack them irrationally” and that their media outlets serve as “a nuclear briefcase” (Mikušovič, 2015) for use in extreme cases.

Furthermore, political media ownership is not uncommon. For example, ex-Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš indirectly controls, among other media outlets, two of

the five key quality daily newspapers. Slovak parliament speaker Boris Kollár owns two of the four most listened-to radio stations. Thus, a sceptical attitude or outright distrust about the media owned by those businessmen and politicians cannot be interpreted so much as an expression of resentment towards the elites or the idealization of foreign owners, but rather as a rational assessment of the situation where the primary motivation for media ownership is not profit (as was usual in the case of foreign owners), but power and influence. It is possible that this sceptical and cautious attitude then extends to the entire media market.

Therefore, commercialization and oligarchization further weakens public trust, which expects journalists, above all, to be independent and impartial. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022, less than a fifth of Czechs and Slovaks think that the media in their country are independent of undue political or government influence (i.e., 17% in the Czech Republic, 16% in Slovakia) and of undue business or commercial influence (i.e., 18% and 15%, respectively) (Newman et al., 2022). The perceived lack of independence is a crucial issue according to the Eurobarometer survey, too. Only 31% of Czechs and 38% of Slovaks believe that the media in their country provide information that is free from political or commercial pressure, which is much lower than the share of those who believe that the national media provide trustworthy information (62% and 52%, respectively) and that they provide diverse views and opinions (74% and 66%, respectively) (European Commission, 2022a). In addition, a third of the Czech public believes that journalists are corrupt and dependent (Volek & Urbániková, 2017a). In summary, it appears that perceived venality and the lack of independence are the main factors that undermine public trust in the Czech and Slovak media.

Journalists as critics or spokespersons for the powerful?

Fourth, the degree of public trust lies largely in the hands of the media and the journalists themselves (Livio & Cohen, 2018). After all, according to institutional theories, trust is, at least to some extent, rationally based, and depends on citizens' evaluations of the institutional performance (Mishler & Rose, 2001). One of the significant factors of public trust is the extent to which the media enables citizens to talk back to power and hold the state accountable (Bakir & Barlow, 2007; Roudakova, 2017). Even though there is no shortage of quality media and journalists in the Czech Republic and Slovakia who do their best to fulfil their watchdog role, the segments of the society who perceive the social system as unfair presumably see the media and journalists as part of the elite and as promoters and defenders of the system rather than as advocates for the weak and vulnerable. This assumption is supported by the results of a Czech survey that showed that people with the lowest (i.e., primary) education and those who are unemployed or studying (i.e., typically without income) have the lowest trust in journalists (Volek & Urbániková, 2017b).

The perception of journalists as part of the establishment may be related to their historical role as regime builders during the Communist era (Sztompka, 2000), both in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The firmly rooted distrust of the media and journalists is encapsulated in the old Czech folk saying “he/she lies as if he/she were printing the words” (*“lže jako když tiskne”*) and in the even more telling expression that refers to the pre-1989 communist newspaper Rudé Právo (The Red Justice): “he/she lies like the Red Justice prints articles” (*“lže jako když Rudé Právo tiskne”*).

In addition, at least in the Czech case (as there is no data on Slovakia in this respect), the socio-demographic structure of the journalism community and the considerable homogeneity of the political values on the part of journalists may also be a source for the feeling of part of the society that the media do not stand on their side (Volek & Urbániková, 2017b). Czech journalism is dominated by educated men in the younger to middle age range. On the liberalism-conservatism scale, most journalists are self-proclaimed liberals (70%), and on the left-right scale, most of them have a right-wing (45%) or centrist (41%) political orientation (Volek & Urbániková, 2017a).² Low diversity in newsrooms may lead to some topics and perspectives that are important to groups other than white liberal right-wing men (e.g., people with left-wing political orientations, women, Roma) not receiving the attention they deserve. To some extent, this shortcoming may be mitigated by specialized and alternative media (e.g., the left-wing online newspapers Deník Alarm and Deník Referendum; the news server Romea.cz, which focuses on the Romani minority). Still, although alternative media activities seem to be expanding in recent years, television remains the main source of information for as much as three-quarters of Czechs and Slovaks (European Parliament, 2022) — and mainstream channels dominate in both countries (the main media type for alternative media are online platforms). In addition, more than a third of Czechs do not consume news at all, or only minimally, because they are simply not interested (NFNZ, 2021a). However, there is a lack of data for a deeper analysis of the media consumption patterns of individual social groups and their media preferences.

Also, unlike traditional professions, journalism is an occupation that is halfway between a craft and a full-fledged profession (Tunstall, 1971), and there is no consensus for clear criteria by which good and bad journalism should be judged and distinguished. Although this is true for journalism in general, the lack of a consensus for the key professional norms and values is even more flagrant in the Czech Republic and Slovakia than, for instance, in Western countries, because the perception of the journalistic roles and the mission has changed several times in the 20th Century, hand in hand with political-regime changes (Urbániková & Volek, 2018).

² In the Czech context the right-left axis refers more to the economic dimension (e.g., ideas about the appropriate level of redistribution of wealth and the size of the state) and the conservatism-liberalism axis refers more to the social and cultural dimension (e.g., LGBT+ rights, climate change, immigration, the right to abortion).

As a result, in a regular Czech survey of occupational prestige (CVVM, 2019) that listed 24 professions, journalists were fourth from the bottom (behind carpenters, construction workers, and shop assistants). Here, too, it is evident that the public thinks less of journalists, as their perceived prestige has fallen by almost a third since 2004. Only MPs have seen a similar drop, which again suggests that these trends are manifested by a broader public scepticism and distrust for those they regard as part of the establishment. In contrast, the prestige of other professions has been stabled over the long term.

The rise of disinformation media as an alternative to mainstream media

The impression that journalists and media fulfil their owner's assignments and therefore cannot be trusted is further reinforced by the rise of "alternative" media, which spreads disinformation, hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and propaganda. Typically, they disseminate anti-immigration, islamophobic, and anti-EU content, and the presented views align with the extreme right and pro-Russian actors³ (Štětka et al., 2021). They often have an unclear ownership structure and funding, they do not follow the basic rules of standard journalism, and, in turn, they accuse the mainstream media of being sell-outs and of hiding important information from people.

Disinformation is widespread both in the Czech Republic and Slovakia; this has become even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. For instance, according to the GLOBSEC report (2021), more than a quarter of Czechs and Slovaks believe that "the COVID-19 pandemic is a planned operation by the hidden forces/elites to control the population" and over a third of respondents in both countries agreed that "COVID-19 is fake to manipulate the population". In the Czech Republic, roughly every sixth person believes that "the coronavirus was artificially created in laboratories thanks to funding from Bill Gates" and that "5G signal transmitters can have a significant negative impact on human health" (NFNZ, 2021b). More than half of the population reportedly saw this information in the media (NFNZ, 2021b).

Due to the increased activity of disinformation websites and the lack of media literacy, some people find it challenging to evaluate quality journalism and reliable sources of information. While for some parts of the audience, this can only lead to scepticism ("it's hard to tell where the truth lies"), for others, it can lead to active distrust ("the mainstream media is lying to us"). When they do not find disinformation narratives in mainstream media, they may succumb to the belief that, as a part of a conspiracy against ordinary citizens, the mainstream media are not telling the public the whole story.

³ For instance, in 2022, one of the authors who contributed to the disinformation outlet Hlavné Správy — which is one of the most popular "alternative" media sources in Slovakia — was, along with others, arrested and charged for taking bribes and conducting espionage for Russia (Francelová, 2022).

How to explain the differences between the Czech Republic and Slovakia?

Finally, the different level of trust in the media and the news in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which are two culturally and geographically close countries with a shared history, needs some analysis. As part of a tentative explanation, there are at least four reasons that the trust is higher in the Czech Republic.

First, as mentioned above, the level of interpersonal and, especially, institutional trust is significantly higher in the Czech Republic (European Commission, 2022b; Boehnke et al., 2018), which is probably due to better functioning and more reliable institutions, less dramatic political developments since 1989, and a higher standard of living. On the contrary, Slovakia has been plagued by corruption, state capture, inequality before the law, and links between organized crime and political elites, as was revealed after the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018. That killing led to mass anti-government protests and the subsequent resignation of the long-time prime minister Robert Fico. Under the current government, the Slovak authorities have put dozens of high-ranking officials from the judiciary and the police on trial in an attempt to “clean out the house” (Hutt, 2022). Still, the government itself is deeply unpopular due to internal contradictions that prevent the proper governance of the country (the share of people who trust the government is currently the second lowest in the EU; see European Commission, 2022b). Thus, Slovak citizens have more reasons to distrust the system and social institutions, which probably spill over into distrust of the media and the journalists as part of the establishment.

Also, anecdotal observations suggest that Slovak journalists may have a greater tendency to be activists, to take sides, and even to go beyond the boundaries of journalism⁴. The desire to be on the “good side” and indicate to the audience what the good side is may be due to the more turbulent political developments described above. If this is indeed the case (again, there is no systematic data in this respect), it could be perceived by the public as a lack of objectivity and independence and further weaken their trust in the media and journalists.

In addition, another factor that leads to greater trust in the media and journalists in the Czech Republic may be the better functioning of the public service media. In both countries, the public service media (television and radio stations, including online outlets) are the most trusted news sources. However, 50% of Czech citizens trust the public service media and this share is almost ten percentage points lower in Slovakia (41%; European Parliament, 2022). This difference is again not surprising, as the Slovak public service media has long faced serious concerns about its

⁴ See the case of Peter Tóth, a former Slovak star journalist and then the head of counterintelligence at the Slovak Intelligence Service, who was later involved in the illegal surveillance of Ján Kuciak and other journalists (Cuprik et al., 2020).

independence and underfunding (Urbániková, 2021). This also means that the pillar on which Slovak citizens could base their trust in the media is simply less solid.

Finally, market size and structure may also be part of the explanation. The Czech Republic has twice the population of Slovakia, and its media sector is larger and richer, so it is possible that various social groups can more easily choose a media outlet that represents them and that they can trust.

Whatever the reasons and causes for the low trust that Czech and Slovak citizens have for the media, media organizations, and journalists, both countries have a long and challenging road ahead if they want to regain and strengthen it.

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