

Poll across Visegrad countries finds public back EU action on media freedom

With the defence of European values increasingly dominating political debate, the first comprehensive survey of public attitudes towards media freedom across Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia shows 52% of people are worried about the state of media freedom in their country. 71% support stronger national legislation to safeguard media independence, and 59% support giving the EU more power to protect media freedom.

However, the poll reveals support for media freedom and independence is not spread evenly across V4 countries. While attitudes towards media freedom in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia are broadly comparable, the poll found significantly less support for both editorial autonomy and the independence of public service media in Hungary, where the ruling party has captured the bulk of the country's media.

The poll - commissioned by the Committee for Editorial Independence in cooperation with the Czech National Committee of the International Press Institute and supported by the Bakala Foundation - also reveals how political and generational cleavages and the way people consume media significantly shape regional attitudes to press freedom.

KEY FINDINGS:

- ***Widespread concern over media freedom across the V4.***
52% expressed concern about the current state of media freedom (63% in Poland, 49% in Slovakia, Hungary 48%, Czech Republic 47%).
- ***Those who rely more heavily on online sources for news show more understanding of media independence.***
Pollsters found that people reading online news content were more likely to see values associated with media freedom as important. In Hungary and Poland, frequent reading of print newspapers is linked to less positive views on media freedom and independence.
- ***Younger generations are less concerned than older people.***
In most V4 countries young people are relatively less engaged in the issue of media freedom and independence. In Hungary just 36% of people aged 18-24 expressed concern, while in Poland the figure is 61%. That number drops to 39% in Slovakia.
- ***Media freedom has become deeply politicised***
When asked whether they were concerned about media freedom, 85% of Hungary's Democratic Coalition supporters agreed, while only 28% of Fidesz supporters expressed concern. In Poland, while just 34% of PiS supporters regard media freedom as a serious issue, 90% of opposition supporters say they're worried about it. In the Czech Republic, supporters of ANO or the far-right SPD are again much less likely to regard the values underpinning media freedom as critical compared to supporters of other parties.

Chair of economia's Editorial Independence Committee, Misha Glenny said: *"Hungary's election shows media capture works. Unless it's confronted at an EU level, it will continue to strangle democracy - not just in Hungary, but across Central and Eastern Europe."*

Join the debate:

The results of the poll are to be discussed in a panel debate with journalists and media experts, such as Veronika Munk, Head of Content Development, Telex, and Michal Klíma, Czech Government Commissioner for Media, and Václav Štětka, Senior Lecturer in Communication and Media, Loughborough University.

COUNTRY HIGHLIGHTS:

Hungary

When asked whether they were "concerned" about media freedom, 85% of Hungary's Democratic Coalition supporters agreed, while only 28% of Fidesz supporters expressed concern.

Media freedom is "absolutely important" only for 34% of Fidesz, but for 89% of Democratic Coalition voters.

Poland

90% of Koalicja Obywatelska voters are "concerned" about the current state of media freedom, 52% "very concerned" (top of the scale). 34% of Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc voters are concerned (42% not concerned), 7% very concerned.

87% of Koalicja Obywatelska voters oppose government influence on public service media news, compared to only 47% PiS voters.

Czech Republic

Compared to other V4 countries, the Czech Republic has the highest percentage of people who believe media independence is an important value (86%), the highest percentage of those who think media owners should not interfere with editorial autonomy (62%), but also the lowest percentage of those who express concerns about the state of media freedom (47%) and the lowest percentage who agree with economic support of media by the state (25%, half as much as those in Poland).

Slovakia

23% of Slovaks believe that the state of media freedom has improved over the course of the last five years - the highest percentage of all V4 countries. This view is more common among voters of OLANO (37%) and the coalition PS/SPOLU (51%), while only 8% of voters of SMER agree.

Slovaks are the most supportive of the EU sanctioning countries whose governments interfere with media freedom – with 64% support.

Chair of the CZ IPI Veronika Sedláčková said: *“It was very interesting to find out what young people consider important about the media. As the survey shows, what matters most to them is online accessibility. Editorial policy or the focus or independence of the media do not play such a big role. This finding leads me to believe that it is important not only to strengthen the position of the media and to support the work of independent and professional journalists, but also to focus much more than before on improving media literacy.”*

Notes to editors

The survey was carried out between 1 - 17. February 2022 by Median, by combination of online panel questioning and telephone interviews. The total sample size was 4069 respondents (aged 18+).

The survey is an initiative of the Committee for Editorial Independence in cooperation with the Czech National Committee of the International Press Institute, and supported by the Bakala Foundation.

Committee for Editorial Independence

The Committee for Editorial Independence is an industry-driven initiative designed to ensure journalists and editors can carry out their work free from any interference, without fear or favour from both internal and external pressures. It seeks to promote free media and positively influence journalistic culture, not only in Central and Eastern Europe. More at <https://free.economia.cz>

Czech National Committee of the International Press Institute

The International Press Institute (IPI) is a global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists who share a common dedication to quality, independent journalism. The Czech National Committee (CZ IPI) is its Czech branch. More at <https://www.czipi.cz>

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