The 6th International Conference on Economics and Social Sciences
**Geopolitical Perspectives and Technological Challenges
for Sustainable Growth in the 21st Century**
June 15-16, 2023
Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

The Impact of Media Politicisation on Media Trust in Romania

Cristian BRANCU[1*], Oana TURCU[2]

Abstract

The decline in public trust in the media is causing concern in many societies on the world map. In modern democracies, trust in the press is an essential element of political communication, people's perceptions of the political sphere being most often mediated and influenced by the information provided by mass media. In this paper, the authors analyse the impact on media politicisation on media trust using a binomial regression with data collected from the Eurobarometer 96. The main conclusion of the article is that Romanians' trust in political parties has been and remains at low levels, not exceeding 20 % over the last two decades.

Keywords: mass media, public trust, politicisation, impact.

JEL Classification: L82, D72.

1. Introduction

Trust plays an essential role in many human interactions and is a key ingredient of social life (Uslaner, 2002). In communities where there is a high level of trust, people are more likely to cooperate, and this in turn generates more trust (Putnam et al., 1993). At the individual level, trust relationships involve the interaction of at least two parties: one who invests trust and the other who receives this trust (Tsfati et al., 2003). Each party's past experiences shape trust relationships, leading to certain expectations and assessments of the other party's future behaviour (Vanacker, Belmas, 2009). However, the intentions of the other actors cannot be fully known, which implies a certain level of risk and uncertainty in social relationships (Tsfati, 2010).

---

[1] Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, brancucristian22@stud.ase.ro.
* Corresponding author.
[2] Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, turcuoana22@stud.ase.ro.

Trust becomes essential precisely in situations where it is difficult to verify the intentions of others and their behaviour cannot be controlled. It reduces social complexity by generalising positive expectations of the trusting party about the future actions of other actors (Tranter, Booth, 2019). Given the uncertainty inherent in social relationships, trusting means accepting a vulnerability on the part of the trusting party, who expects to gain rather than lose from the interaction with the other party (Coleman, 1990). In terms of trusting the media, the public accepts a vulnerability and takes a risk when it decides to expose itself to media messages. In general, they can neither verify the veracity of news content, nor know whether journalists adhere to ethical rules (Tully et al., 2020). Such situations abound in our relationship with the media. Often issues reported by media cannot be assessed directly, based on personal experience, and trust becomes the key factor for the public to accept information provided by media as accurate (Kohring, Matthews, 2007). For this paper, trust in the media is the willingness of individuals to be vulnerable to content provided through mass media channels, based on the expectation that the media will operate in a satisfactory manner (Fawzi, 2019).

Trust in the media is part of the broader category of public perceptions of mass media (Helberger, 2019). Perceptions of the media can manifest themselves at different levels: the media as a whole; different communication channels such as television, print, or the Internet; media organisations; types and genres of media content; specific media messages (McLeod et al., 2017). This study focuses on trust in media understood as the public's perception of traditional (TV, radio, print) and alternative (Internet and online social media) communication channels.

2. Modelling the Trust in Media

An important role in shaping perceptions of the media is played by several psychological processes that can tip the balance between trusting and distrusting the media. Perceptual selectivity is a mechanism by which individuals develop a biased attitude towards the media according to their own predispositions, stereotypes, or prejudices. According to the perceptual selectivity thesis, people are more likely to trust information channels that confirm their own biases. On the other hand, they trust less media that provide information that conflicts with their own views. One of the main sources of differentiation between those who trust the media and those who do not trust them is political partisanship, understood as the predisposition of individuals to feel close to and trust a political party. Bias helps individuals guide their attitudes and behaviour according to a simplified grid of reality assessment (Dalton, 2016). Thus, perceptions of media credibility and exposure to different news channels vary according to individuals' partisan and ideological orientations (Cappella et al., 2011).

The relationship between trust, politicisation, and media consumption: theories and hypotheses.

The political sphere can interact with the media system by affecting citizens' assessments of media credibility. For this reason, several studies place trust in the media within the broader framework of public trust in political institutions. This

approach is based on the premise that trust in the media does not occur in isolation. It is formed in a social and political context and is closely linked to public perceptions of other institutions. In other words, the media tends to take the shape and colour of the social and political structures within which it operates. Two main theses dominate the debate on the interactions between media and politics: the mediatisation of politics and the politicisation of media. The mediatisation of politics thesis supports the idea of the centrality of the media in modern democratic processes.

Media primacy reshapes the mechanisms and rules of operation of the political sphere. Political actors are forced to adopt media logics to communicate effectively with wider audiences and to be successful in their actions, thus becoming dependent on the media. Media politicisation emphasises instead the intertwining of the political environment with modern mass communication systems. Some authors even speak of a colonisation of the media by political parties and the transformation of the media into instruments of political propaganda. This phenomenon is more prominent in the polarised-pluralist or Mediterranean model of the media, which has been identified by Hallin et al. (2023) in countries such as Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, and France. The Mediterranean model also describes relatively well the media systems of Central and Eastern European countries.

A study by Active Watch showed that in 2014, around 40 % of TV stations were politically affiliated through their owners or directors". The politicisation of the media is also manifesting itself in the extension of divisions and conflict lines from the political realm into the media space.

The polarisation of the public along party lines has implications not only for the functioning of media organisations but also for perceptions of the media. When different media take overtly partisan positions and become direct combatants in political competition, it will be easier for the public to identify connections between media channels and parties. Based on the mechanisms of selective perception discussed above, some individuals will project their trust, and others their distrust of political parties onto the media instrumentalised by them. Therefore, we formulate Hypothesis 1 on media politicisation: Individuals who trust political parties tend to trust the media more than those who do not trust parties. However, it is very likely that not all media channels are equally politicised. Traditional media (TV, print, and radio) may be perceived by the public as being to a greater extent controlled by politicians. Pressure from politicians may focus on television, which is the main source of information about politics for most Romanians.

Hallin et al. (2023) also argue that the prevalence of television over print media in southern European countries is closely linked to a higher level of politicisation of television. It is subject to strong control and greater influence by political organisations that use or try to use this channel to satisfy their interests. On the other hand, the use of the Internet and online social networks segmented audiences, multiplying and diversifying the patterns of media use for political information. Aligning audiences along partisan lines seems more difficult in the context of a much greater diversity of online information sources. This could leave alternative media

freer from political constraints than traditional media. Therefore, we formulate Hypothesis 2 on the differential politicisation of traditional and alternative media. Trust in political parties is more strongly associated with trust in traditional media (TV, radio, print media) than with trust in alternative media (Internet, online social networks).

3. Research Methods

For a detailed examination of the structural dimensions of public trust in the media, we used exploratory factor analysis on Eurobarometer 96 data collected in November 2021.

3.1 Dependent Variable

Eurobarometer 96 measures public trust in different media with the following question (QA8a): I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions and the media. For each of the following institutions and types of media, please tell me whether you tend to trust them or tend not to trust them: 1. Print media; 2. Television; 4. Internet; 5. Online social networks? We recoded the responses for each of the five media types into dichotomous variables with the following values: '1' for respondents who tend to trust and '0' for the other response options. To check the structural dimensions of public trust in media, we used exploratory factor analysis (principal components and Varimax rotation method). The analysis revealed two factors, corresponding to the two dimensions of public trust in traditional and alternative media. After rotation, the first factor covers approximately 48 % of the variance and the second factor 34 % of the variance. Table 1 presents the items and factor loadings for the rotated factors, loadings less than 0.40 are excluded from the presentation for clarity. The first dimension, bringing together traditional media, is more strongly saturated by the first 3 items: print media, radio, and television. The second dimension, alternative media, is composed of two items: Internet and online social networks. Based on these two dimensions, it is expected that the motivations for trusting or distrusting traditional and alternative media are also different.

Table 1. The items and factor loadings for the rotated factors

Items	Factorial saturation		Communalities
	Traditional media	**Alternative media**	
Newspaper	0.802		0.702
Radio	0.798		0.745
TV	0.802		0.698
Internet		0.821	0.803
Online social media		0.885	0.811
Eigenvalue	2.11	1.89	
Variance (%)	48%	34.09%	

Source: Own computations.

3.2 Independent Variables

The main explanatory variable is trust in political parties, which is used to highlight media politicisation along party lines. We recorded responses to question QA8a-10 in Eurobarometer 96 with '1' if respondents said they tended to trust parties and '0' for the other response options. Media consumption is the second important explanatory factor, measured by the frequency of use of different media. We recoded the responses to QE3_1-5 on the frequency of use of different media on a scale of 12 0 to 5 as follows: 0 = "not at all"; 1 = "very rarely"; 2 = "2-3 times a month"; 3 = "once a week"; 4 = "2-3 times a week"; 5 = "daily or almost daily". We applied exploratory factor analysis on these recoded variables, and three separate factors of media consumption resulted: television consumption; radio and print media consumption; Internet and online social networking consumption. Therefore, we constructed two additional scales with values from 0 to 5: a print and radio consumption scale (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.653) and an Internet and online social networking consumption scale (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.958).

4. Findings

The first part of the results illustrates the evolution of Romanians' trust ratings in different media (Figure 1). Romanians' trust rates in traditional and alternative media are close to the average trust rates recorded in the European Union. Like other Europeans, the Romanian public tends to trust traditional media more than alternative media. The diachronic series of data presented in Figure 1 shows that television leads the top of trust, with an average trust rate of 64 % over the 2001-2021 period. It is closely followed by radio, with an average trust level of 60 %. Trust in print media is on average 10-15 percentage points lower than trust in radio and television, respectively. On the other hand, alternative media have lower trust ratings: on average only 40 % of respondents trust the internet and around 30 % trust online social networks. The lower public trust in alternative media could also be due to a significant part of the adult population in Romania either does not have access to or does not know how to use the Internet and the online environment in general. The protection of confidentiality of the personal data, as well as the accuracy of the information that needs to be checked, are factors that could also influence the credibility of the alternative channels that could be considered in further research. In a previous survey, we showed that almost half of the respondents to the November 2017 Eurobarometer 86.2 did not use the Internet at all or used it only very rarely.

These data confirm the hypothesis of media politicisation along partisan lines (Hypothesis 1), with the strongest effects in television, followed by print media. On the other hand, trust in parties has weaker effects on trust in alternative media (Internet and online social networks) compared to traditional media, and this confirms the hypothesis of stronger politicisation of traditional media (Hypothesis 2).

Figure 1. The dynamics of the people trust in the media, between 2001-2021
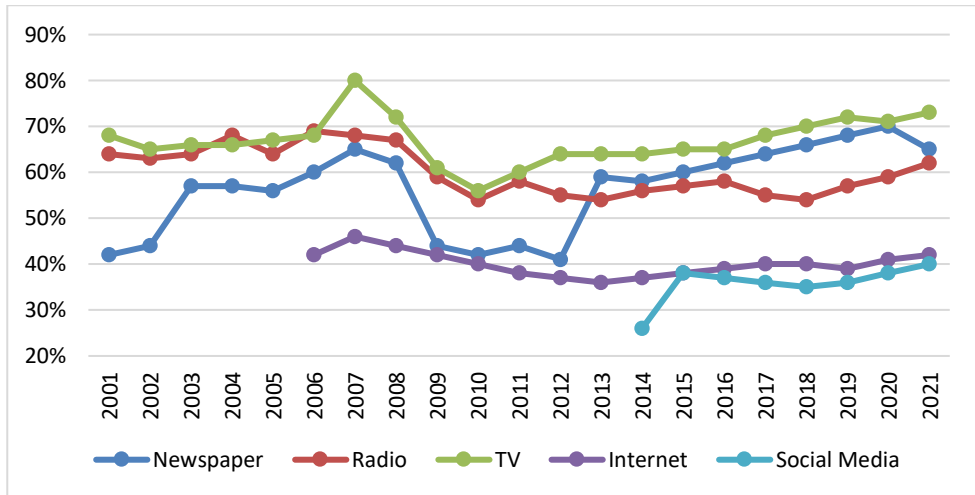
Note: The date represents the percentages of the respondents who declared
that they trust the respective channels.
Source: Own computations based on data retrieved from the Eurobarometer 96.

Trust in traditional media fluctuates significantly between 2001 and 2017. The data in Figure 1 suggest three trends in the evolution of public trust in the media: maintaining trust at relatively high levels (2001-2007), a sharp loss of credibility (2008-2010), and stabilisation of trust at a lower level (2011- 2017). From 2001 to 2007, trust in print media increases significantly from 44 % to 68 %, approaching the trust rates in radio and television, which remained at a relatively high level throughout this period. In fact, 2007 represents a peak in trust for all three types of traditional media. The period 2008-2010 is marked by significant decreases in media credibility: trust in television drops from 80 % in 2007 to 54 % in 2010, trust in radio from 72 % to 50 %, and trust in print media declines from 68 % to 42 %. After 2011, trust in traditional media tends to stabilise, but at around 15 percentage points lower than between 2001 and 2007.

What explains the sharp drop in trust in traditional media between 2008 and 2010? Institutional and cultural theories dominate the debate on the erosion of trust in institutions in general and are also applicable to the decline in trust in the media. On the one hand, cultural theories argue that trust in institutions has exogenous causes, being rather an extension of social trust that is acquired from an early age and then projected onto public institutions. Cultural explanations are supported by a number of studies showing that individuals tend to trust the media more when they trust other people.

According to cultural explanations, the erosion of trust in the traditional media in Romania is driven by a decline in social trust, amid the deterioration of people's material resources during the economic crisis (2008-2010). On the other hand, institutional theories argue that trust has endogenous causes, depending on

institutional performance. Therefore, the erosion of trust in the media is seen because of the degradation of media services and content.

According to institutional explanations, the decline of trust in traditional media in Romania during the economic crisis is due to factors such as the decline in the quality of content and the de-professionalisation of the media in the context of the collapse of the media market. At the same time, there is a growing public perception that the media are deeply flawed and increasingly dependent on the political sphere, amidst the drastic decrease of resources available in the economy. The dependence on funding from politically controlled money has favoured the transformation of the media into instruments of partisan propaganda.

The close links between the media and political parties became evident to the public when various media organisations became directly involved in electoral competition from overtly partisan positions. The economic crisis overlapped with a busy election cycle: local and general elections took place in 2008, and in 2009 the European parliamentary and presidential elections. In this election cycle, the media "stepped out of their positions as supporters of one candidate or another and became active participants in the electoral competition (TVs were fighting with other TVs, journalists with other journalists). The public, as polarised as the media, blamed this conduct". By taking a direct part in the political competition, the media became the target of virulent rhetorical attacks from opposing political elites, which further polarised public perceptions of the media, undermining trust. These developments confirm that trust in the media is formed in a social and political context and is closely related to public perceptions of other institutions. The erosion of trust in the traditional media in Romania is part of a broader syndrome of declining public trust in political institutions during the economic crisis.

The above analysis aimed to show the interdependencies between trust in the media and trust in political parties, on the one hand, and how media consumption influences public perceptions of the credibility of different types of information channels, on the other. In public perception, there are close links especially between traditional media and the political sphere. Those who trust political parties tend to trust the media more than those who do not trust parties. These results confirm that an important manifestation of media politicisation is the differentiation of public trust in the media along partisan lines. However, not all media are equally affected by this trend.

Television is the most politicised channel and, therefore, it is here that the differences in trust between partisans and non-partisans are most clearly seen. Figure 2 graphically confirms the hypothesis of the politicisation of television in terms of public perceptions and trust (Hypothesis 1). People with partisan predispositions (those who trust the parties) are more than 20 percentage points (0.20 on a scale from 0 to 1) more likely to trust television than those who do not trust the parties, controlling for the effect of other factors. The two oblique lines in Figure 2 run almost parallel, which illustrates that the difference between trust levels of partisans and non-partisans holds for both those who do not watch TV at all and the 86.6 % who watch TV daily or almost daily.

Figure 2. Trust in television as a function of trust in parties and media consumption
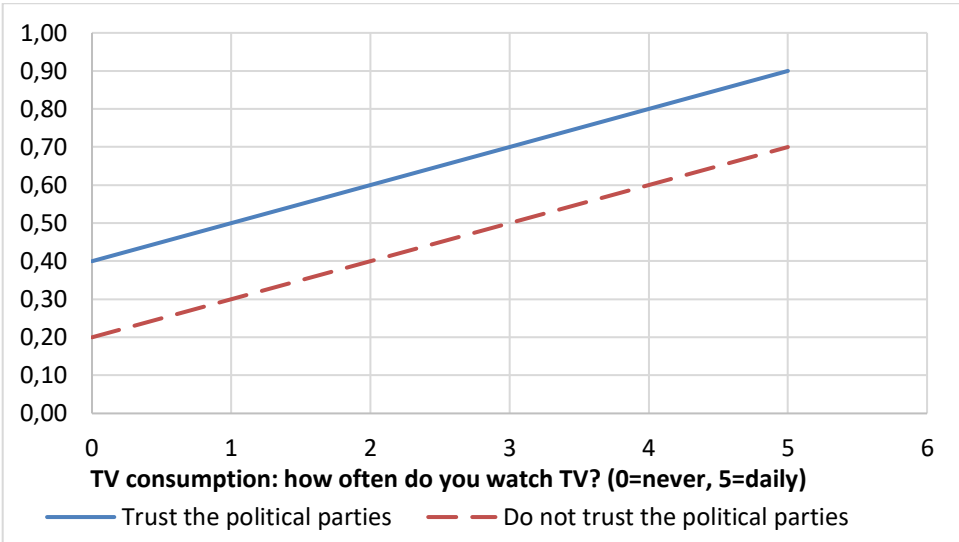
Note: The graph shows the probability of trusting the TV, controlling for the effect
of the other predictors (independent variables) included in Table 1.
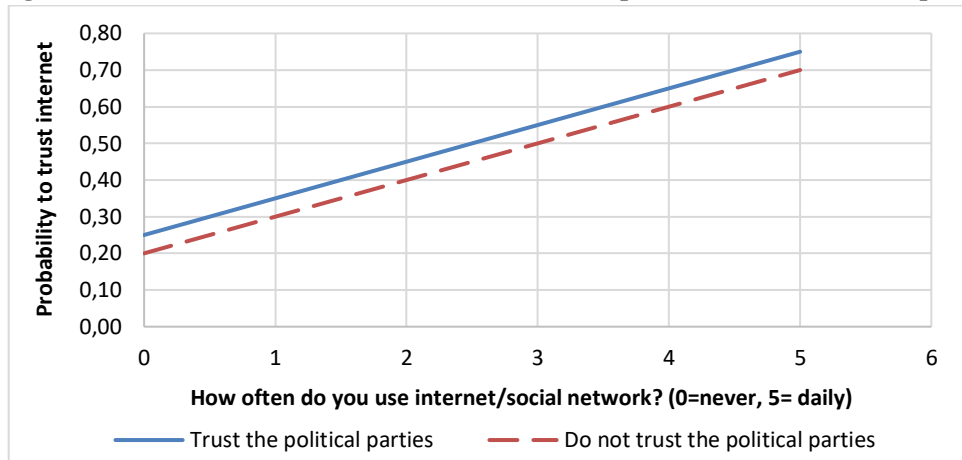*Source:* Graph developed by the author based on the analysis of Eurobarometer 96 data.

On the other hand, the probability of trusting television increases with the frequency of individuals' exposure to TV content. This relationship manifests itself both in the case of those who trust and in the case of those who do not trust the parties. However, those who do not trust the parties cross the threshold of the 0.5 probability of trusting television (dotted horizontal line) only if they watch TV daily or almost daily. On the other side, those who trust the parties pass the probability threshold of 0.5 even if they only watch TV 2-3 times a month. In this case, individuals seem to extrapolate trust in parties to television, even if they watch very rarely TV stations. Several studies find that party identification provides powerful cues in guiding people's attitudes and behaviour. In the case of the partisans from our sample, trust in parties seems to provide them with sufficient cues for evaluation the credibility of television, even in the situation where the personal experience acquired through direct exposure to TV channels is minimal.

Partisanship has much less effect in influencing perceptions of trust in alternative media (Internet and online social networks). Figure 3 shows the fact that the differences between the probabilities of partisans and non-partisans to trust the Internet (the two almost parallel diagonal lines) are about 10 percentage points (0.1 on a scale of 0 to 1). Therefore, trust in parties has a double effect on trust in television, compared to that on trust in the Internet, which confirms Hypothesis 2 of less politicisation of alternative media in public perception.

The analysis of the data in Table 1 shows that the use of online sources does not erode in a statistically significant trust in television and radio but only in print media. In general, the use of a certain medium of communication tends to strengthen trust

in that environment and affects trust less in other mediums. Furthermore, the effect of using online media on Internet trust is with about 10 percentage points (0.1 on a scale of 0 to 1) greater than the effect consumption of TV programs on trust in television. In conclusion, the interdependence between consumption and trust is stronger in the case of alternative media, while the interdependence of partisanship and trust is stronger in traditional environments.

Figure 3. Trust in the Internet as a function of trust in parties and media consumption

Note: The graph shows the probability of trusting the Internet by the level of media consumption and the party trust, controlling for the effect of the other predictors (independent variables) included in Table 1.
Source: Graph developed by the author based on the analysis of Eurobarometer 96 data.

Figure 3 shows that the differences between partisan and non-partisan probabilities of trusting the Internet (the two almost parallel oblique lines) are about 10 percentage points (0.1 on a scale of 0 to 1). Therefore, trust in parties has twice the effect on trust in television than on trust on the Internet, confirming Hypothesis 2 of less politicisation of alternative media in public perception.

5. Conclusions

Taking the literature on media trust as a starting point, this study aimed to answer the question: to what extent is individuals' trust in different types of media in Romania differentiated along party political lines and according to the consumption patterns of the population?

Second, the paper revealed an interdependence between trust, partisanship, and individual-level media consumption patterns. An important manifestation of media politicisation is the differentiation of public trust in the media along partisan lines. Those who trust political parties tend to trust the media more. The relationships between partisan bias and trust in the media are stronger for television and print than for online. Media consumption patterns seem to reinforce the link between

Romanians' trust in parties and media. Nevertheless, the development of the regulatory framework in the digital media may change the patterns in the future and that could be the object of further research studies.

The more often the media consumers are exposed to a particular type of media, the more they tend to trust that source of information. Exposure is, however, selective to those sources of information that tend to confirm their own criticisms. Therefore, the increased politicisation of the media and selective exposure further polarises the public along partisan lines of conflict.

These results have several practical, theoretical, and normative implications. At the practical level, the interdependence between consumption patterns, trust in political parties, and the media has ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, the consumption of partisan media content reinforces the political beliefs of audiences who trust political parties. In addition, exposure to information sources that confirm and reinforce partisan predispositions contributes to better electoral mobilisation of political party supporters. On the other hand, Romanians' trust in political parties has been and remains at low levels, not exceeding 20 % over the last two decades. Therefore, the affiliation of some media with parties, even if it builds loyalty among the hard core of the partisan public, risks damaging the reputation and credibility of these information channels in the eyes of the wider non-partisan public.

Moreover, most people watch only one TV channel, the main source of information in Romania, and "do not cross-check the information as the exercise of critical thinking requires". The heightened politicisation of the media and selective exposure therefore further polarises the public along partisan lines of conflict.

At the normative level, excessive politicisation of the media can undermine the "watchdog of democracy" function that political theory attributes to the press. The less the media system is constrained by political or economic pressures, the closer it is to the democratic ideal of an autonomous and professional press. On the other hand, a politically controlled media agenda takes second place to the public interest and the public's right to accurate information. Democracy, to function optimally, requires accurate information provided by the media, based on which citizens can assess the political sphere and make informed decisions. Trust is essential for the political communication processes in a democracy. However, as the results of this study show, trust in the media is often closely related to trust in political parties. For the non-partisan public, the close links between media and politics can undermine trust in the media, which is perceived as serving the interests of politicians rather than the public interest. Such perceptions can generate anti-elitist sentiments that can spread throughout society, providing fertile ground for the development of populist movements. Populist discourse deliberately constructs an antagonistic relationship between 'the people' and the 'corrupt elite' in which the press is interpreted as an essentially elitist institution. However, it should be noted that trust in the media is not a panacea. The decline in trust can also be interpreted as an increase in the critical sense of the media consumer who feels the need for accurate information in a public space "parasitised by fake news, propaganda, and PR material that will be recognised as journalism". From this point of view, excessive reliance on the media can be as

undesirable from a normative point of view as acute distrust of the press. Democracy seems to be based on a balance between citizens' trust and their critical attitudes toward both political institutions and the media.

References

[1] Cappella, J.N. (1997). Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good, New York: Oxford University Press. Ladd, Jonathan M., Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

[2] Coleman, J.S. (1990). Foundations of Social Theory, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

[3] Dalton, R.J. (2016). "Party Identification and Its Implications," in Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, Edited by William R. Thompson, 18 p., available online at: http://politics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-72.

[4] Fawzi, N. (2019). Untrustworthy news and the media as "enemy of the people?" How a populist worldview shapes recipients' attitudes toward the media, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 24(2), 146-164.

[5] Hallin, D.C., Mellado, C., Mancini, P. (2023). The concept of hybridity in journalism studies, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 28(1), 219-237.

[6] Helberger, N. (2019). On the democratic role of news recommenders, *Digital Journalism*, 7(8), 993-1012.

[7] Kohring, M., Matthes, J. (2007). Trust in News Media: Development and Validation of a Multidimensional Scale, *Communication Research*, 34(2), 231-52.

[8] McLeod, D.M., Wise, D., Perryman, M. (2017). Thinking About the Media: A Review of Theory and Research on Media Perceptions, Media Effects Perceptions, and Their Consequences, *Review of Communication Research*, vol. 5, 35-82.

[9] Putnam, R.D., Leonardi, R., Nanetti, R., Democracy, M. (1993). Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

[10] Tranter, B., Booth, K. (2019). Geographies of trust: Socio-spatial variegations of trust in insurance, *Geoforum*, 107, 199-206.

[11] Tsfati, Y. (2010). Online News Exposure and Trust in the Mainstream Media: Exploring Possible Associations, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 54(1), 22-42.

[12] Tsfati, Y., and Cappella, J. N. (2003). Do People Watch What They Do Not Trust? Exploring the Association between News Media Skepticism and Exposure, *Communication Research*, 30(5), 504-29.

[13] Tully, M., Vraga, E.K., Bode, L. (2020). Designing and testing news literacy messages for social media, *Mass Communication and Society*, 23(1), 22-46.

[14] Uslaner, E.M. (2002). The Moral Foundations of Trust, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[15] Vanacker, B., Belmas, G. (2009). Trust and the Economics of News, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 24(2-3), 110-26.