



HOOKED ON THE FEED

**An Analysis of How
Facebook, TikTok, and X
Shape Information
Consumption in Eastern
Europe**

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Executive Summary

Rationale

This study was launched to better understand how rapidly evolving audience behaviors are reshaping journalism and news consumption, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Hungary, Romania, and Poland were selected as case studies as they provide a rich context for exploring how civic engagement, media trust, and information habits are shaped under pressure from domestic politics and global events. The timing of the research is no coincidence. It follows significant developments such as Romania's annulled 2024 presidential elections, upcoming elections in Romania, Poland and Hungary, and dramatic shifts in U.S. foreign policy under a second Trump presidency. What sets this study apart is its qualitative, people-centered approach. Through in-depth interviews with social media users, the project explores not only what type of content people consume, but *why* they consume it, *how* they interpret it, and *what* it means for their political and civic behavior. This fills a gap in current media research, which often overlooks the personal and cultural factors that shape news engagement.

Research questions

- How do individuals choose, interpret, and share news and information in their everyday social and digital environments?
- What personal, cultural, and societal factors influence audience trust in various sources of news—particularly on social media?
- To what extent do people recognize and value professional journalism compared to other types of content creators or influencers?
- How do changing patterns of media consumption affect civic behaviors, such as voting, activism, or political engagement?

Methods

This study employed a qualitative methodology centered on four case studies across Romania, Hungary, and Poland. A total of **82 interviews** were conducted with social media users as follows: **22 TikTok users in Romania**, **20 Facebook users in Hungary**, **20 X (formerly Twitter) users in Poland**, and **20 Facebook users from the Hungarian community in Romania**.

Key takeaways

Widespread use, shallow engagement

Social media remains highly popular across Eastern Europe, but user engagement is increasingly marked by what this study terms “blind scrolling”—a close relative of doomscrolling—describing a passive, almost knee-jerk habit of endlessly swiping through content without real interest or intent, which cuts across age groups and educational backgrounds.

Social media fatigue

Many users report a growing sense of exhaustion and frustration with platforms they still rely on daily. Despite recognizing the negative impact on their well-being, most feel unable to disconnect.

Platform-specific behaviors

- **TikTok** is dominant among younger Romanians, used mainly for entertainment and influencer-driven content.
- **Facebook** is valued for maintaining personal connections, especially among Hungarian communities.
- **X (formerly Twitter)** is favored by politically engaged users, especially in Poland, for its fast-paced, less ad-charged environment.

Declining trust in journalism

There is a noticeable drift from professional news sources. Most respondents no longer regularly engage with or trust traditional journalism, citing editorial bias, superficial reporting, and political or corporate influence. Especially on TikTok in Romania, non-journalists acting as political commentators are seen as credible sources, further confusing audiences about who qualifies as a journalist.

Information overload and mistrust

An overwhelming flow of online content, paired with regional skepticism toward institutions, fuels disengagement from established media. In Romania, the media is often lumped in with “the system” (or the establishment) and seen as corrupt or out of touch.

Recommendations

This study underscores the urgent need to rethink journalism's place in an age where social media dominates the information diet and traditional trust has worn thin. The findings lay out a path forward.

First, newsrooms need to flip the script—ditching outdated, top-down models and embracing audience-led journalism, trading passive content delivery for active listening, deeper engagement, and more responsive storytelling. Second, media literacy should be treated as a long-term investment. Giving especially younger audiences the tools to question sources and decode agendas is key to rebuilding trust in information. Lastly, governments have a part to play by adopting policies that protect and promote independent journalism, especially in politically volatile contexts.

Looking ahead, future research should dig deeper into the shifting sands of audience trust—exploring how people differentiate between bona fide journalists and influencers posing as credible voices. There's also more to uncover about how civic engagement and political expectations evolve amid the noise and fragmentation of digital platforms. More importantly, this study highlights that media consumption is not just about staying informed. It is about shaping how people see the world, what they value, and how they show up as citizens.

1. Key Findings

Social media platforms continue to enjoy massive popularity across Eastern Europe, with many of the world's top networks capturing large segments of the population. These platforms hold significant sway over people's daily lives, as countless users log in regularly—often for long stretches—to stay in touch, look up information, or simply pass the time.

Yet much of this engagement seems to be running on empty. A key takeaway from this study is the growing trend of what we call “blind scrolling”: a near-automatic habit of thumbing through an endless cascade of content, a cousin of doomscrolling, marked by compulsive, almost trance-like behavior. This behavior was reported by a wide range of our interviewees, cutting across different age groups and education levels. Social media has thus become a constant companion, something people instinctively check during idle moments—whether while waiting for the bus, sipping coffee, or winding down before bed.

While this is not a new phenomenon, a clear sense of social media fatigue is now emerging. Many participants admitted they often open these apps simply out of boredom, barely noticing—or caring about—the content they come across.

Thus, a number of respondents expressed a growing urge to break free from the grip of social media, recognizing its often adverse impact on their well-being. Yet, despite these misgivings, social media continues to wield considerable power, with most users still leaning heavily on these platforms for news, entertainment, and daily connection.

Clear distinctions emerge in how different platforms are used in the region. TikTok has carved out a niche among younger audiences, primarily serving as a hub for light-hearted content, viral videos, and influencer-driven entertainment. It's where users go to unwind, share laughs with friends, and follow familiar digital personalities. Facebook, on the other hand, remains a go-to for staying in touch with friends and family, while X (formerly Twitter) is preferred by those seeking to participate in social and political discourse or to stay abreast of breaking developments.

When asked what they value most about social media, many respondents cited the ability to maintain social ties—particularly on Facebook and, to a lesser extent, X. Polish users showed a marked preference for X, appreciating its relatively ad-light experience compared to Facebook's ad-saturated feed. Concise, fast-moving content was also a major draw, a feature that has helped fuel TikTok's meteoric rise—especially in Romania, where the platform's snappy format resonates strongly with users. Interestingly, some Polish users praised X for fostering a greater sense of free expression, contrasting it with Facebook's more rigid moderation policies, where a controversial comment can quickly lead to temporary bans or content blocks.

But entwined with the complex dependence on—and growing frustration with—social media is another revealing insight from this study: a marked disengagement from professional news media and journalism. Only a small minority of survey participants reported regularly consuming news from established outlets or placing trust in journalists.

One respondent underscored the enduring relevance of journalism, noting that professional reporters often have access to exclusive information that the public would otherwise never see. Still, such views were few and far between. Very few participants indicated a willingness to pay for quality journalism, with subscriptions to reputable outlets being the exception rather than the rule.

Instead, most respondents now turn to alternative sources for their information—either out of convenience or growing skepticism toward mainstream media. Many expressed distrust toward journalists, often pointing to perceived editorial bias stemming from corporate ownership or political funding. Others were simply disillusioned by what they saw as shallow, repetitive reporting that lacks critical depth or original analysis.

Beyond the usual suspects—mistrust and perceived bias—another key factor driving people away from mainstream media is the sheer overload of information. The digital age has ushered in an unrelenting stream of content, with social media platforms constantly jostling for attention. This information deluge, combined with a deep-rooted culture of mistrust in the region, has left many feeling overwhelmed and disengaged. As revealed in our interviews, much of this cynicism can be traced back to widespread disillusionment with politics, which in turn erodes trust in public institutions, services, and by extension, the media itself.

In Romania, for example, journalism and media are often painted with the same broad brush as the political establishment—derisively referred to by respondents as “the system.” This sentiment came to a head during the run-up to the 2024 presidential elections, when many voters threw their support behind Călin Georgescu, a previously unknown right-wing figure. For these voters, the ballot was not just about policies, but a symbolic rejection of “the system”—a concept many invoked with conviction, yet struggled to define clearly.

The line between credible journalism and impersonation has become increasingly difficult to distinguish. In regions like Dobrogea, southeastern Romania, where TikTok dominates the media landscape, the platform played a key role in fueling the rise of right-wing political figures. The “journalists” most commonly cited by our respondents bear little resemblance to traditional media professionals. One such figure, Bobby D, has carved out a niche by posting short, politically charged TikTok videos, self-styled as journalism. Another, Emil Tatu—a practicing lawyer—hosts interviews for a local online station, reportedly charging upwards of €1,000 per appearance during the campaign season.

This blurring of boundaries has left audiences unsure of who to trust, further muddying the waters of public discourse.

But amid the fierce battle for public attention, state-sponsored and highly coordinated propaganda outlets continue to exert considerable influence. Hungary offers a telling example. There, the media landscape is sharply polarized, with respondents in our survey frequently categorizing outlets as either pro- or anti-government. Ethnic Hungarians in Romania, too, often consume Hungarian state media with ease, reinforcing an identity shaped by the ideological narratives endorsed by Budapest. This alignment extends to international affiliations, with perceived allies including Russia, China, and, more recently, the United States—following the anticipated political resurgence of Donald Trump—while the European Union is cast as a principal enemy.

Among many within Romania's Hungarian minority—strong supporters of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's conservative Fidesz party—the messaging of Hungarian state-aligned media finds fertile ground. Narratives surrounding the war in Ukraine, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, and Hungary's contentious relationship with the EU have deeply influenced public discourse within these communities.

By contrast, in Romania proper, the Chinese-owned platform TikTok has emerged as a major player—particularly among users with right-wing political sympathies. A significant portion of our TikTok-using respondents identified the EU and the U.S. as perceived threats to national sovereignty, while expressing more favorable views toward Russia. In this environment, social media platforms are not just communication tools—they have become powerful engines of political sentiment and public opinion. The content that circulates often tugs at emotional chords, frequently veering away from mainstream media narratives and tapping into undercurrents of discontent and identity politics.

This growing rift between the two public agendas, one set by traditional journalism and another one by social media, was perhaps most clearly illustrated in Romania's 2024 presidential election when a candidate who had been virtually invisible in the mainstream media managed to clinch victory—an outcome driven largely by online momentum and grassroots digital campaigning.

In conclusion, these observations highlight a profound shift in how the public perceives, consumes, and gathers information in the region—one that has gradually pushed traditional journalism to the sidelines of daily life. This transformation has been unfolding for years, if not decades, across the region, and recent trends have only accelerated the pace. For media outlets, this serves as a crucial wake-up call—an urgent prompt to reassess their role in a rapidly evolving communication ecosystem. To remain relevant, they must not only retain their core audiences, who continue to value professionally sourced news, but also craft the content that can recapture the attention of those drifting toward the fast, attention-grabbing allure of social media—even when such platforms fall short of substance or fail to meet people's expectations.

2. Introduction

This research brings together key insights from a project designed by the Thomson Foundation in partnership with the Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC). Both organizations focus on researching how the evolving nature of audiences affects news media and journalism. For the Thomson Foundation, understanding these dynamics holds the key to refining its approach to media assistance in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in other regions where it is active. Concurrently, MJRC's interests are resonant with its new research initiative, "Who's Listening," which seeks to thoroughly research people's attitudes, habits, and beliefs to unearth the reasons behind their engagement and consumption habits concerning news and information.

This study, hereinafter referred to as the "Thomson Foundation-MJRC study", unfolds against the backdrop of consequential political shifts, notably the 2024 presidential election in Romania, which was marked by a sea of changes in information consumption patterns. While much of the discussion about that election has been analyzing possible foreign influence, there's scant understanding of the underlying motivations prompting audiences to choose various sources and platforms for their information needs and of how this affects their civic behaviors.

For more than a decade, journalism has concentrated on quantitative indicators such as website traffic, social media interactions, and the time audiences spend on content to try and better understand and cater to their readers.[1] Meanwhile, the media consumption landscape is being explored through wide-ranging surveys designed to evaluate how people select and engage with news media and journalism. Although these insights hold value, this broad approach sometimes misses the critical nuances that provide a richer context.

This research project aims to chart new territory by immersing itself in the diverse lives of audiences. We sought to uncover how factors such as local economic conditions, cultural norms, personal values, attitudes, and beliefs shape how people communicate and consume information. Essentially, the goal of this research project is to explore what influences people's interactions with news and media, particularly their behavior on social media and their indirect engagement journalism.[2]

To accomplish this, we conducted interviews with users of various social media platforms as described in the Methodology below.

[1] Clifton, B. (2012). *Advanced web metrics with Google Analytics*. John Wiley & Sons; Blanchett Neheli, N. (2018). *News by numbers: The evolution of analytics in journalism*. *Digital Journalism*, 6(8), 1041-1051; Carlson, M. (2019). *Measurable Journalism*. Routledge.

[2] Such as Digital News Reports from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (see Methodology [here](#)) or the Eurobarometer, which also covers media habits (see [here](#)).

As for contextual factors, this study should be interpreted in light of the surrounding circumstances as the feedback gleaned from the interviews was largely colored by current events. Among the more influential, the Romanian Constitutional Court annulled the presidential elections of December 2024, with a new round of elections slated for May 2025. Donald Trump began his second term as the U.S. President, sparking significant global developments like the U.S. enforcing peace talks between Ukraine and Russia and discontinuing military aid for Ukraine. Trump also began to revamp America's foreign relations with old allies, using tactics such as imposing tariffs and demanding territorial control globally. Additionally, Poland was preparing for a presidential election in May 2025, nearly two years after the departure of the populist Law and Justice (PiS) party from power while general elections are planned to be held in Hungary in 2026.

3. Methodology

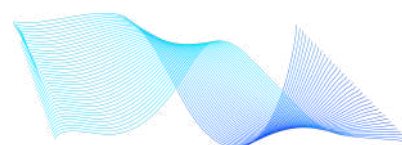
This study presents findings through research of four case studies: TikTok in Romania, Facebook among Hungarian communities in Romania, Facebook use in Hungary, and X usage in Poland.

These social media platforms were selected based on their popularity within the nation or the specific communities pertinent to our research (see Overview of Social Media section below). In Romania, for instance, interviews took place in Bucharest, Romania's capital, as well as in the southeastern region of Dobrogea, encompassing the counties of Tulcea and Constanța. Notably, Constanța was among the trio of Romanian counties—alongside Suceava and Arad—where the right-wing political party, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), garnered the largest share of the votes in the 2024 elections.

A total of 82 interviews were conducted as follows: 20 involving Facebook users in Hungary, 20 with X users from Poland, 22 with TikTok users in Romania, and 20 with Facebook users from Romania's Hungarian communities.

The interviewees were chosen to reflect a wide range of backgrounds, considering age, education, gender, and geographical diversity, including both city dwellers and those from rural areas. For instance, the gender distribution is close at 53% male and 47% female, while education levels are evenly split with half having completed tertiary education and the other half having secondary or lower education. Urban inhabitants are more common in the sample, making up 62%. Age-wise, young adults aged 18-24 dominate the group at 25%, with the 45-54 age bracket following at 23% and those aged 35-44 at 21%. The rest comprises individuals aged 55 and above 65 (16%) and those between 25-34 years (15%).

The interviews were conducted between 19 February and March 2025 by four research teams using a standardized set of topics and questions. Details on the participants and the questionnaires can be found in the Annex of this report.



4. An Overview of Social Media in Central and Eastern Europe

Social media platforms continue to hold immense popularity across Central and Eastern Europe, mirroring global trends. While these regions host many of the world's prominent social networking sites, the landscape varies significantly at the national level.

Leading the charge is Poland, with a 92% internet penetration rate, and 81% of its citizens relying on online news sources, as reported by the Reuters Institute. Hungary trails slightly, boasting an 89% penetration rate with 78% of individuals turning to the internet for news. Romania, not far behind, flaunts an 84% internet penetration, also with 78% of its population browsing news online.

What these nations share in common, however, is dwindling confidence in news media. Trust figures for 2024 tell a worrying story: Poland shows just 30%, having dramatically dropped from 56% in 2015. Meanwhile, Romania sees trust at 27%, down from 39% in 2017. Finally, Hungary reports the lowest with a mere 23%, having decreased from 31% in 2016, as surveyed by the Reuters Institute.

TikTok in Romania

Romania, with its population hovering around 19 million, experienced a significant digital transformation with roughly 13 million active social media accounts logged in January 2025, comprising nearly 70% of the populace, as reported by DataReportal. Various datasets shared by tech firms indicate that YouTube dominates the Romanian scene with 13 million users in 2025, followed by Facebook with 9.90 million users, and Instagram capturing the interest of 5.45 million users. Meanwhile, platform X engaged 1.63 million individuals.

TikTok, owned by a Chinese enterprise, has all but swept through Romania, amassing around 9 million accounts, per insights from the World Population Review.[3] Romania boasts the highest proportion of TikTok accounts relative to population in the entire European Union—an impressive 47%. Highlighting an explosive trend, Romania has watched TikTok usage skyrocket by 20%, leaping from 7.6 million to 9 million accounts between 2023 and 2024. This surge allowed TikTok to outpace Facebook in users in 2024 for the first time ever.[4]

[3] Miruna Diaconu, "Platforma chinezească TikTok numără 9 milioane de conturi în România, cât jumătate din populația țării. Numărul conturilor a crescut cu 20% în ultimul an", Ziarul Financiar, 26 November 2024, available online at <https://www.zf.ro/eveniment/platforma-chinezeasca-tiktok-numara-9-milioane-de-conturi-in-romania-22575289>.

[4] Nicolae Cotruț, Cătălin Tolontan, "TikTok, cu 8,97 de milioane de utilizatori, să fie interzis în România, a cerut un șef ANCOM. Ce s-a întâmplat în Rusia când YouTube a fost încetinit", HotNews, 28 November 2024, available online at <https://hotnews.ro/tiktok-cu-897-de-milioane-de-utilizatori-sa-fie-interzis-in-romania-a-cerut-ancom-ce-s-a-intamplat-in-rusia-cand-youtube-a-fost-incetinit-1847808>.

Following the 2024 elections in Romania, TikTok's significant influence has ignited fervent discussions after far-right figure Călin Georgescu triumphed with nearly 23% of the votes, cast by around 9.4 million Romanians—approximately 52% of the electorate. [5] With a doctorate in soil science, Georgescu held positions within Romania's Ministry of Environment during the 1990s. His rise in politics left media watchers and analysts perplexed and anxious owing to his previously low-key profile throughout the country.

It was subsequently found that Georgescu secured an advantage through a TikTok campaign akin to Russian-style operations aimed at influencing public sentiment in Ukraine and Moldova, as disclosed by declassified documents from the Romanian intelligence services. According to these documents, paid influencers and certain extremist right-wing factions, some with connections to organized crime, bolstered Georgescu's formidable online presence.[6] Amidst this maelstrom of controversy, the elections were annulled—a drastic measure scarcely seen in Europe. Consequently, Georgescu was barred from taking part in the rescheduled elections slated for May 2025.

A study conducted by World Vision Romania[7] found that a noteworthy majority of the youth engage with TikTok daily. Insights from the survey demonstrated a direct link between the time spent online and TikTok usage, with youngsters aged 14 to 19 clocking an average of 2.5 hours daily on the platform, surpassing five hours online overall.

In Romania, TikTok is predominantly a source of entertainment rather than information. Its notable political impact can be attributed to influencers, both paid and unpaid, who boast substantial followings. Meanwhile, mainstream media or professional journalists have been slow to launch accounts on TikTok.

Most of the TikTok users aged 14 to 19 follow friends and acquaintances (76.8%) while 68.6% keep tabs on celebrities. Additionally, 36.7% tune into content from field experts, 15.2% are interested in accounts of politicians, and only 9.9% follow journalists. Notably, 43% of these young users consider the information provided by TikTok to be trustworthy to a great or very great extent.

[5] Euronews. Far-right populist Calin Georgescu enters Romania's presidential runoff with most votes. Euronews, 25 November 2024, available online at <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/25/populist-calin-georgescu-takes-surprise-lead-in-romania's-presidential-election>.

[6] Paun, Carmen, "Romania's presidential front-runner Georgescu benefited from Russia-style booster campaign, declassified docs say, Politico, 5 December 2024, available online at <https://www.politico.eu/article/romania's-presidential-frontrunner-benefited-from-russia-style-booster-campaign-declassified-docs-say/>.

[7] World Vision Romania, "Mai mult de 8 din 10 adolescenți care au TikTok accesează zilnic platforma și au primit conținut politic în perioada alegerilor", 11 February 2025, available online at <https://worldvision.ro/2025/02/11/ziua-sigurantei-pe-internet-sondaj-generatia-tiktok-mai-mult-de-8-din-10-adolescenti-care-au-tiktok-accesaza-zilnic-platforma-si-au-primit-continut-politic-in-perioada-alegerilor/>.

Facebook in Hungary

At the beginning of 2025, internet usage surged past nine million individuals in Hungary, pushing online penetration to an impressive 94%, as reported by Data Reportal. This source also revealed that 73% of Hungary's populace, close to 10 million strong, engaged with social media platforms as of January 2025.

Facebook is widely used by people in Hungary. Statista data from 2024 indicates that around 64% of Hungarians maintained a Facebook account, and by March 2025, the presence of Facebook users soared to 7.11 million, securing Facebook's position as the premier social media platform.

A study released in 2025 by Hungary's media regulator, the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH), found that Facebook isn't merely the most used networking site but also boasts heavy engagement, as 89% of its users visiting it daily — remarkably, 60% do so multiple times a day. While users primarily hop on to peruse friends' posts, a significant number of users explore news, scout for products and services, or keep tabs on other users, according to findings from the NMHH research.[8]

Media outlets with large reach on Facebook in Hungary

Media outlet	Type of operation	Number of followers
24.hu	News website	1,000,000
Blikk	Tabloid daily	881,000
HVG (Heti Világgazdaság)	Political and business weekly, news portal	696,000
Index	News website	652,000
ATV	Commercial TV	606,000
Origo	News website	533,000
444.hu	News website	487,000
Duna TV	Public (state-controlled) TV	419,000
TV2	National commercial TV broadcaster	365,000
Retro Radio	National commercial radio	349,000
Hír TV	Commercial news channel, pro-government	308,000
Ripost	Tabloid	286,000
Petőfi Radio	Public (state-controlled) radio	267,000
RTL Klub	National commercial TV broadcaster	226,000
Atlatszo	Investigative news outlet	160,000
Kossuth Radio	Public (state-controlled) radio	111,000

Source: MJRC, data collected in April 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

[8] NMHH, "AZ ELEKTRONIKUS HÍRKÖZLÉSI PIAC FOGYASZTÓINAK VIZSGÁLATA. Internetes felmérés – 2024", available online at https://english.nmhh.hu/document/251288/riport_nmhh_internethasznaloi_kutatas_2024.pdf.

Facebook in Transylvania

Transylvania, a region in northwestern Romania, harbors around 1.2 million ethnic Hungarians who account for nearly 6% of Romania's populace, marking one of Europe's largest ethnic minority groups. The Hungarian government in Budapest has channeled significant financial support into Hungarian-language media, educational systems, and religious structures within Transylvania in recent years,[9] with the chief aim of promoting cultural and linguistic ties among Hungarians in Romania.[10]

Broadening and consolidating media outlets emerges as a core strategy, noteworthy for instilling a pronounced sense of connection to Hungary over Romania in numerous Hungarians living there. Moreover, it's reported by community members that there is an amplified bond with Hungary's political sphere, subsequently overshadowing familiarity with Romanian politics led from Bucharest.

Tamás Kiss, a scholar at the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities, has termed this phenomenon as a system of 'ethnic parallelism,' allowing Hungarians in Romania to live their lives almost as though they were part of Hungary.[11]

As Hungarians living in Transylvania are allowed to participate in Hungary's parliamentary elections, this ethnic group is drenched in an avalanche of populist political rhetoric streaming from Budapest. Additionally, Hungarian media garners a significantly greater level of trust compared to their Romanian counterparts.

According to a survey by the Bálványos Institute from November 2021, close to half of the participants demonstrated considerable trust toward public media in Hungary, while confidence in Romanian TV channels lingered at a modest 23% to 26%. In addition, the study found that Hungarians living in Transylvania chiefly acquire news through television and face-to-face conversations, each accounting for almost 74%. Social media, predominantly Facebook, and various online platforms follow at roughly 53%, rounding out the manifold sources.[12]

Operationally active on Facebook, Hungary's ruling national-conservative party Fidesz successfully directs its illiberal narratives towards the Transylvanian audience via strategic, sponsored posts targeting identified groups.[13] A significant portion of the local Hungarian population relies on Facebook as their main news outlet, a testament, in part, to the waning influence of local presses meant to serve these Hungarian communities.

[9] Beacon Project Research, "FIDESZ propaganda and the Hungarian minority in Transylvania: context, channels, and narratives", available online at https://expertforum.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Final-Report-FIDESZ-propaganda-and-the-Hungarian-minority-in-Transylvania_-context-channels-and-narratives-AL-JR-19-X-4.pdf.

[10] "Daună totală: 'tămâierea' presei maghiare din Ardeal cu banii Budapestei, un fiasco zgomotos", Afaceri, 30 December 2024, available online at <https://www.afaceri.news/dauna-totala-tamaierea-presei-maghiare-din-ardeal-cu-banii-budapestei-un-fiasco-zgomotos/>.

[11] Akos Keller-Alant, "Living like in Hungary: Orban Bankrolling Romania 'Ethnic Parallelism'", BIRN, 30 January 2020, available online at <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/30/living-like-in-hungary-orban-bankrolling-romania-ethnic-parallelism/>.

[12] See Codruța Simina, "Analiză. Cum propagă AUR aceleași mesaje ca partidul de guvernământ din Ungaria", RISE, 21 August 2023, available online at <https://www.riseproject.ro/projects/analiza-cum-propaga-aur-aceleasi-mesaje-ca-partidul-de-guvernament-din-ungaria/>.

[13] Jeremy Druker, "Hungary Exports Nationalism Via Facebook", CEPA, 9 February 2022, available online at <https://cepa.org/article/hungary-exports-nationalism-via-facebook/>.

X (Twitter) in Poland

According to the 2024 Digital News Report, X remains an important social media platform in Poland, capturing the attention of approximately 30% of internet users aged 16 to 64. Facebook leads the pack with 86.9%, followed by Facebook Messenger at 80.1%, Instagram (62.7%), WhatsApp (55.2%), and TikTok (49.6%).

The Polish social media landscape is witnessing a continual upswing in its user base. As per DataReportal, there were 34.5 million internet users in Poland at the outset of 2025. Extrapolation from X's advertising data places its user count in Poland at 5.33 million during this period.

Roughly 75% of Poles devote between three to four hours per day to digital browsing. Meanwhile, 40% spend about one to two hours, whereas 14% spend five or six hours a day online, based on insights from a 2025 study.^[14] Older residents, in particular, spend less time immersed in cyberspace—50% of those aged 50-59 and nearly 60% of individuals over 60 limit themselves to one to two hours daily. On the contrary, younger folks lean heavily into their screens, often engaging five to six hours daily, accounting for 40% of that demographic.

The online pursuits of Poles are predominantly geared toward news, both local and international (60%), engaging in leisure activities such as streaming movies and music (57%), and conducting online banking (54%).^[15]

In recent years, X has surged in popularity as a powerful political communication tool, proving instrumental in election campaigns and image crafting. Its features facilitate rapid, cost-efficient outreach, making waves in influence.^[16]

[14] Santander Polaków Portfel Własny. Polacy w sieci, available online at https://www.santanderconsumer.pl/gfx/santander/userfiles/_public/o_banku/raport_ppw_polacy_w_sieci.pdf.

[15] Santander Polaków Portfel Własny, cit.

[16] Maguś, W. (2021). Twitter jako narzędzie zarządzania wizerunkiem. Zarządzanie Mediami, 9(3), 507-533.

Media outlets with large reach on X in Poland

Media outlet	Number of followers
TVN24	2,121,400
Newsweek Polska	962,300
TVP Info	861,900
Gazeta.pl	605,900
WPROST.pl	414,400
Rzeczpospolita	364,000
Radio TOK FM	359,000
Fakty RMF FM	317,700
Polsat News	296,000
Onet	291,100
OKO.press	239,400
Radio ZET	167,800
TV Republika	167,000
DoRzeczy	165,000
Wirtualna Polska	163,400
Dziennik Gazeta Prawna	100,000

Source: MJRC, data collected in April 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

5. Analysis

5.1 Civic Duty and Political Affinities

5.1.1 Civic Life

Most engaging civic activities

Despite an overarching skepticism towards politicians, our research has shown that there remains a significant interest among individuals in exercising their electoral choice. However, tangible civic engagement wanes, with minimal participation evident, particularly from the younger demographic, in activities like protests, petition signing, or community initiatives. On the spectrum of civic engagement surveyed, the interviewees representing the Hungarian minority in Romania in our sample exhibit very limited involvement, contrasting sharply with respondents in Poland who demonstrate a strong penchant for active citizenship. This trend can be attributed, in part, to a higher proportion of urban and well-educated respondents within our Polish sample of interviewees.

Universally, the act of voting emerged as the most favored form of civic participation among respondents. An overwhelming majority indicated regular voting habits, viewing it not merely as a civic duty but also as an opportunity to influence their future—or both.

In Transylvania, even the most politically disengaged Hungarians exhibit remarkable interest in electoral participation. Every Hungarian respondent from these communities confirmed participation in past elections, a sentiment echoed by the majority of respondents in Romania and Poland who deemed voting as their principal form of civic involvement. In Poland, a considerable number of respondents boasted an unbroken record of attendance at every voting event, including the recent parliamentary elections in October 2023, which saw an unprecedented voter turnout of 74.4%, the highest since the watershed elections of 1989. For many individuals in Poland, casting their ballot is perceived both as an intrinsic human right and a civic obligation. Additionally, it serves as an opportunity to voice their displeasure with prevailing political measures.

Types of civic engagement the respondents in the Thomson Foundation-MJRC study spoke about

	FB users in Hungarian communities in Romania	Facebook users in Hungary	TikTok users in Romania	X users in Poland
Voting in elections	Active	Active	Active (mostly young people)	Active
Participating in protests	Limited engagement	High engagement (urban areas)	Active (mostly young people)	Active
Signing petitions	Limited engagement		Active (mostly young people)	
Contacting elected representatives	Limited engagement			
Community activities (volunteering)		High engagement (i.e. environmental cleanups, school fundraisers), mostly in small communities	Relatively active (mostly young people)	Relatively active

Source: Thomson Foundation-MJRC study; See the list of interviewees by country, gender, age, rural/urban area and education level in Annex (interviews conducted in February-March 2025) • Created with Datawrapper

When considering other avenues of civic engagement, volunteering surfaced as a notable activity among some respondents within the Romanian demographic. This is particularly prominent among younger, more educated persons who frequently partake in signing petitions and lend their support through activities like sports initiatives or blood donation campaigns.

In Poland, civic engagement appears to be a significant priority, with a notable number of people actively participating in demonstrations and supporting NGOs and foundations, as well as embracing grassroots socio-political endeavors. Many interviewees, particularly those identifying as liberal or center-left, vividly remember women's social movements and their advocates rallying against the restrictive abortion law imposed by the conservative ruling of the Constitutional Court in October 2020.

In contrast, civic activism within the Hungarian communities in Romania is quite sparse, with only a handful of participants indicating their involvement in protests, petition signing, or reaching out to elected officials. A few respondents, largely younger or middle-aged city dwellers, have at some point engaged in volunteer work. However, these pursuits tend to fall by the wayside once full-time employment becomes a priority. On the other hand, respondents from Hungary in our sample report more vibrant civic engagement, particularly in smaller towns where residents partake in communal activities like environmental clean-ups and school fundraisers. In smaller towns or villages, many rely on personal contacts and word-of-mouth for sharing information, with Facebook groups serving as prime sources for official communications or local tidbits—from municipal updates to reports of lost puppies and handyman inquiries.

Civically proactive interviewees in Romania, particularly those living in Bucharest, exhibit heightened awareness regarding extremist movements. Individuals engaged through entities such as NGOs, scout groups, or school-based actions are clearly more socially active and display different digital habits, often lacking over-dependency on the internet despite being conscious of digital temptations.

"It happens naturally - I don't feel dependent on the app. If I have a busy day with no breaks, I don't feel the urge to go on TikTok. For example, when I'm [with] the scouts, outdoors, or doing activities, I only use my phone to text my mom and let her know I'm okay." (woman, Romania, age 18-24).

In contrast, respondents who possess a minimal social life often become more drawn to right-wing extremist figures and are frequent users of the internet. Călin Georgescu, the unexpected winner in the first round of Romania's presidential elections in 2024, has garnered the attention of a respondent—a woman who abstains from civic participation such as volunteering or protesting, and whose social activities are largely confined to occasional church attendance. She noted:

"[Georgescu] is the kind of man who sees everything. Like a tracking dog. He digs until he finds the thief. I found out about him on TikTok. I saw him on Facebook too, but they removed him quickly. [...] When he talks about politics, it's not just politics, it's about his family too. His wife is very respected. A real lady. Compared to me, I don't have her education, her university degree. She's a lady. She deserves respect. The way she speaks, how she communicates with people - it doesn't matter if the person is a garbage collector." (woman, Romania, age 55-60)

With whom people are talking about social and political issues with

When it comes to engaging in discussions about social and political matters, interviewees' family and friends often take precedence. However, this varies significantly across nations, regions, and different groups of respondents.

Taking Hungary as an illustration, people talk about politics and current affairs with family and friends almost daily. Engaging in political discussions with colleagues does happen, yet it is less frequent.

Often, such dialogues influence one's level of civic participation. For instance, in Poland, a few of the interviewees said that they may decide to join protests after being spurred on by their closest friends. In Romania as well, a civically active high-school student from Bucharest mentioned that for new voters^[17] in particular, "political orientation is largely influenced by family background." (man, Romania, aged 18-24).

Age also plays a crucial role in determining who people turn to for discussions on social and political topics. Among the interviewees in Bucharest, for instance, there is a noticeable divide in engagement levels between generations. Younger individuals are busier discussing public issues with family and friends, holding distinct political views, heading to the polls, and getting involved in activities like petitioning or volunteering, driven by the hope that their civic contributions can make a difference. On the flip side, older participants frequently express disenchantment with political parties and governmental functioning, whether at the local or national level. Consequently, many choose to withdraw from political discussions altogether, seeing it as a way to shield themselves from disappointment.

"I am not signing petitions and stuff like that, because I came to the conclusion that we don't really matter. It is in vain that we go to vote, because it doesn't matter, who has to win will win. If you submit a petition, it will get lost on the way." (man, Romania, aged 45-54)

There are instances where young individuals steer clear of political discussions due to feeling a consensus is unattainable. Some respondents from Constanța noted that they avoid such topics with their families, as their perspectives are starkly different, making such discussions seem futile. Similarly, several respondents in Hungary expressed that they stay away from political conversations because they perceive them as "depressing, irritating, and pointless." Those who do engage in discussing politics often do so with like-minded people, largely to vent their frustrations about the prevailing political climate.

[17] In the last parliamentary elections, 35.5% of voters aged 18 to 30 voted for extremist parties. See Remus Florescu, "Profilul alegătorului suveranist și 'georgescian'. Legătură cu lipsa demnității la locul de muncă", *Adevărul*, 3 December 2024. Available online at https://adevarul.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2025/profilul-alegatorului-suveranist-si-georgescian-2405917.html#google_vignette.

The growing trend of shunning political discourse appears to stem from a diluted trust in politics. While some older individuals perceive this as a widespread skepticism toward the political system, the younger generation either succumbs to familial influence or holds the belief that politicians are all cut from the same cloth. An 18-year-old civic-minded high-school student, politically inclined toward Western ideals, captured this sentiment saying, "Everyone says everything and nothing at the same time. It's all just nice speeches meant to attract public attention, but ultimately, they mean nothing" (man, Romania, aged 18-24).

For many Hungarians residing in Romania, especially those critical of Fidesz and the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, political discussions are like navigating a minefield, often rendered off-limits when opinions diverge.

"I try not to talk about politics with people, because it's not worth it. Politics is such a trench warfare that it's a shame to spoil friendships or good acquaintanceships because of politics. (...) And especially because I have acquaintances who I know are exactly the kind of Orbán fanatics and Fidesz fanatics, and then I avoid the subject completely, because it's like an atheist and a priest talking about the existence of God, so it's not worth wasting time and energy on it." (man, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 45-54)

The distrust in politics has paved the way for the rise of extremist ideologies and leaders, most interviewees in this project indicated. A 57-year-old Romanian woman, with eight years of schooling, voiced her deep-seated admiration for the far-right extremist presidential hopeful Călin Georgescu and his spouse. While she maintains her allegiance to the Romanian people, her confidence in the government is shattered and her skepticism toward the broader political landscape in Romania remains unshaken.

"Once in power, no one really knows if even he [Georgescu] won't change. When a person gets to the meat and sets the bone aside, they forget. Honestly, I swear, I don't trust anyone anymore." (woman, Romania, aged 54-65)

Whom respondents in the Thomson Foundation-MJRC study talk to about social and political issues

	FB users in Hungarian communities in Romania	Facebook users in Hungary	TikTok users in Romania	X users in Poland
Family	✓	✓	✓	✓
Friends	✓	✓	✓	✓
Colleagues		✓		✓
Neighbors				
Teachers			✓	

Source: Thomson Foundation-MJRC study; See the list of interviewees by country, gender, age, rural/urban area and education level in Annex (interviews conducted in February-March 2025) • Created with Datawrapper

What people care about most

Despite the widespread dissatisfaction and ennui people express towards political affairs and politicians, interviews in this project highlight that politics undeniably ranks high on people's list of interests. It consistently emerges as a sought-after topic across our surveyed countries. Corruption frequently appears among discussion topics, often related to politics, demonstrating an ongoing public appetite for such issues, even as some speculate that the fervor of investigations has begun to overwhelm public interest.

Likewise, the prominence of education as a major area of interest reveals a deep-seated frustration with the current educational systems, probably tied to parental concerns about their children's futures. Moreover, enduring concerns such as the economy—a staple anxiety in the aftermath of successive economic crises—remain a significant focus. People continue to grapple with related problems like housing accessibility and salaries, which strike a chord with many.

Beyond these broader issues, specialized topics brush to the fore in the favorites list of many respondents, particularly those with higher education. Issues like the fight against fascism, women's rights, and minority concerns resonate deeply and reflect specific societal challenges.

Apart from that, specific subjects and perspectives resonate with particular respondents due to regional contexts. In Poland, for instance, international politics is a hot-button topic, especially concerning Russia's belligerence in Ukraine, discussions around the European rule of law, and Poland's ties with NATO and the United States. This matter weighs heavily on the minds of those in urban centers. Conversely, individuals residing beyond Warsaw, in cities such as Bydgoszcz, Toruń, Gdynia, and Wrocław, tend to gravitate towards matters of local governance and municipal politics.

Moving on, the situation of the Hungarian communities in Romania presents a unique scenario as they straddle two worlds, navigating both Bucharest and Budapest. Consequently, their interests are intricately tied to each of the nations they look toward. Political enthusiasts among the interviewees keep a keen eye on developments simultaneously in Hungary and Romania. Yet, while Hungary's political discourse is heavily influenced by Fidesz, encompassing topics like the Ukraine conflict, LGBTQ matters, Hungary's relations with the EU, migration, and the Hungarian opposition, the topics related to Romania cover more day-to-day concerns like education, healthcare, economic conditions, and minority rights.

Relevant topics mentioned by the respondents in the Thomson Foundation-MJRC study

FB users in Hungarian communities in Romania	Facebook users in Hungary	TikTok users in Romania	X users in Poland
Hungary-related topics: War in Ukraine, LGBTQ, Hungary-EU relations, migration, Hungarian opposition; Romania-related topics: Education, healthcare, economy, minority rights	Politics, including current affairs (especially Donald Trump), corruption, healthcare, education	Education, corruption, politics, healthcare, economy, lifestyle (travel, wellbeing)	Politics, geopolitics, economy, human rights, healthcare, access to housing; May 2025 presidential elections

Source: Thomson Foundation-MJRC study; See the list of interviewees by country, gender, age, rural/urban area and education level in Annex (interviews conducted in February-March 2025) • Created with Datawrapper

5.1.2 Political Preferences and Opinions

Ideological and party preferences

When queried about their political ideologies and party leanings, the interviewees paint a kaleidoscopic picture, with individuals' political loyalties stretching across a wide ideological spectrum. In Romania, there is a notably varied range of political preferences; however, very few respondents could pinpoint a specific political ideology to which they gravitate. A number of participants from Constanța, one of the two Romanian counties (the other being Arad in western Romania) where the right-wing party, Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), garnered the most votes in the 2024 elections, admitted they couldn't recollect any particular ideology.

"Let me think about what I've listened to on the programs, what I've read. No, nothing's coming to me. Uh, I don't. I don't know. I really don't." (woman, Romania, aged 18-24)

Several other respondents from Romania remarked that their ideological stance evolves over time, depending on what carries weight in their lives at any given moment. Many underscored that other elements take greater precedence over ideology in how they interact with the political landscape.

"I identify myself with fair, honest, patriotic, sovereign people who want the good of the country and the people, not with those who have sold and dismembered this country." (woman, Romania, aged 45-54)

Conversely, some individuals identify more closely with political figures than they do with a rigid ideology. Several residents of Constanța have openly voiced their support for right-wing populist leaders like George Simion, Diana Șoșoacă, and Călin Georgescu. They explained that they formed these political associations primarily through TikTok. Even in discussions about political parties, these respondents quickly shift their focus to the charismatic figures behind these parties, whom they feel a personal affinity for.

"I like more S.O.S., Diana [Șoșoacă], even though she is more like a warrior, like that. Somehow, I find myself in her, I am a tough person myself." (woman, Romania, aged 45-54).

Among the respondents was a young man, an avid TikTok user, who expressed fervent admiration for George Simion and Călin Georgescu. He actively tunes into their messages and opinions on the platform while choosing to disregard the perspectives offered by mainstream media on political matters. Regarding Simion, the young man remarked:

"I like his behaviour very much, because he is from the new generation. And he does not look his age. I mean he does not look old style, but new style [...] And I like very much what he does. [Researcher: Do you remember any of the things that he wants to do?] No." (man, Romania, aged 18-24)

Intriguingly, these Constanța denizens who align with populist leaders were a unique minority in our study. Others were either more reticent or acknowledged no political allegiance or preference whatsoever.

The interviews conducted in Constanța suggest that the radicalization of the populace, a topic hotly debated among media specialists and political pundits, might stem from a matter of personal choice, albeit potentially misguided. It is a personal choice of politics, not something imposed; these are decisions people actively make, rather than feeling bound to adopt under compulsion.

In Constanța county, it appears that charismatic leaders have successfully tapped into the widespread dissatisfaction with the existing political order. This could also be attributed to the fact that the Dobrogea region has had scant experience with democratic norms and faced limited freedoms due to the overpowering influence of various corrupt and authoritarian local politicians. One such figure was Radu Mazăre, the charismatic former mayor of Constanța for 15 years known for his authoritarian streak and corruption, which eventually led to his imprisonment (he has since been released). Consequently, in this part of Romania, having authentic political preferences and voicing them is quite a rarity, felt more like political liberation. Fed up with long-standing politics, many residents in this area believe that by aligning themselves with vocal right-wing parties, they are exercising their freedom by casting off the shackles of the past.

In a similar manner, respondents from Romania's Hungarian community almost unanimously expressed a desire to not be pigeonholed by political ideology. However, for most people, this does not mean that they steer clear of all extremist positions. As right-wing populist discourse becomes more mainstream, it becomes more acceptable to those taking a centrist position as well.

"Well, I try to be a centrist, but I'll be honest, I lean to the right, but I prefer centrist. I can't accept all the nonsense that's going on now, like racial discrimination and so on, it's extreme. But I, for example, have a large family, [...] and I also condemn this [pro-LGBTQ] propaganda." (man, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 35-44)

For those who genuinely reject these extremes, their aversion to clear-cut ideology can be better explained by a fear of opposing the prevailing viewpoints shaped by the Hungarian governmental party and largely embraced by the Hungarian public.

“Well, I would definitely put myself on the left in the same way, but that I strive not to be an extremist, because I've always said that extremes, either it's left, or it's right, it's never good, so that I don't believe in extremes. (woman, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 24-34)

In Hungary, compared to other regions, most interviewees can readily locate themselves within the conventional political spectrum, whether it be left-right or liberal-conservative. Notable about the Hungarian political landscape, however, is its exceedingly high level of political division. This schism encourages individuals to consistently identify as either pro-government or anti-government, viewing this distinction as more pertinent than the traditional ideological labels.

Turning to Poland, the majority of users on the X network demonstrate clear socio-political aspirations, generally circling around centrist and liberal perspectives. It is worth emphasising that some Polish respondents observed a melding of conservative and liberal ideals, juxtaposing their conservative notions on national identity and family with socio-democratic beliefs in state intervention and the principle of social welfare.

Many Polish interviewees exhibited a deep grasp of national politics and the machinations of the country's political parties. Some have articulated the fundamental political rift that separates Poland: on one hand, adherents of the conservative and far-right factions, namely Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) and Confederation (Konfederacja); and on the other, proponents of the governing coalition, which includes the Civic Platform Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska), the Third Way – made up of the Polish Peasant Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe) and Polska 2050 – along with the New Left (Nowa Lewica), all wielding significant governmental influence.



Political leanings are influenced by recent political affairs in Hungary, Poland and Romania, as described by respondents in the Thomson Foundation-MJRC study

	FB users in Hungarian communities in Romania	Facebook users in Hungary	TikTok users in Romania	X users in Poland
How do you want to be identified ideologically	Not willing to be categorized ideologically	Pro- and anti-government	Not able to say generally	A blend of socio-political identities
Most party support	RMDSZ (Romania) Fidesz (Hungary)	Pro- and anti-government	A mix between right-wing, center, left and no political party preferences	A mix between right and left (hard to identify due to high polarization)
Specificities	Young voters are more critical of Fidesz	None	More educated people tend to identify more with right-wing parties Right-wing supporters seemed to be the most enthusiastic about their political choice.	Blend of conservatism and liberalism depending on the issues at stake

Source: Thomson Foundation-MJRC study; See the list of interviewees by country, gender, age, rural/urban area and education level in Annex (interviews conducted in February-March 2025) • Created with Datawrapper

While numerous respondents expressed support for certain political parties, a clear trend has not yet surfaced. Instead, the interviews have revealed a general disdain for political parties, which seem to be in a constant state of flux motivated by self-interest, thereby eroding public loyalty.

Take Hungary as an example, where no interviewee showed enthusiasm for the existing political parties. Across the political spectrum, participants admitted to casting their votes in protest rather than support, choosing the “lesser of two evils” rather than genuinely backing any party. Their choices are strategic and calculated, more about preventing undesirable outcomes than wholeheartedly endorsing a particular group.

This scenario stands in contrast to the attitudes of Hungarians residing in Romania. Those leaning heavily right are influenced by their affinity for Hungarian politics, particularly their admiration for Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, rather than a broader adherence to right-wing ideology.

"In my heart I am an Orbán fan. My child, the [older] one, is not and she is very much into politics, (...) she always scolds me, 'Mom, you are wrong, and you didn't see it, and you didn't hear it?' I said no, I didn't see it, I didn't hear it. But deep in my heart I... I don't know what he does, how he does it, [...] but I'm an Orbán fan." (woman, Hungarian community in Romania, aged over 65).

This instinctive behavior can be associated with a prevailing distrust—or occasionally, a lack of interest—in the Romanian political landscape. Among our respondents, only a select few showed concern beyond the results of parliamentary elections. Specifically, a small minority of educated young Hungarians—most of whom reside in cities with small Hungarian minorities, like some of our interviewees from Timișoara—opt not to vote for the Hungarian party in Romania, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ). Instead, they favor principally progressive Romanian parties. These individuals distance themselves from their ethnic core, primarily due to an affinity for local political figures and the anti-corruption narratives advanced by those political groups. The younger, more well-educated urbanites exhibit slightly more skepticism towards the Orbán administration, contrary to the older generations who largely support his policies.

How people assess politicians

Widespread distrust in politicians has emerged as a prevalent conclusion from our study's interviews, arguably sparking the focus on candidates' personalities during elections. This is especially the case, save for the Hungarian community in Romania, where interview respondents consistently emphasized that personal characteristics and life experiences weigh heaviest when casting their votes.

In Hungary, when evaluating a political figure's fitness for office, respondents highlighted personal attributes as paramount, notably authenticity and credibility—even more so than party allegiance, particularly among those most skeptical of political parties. These voters make their electoral choices based on a candidate's real actions, independent of party lines.

Similarly, Romanian voters canvassed by our study say that they heavily consider professional experience and personal traits such as integrity and honesty in their electoral decisions. They diligently investigate the history of candidates, steering clear of those with dubious political pasts or blemished records, such as former convicts. For many interviewees in Constanța, the individual candidate takes precedence over their party affiliation. They also insist on the candidate's proven track record of tangible accomplishments, strongly dismissing those politicians notorious for failed pledges.

"They all seem very well trained to tell you what you want to hear [...] I do not like the candidates who campaign on TikTok. This platform is not for this. They manage to enter the minds of people that have only recently obtained the right to vote and that believe that it is cool to trust a guy that makes three jokes in a TikTok video." (woman, Romania, aged 18-24)

Only in Poland, political platforms seem to garner more attention than individual politicians. Many interviewees in our research evaluate politics based on several key factors, with a primary focus on how party platforms and actions resonate with their own views. Polish X users interviewed for this study frequently scrutinise the extent to which electoral campaign promises have been achieved, using this as a litmus test when determining their vote. Some interviewees admitted that they endeavor to steer clear of arrogance, vanity, and aggression when choosing political candidates. Ultimately, however, as is true in other regions, the personal attributes of a candidate bear the most weight. In the run-up to the 2025 presidential elections in Poland set for May 18, factors such as educational background, professional experience, proficiency in foreign languages, and communication prowess have been identified as significant criteria by some interviewees, while others emphasise candidates' track records as a measure of their credibility.

On the other hand, within the Hungarian community in Romania, voting habits differ markedly, with cultural identity playing a preeminent role. For many interviewees, casting their ballot in support of the ethnic party, RMDSZ, is almost instinctual and springs from their sense of Hungarianness.

"[...] as a minority we have only one option, RMDSZ, I think (...) I trust, not trust, but I know that they will do more under any circumstances than any other. Whether they do or not, the chances are much higher than in the case of others." (man, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 35-44).

"[...] I am an RMDSZ voter, I go to vote for RMDSZ, obviously I will look at what they say, but I think they would have to say some very big stupid things for me not to vote for them." (woman, Hungarian community in Romania, 45-54)

Along these lines, Hungarian interviewees in Romania tend to reject political candidates who champion Romanian nationalism. Take, for example, the case of Călin Georgescu, who claimed a surprising victory in Romania's presidential elections last November. While some members of Romania's Hungarian community initially regarded him as an "honest man" and warmed to his views, their opinion of him swiftly soured upon closer inspection. His advocacy for Romanian nationalism proved unpalatable to many, galvanizing the RMDSZ to launch a vigorous online campaign against him, branding him as anti-Hungarian.

In hindsight, a significant portion of the Hungarian community publicly supported the Romanian Constitutional Court's controversial decision to annul the 2024 elections and exclude Georgescu from the race, albeit with some unease. While acknowledging the democratic principles were undermined by this move, it was widely felt to be the only recourse to forestall his influence.

The sense of Hungarian identity among ethnic Hungarians in Romania offers further insight into their political engagement, especially when it comes to presidential elections. Such events tend to generate less enthusiasm unless a Hungarian candidate is in the running. Those who do intend to cast their votes—frequently from rural areas—often wait to ascertain which candidate has RMDSZ's backing, allowing the party's support to shape their choices when the time for decision draws near.

Politicians' personal traits often influence voting decisions in Hungary, Poland and Romania, as described by respondents in the Thomson Foundation-MJRC study

FB users in Hungarian communities in Romania	Facebook users in Hungary	TikTok users in Romania	X users in Poland
Not much: voting is seen as a duty to support the minority political party	Personal traits (credibility and authenticity)	Track record (political past, studies, previous experience, especially how they fulfilled promises) Interest in youth	Political coherence exhibited by candidates Education and professional experience (including knowledge of foreign languages)
Rejection of candidates who promote Romanian nationalism		Interest in youth	Education and professional experience (including knowledge of foreign languages)

Source: Thomson Foundation-MJRC study; See the list of interviewees by country, gender, age, rural/urban area and education level in Annex (interviews conducted in February-March 2025) • Created with Datawrapper

Geopolitics: foes and friends

Reflecting on the interview responses from the Polish cohort, their views on international allies and adversaries were generally very articulate. Predominantly, they identified Russia and Belarus as significant geopolitical threats, while recognizing the European Union and the United States as allies, especially championing mutual principles such as democracy, human rights, and a free press.

But the political discourse in Poland appears sharply segmented between conservative and liberal opinions when it comes to historical ties and current affairs with Germany, according to the interviews in this project. The Law and Justice Party, according to some interviewees, has openly criticized the Tusk government, perceiving it almost as a proxy for Berlin.

On the other hand, in Romania, the view on friendly and adversarial nations is more labyrinthine. In the interviews, sentiments vary widely, with some expressing profound skepticism towards all countries and others unable to conclude definitively. A 20-year-old male respondent justified his outlook by asserting that the geopolitical arena poses a hostile challenge to every nation, complicating any attempt at a clear judgment, be it positive or negative. Another interview, with a 47-year-old woman, revealed a notably convoluted stance: she professed trust in both the United States and Russia while expressing complete distrust of all European Union nations:

"Given what is happening at the moment, I think that the United States of America would be reliable for us. I, for example, was born in the Republic of Moldova and I lived under the Soviet Union, with the Russians, and I did very well. I trust them. That is my opinion. [...] In other countries I wouldn't see them as friends for us, especially those with which we are neighbors. We know very well what the Hungarians want to take from us, what the Austrians are doing to us, what the Dutch are doing to us. So, no, I don't trust them. Of those who are part of the European Union, I trust absolutely no one." (woman, Romania, aged 45-54)

Trump's reoccupation of the White House has somewhat colored global perceptions of the United States. Liberally inclined, the Western-supporting respondents in Poland and Romania express concern that Trump's leadership trajectory might not fortuitously align with their countries' best interests.

In Hungary, interviewees—regardless of political affiliation—consistently identified Western European and Nordic countries, and in some cases fellow Visegrád nations (notably Poland), as preferred allies for Hungary's future. Across the board, there was strong support for Hungary remaining within the European Union. However, opinions became more polarized when it came to identifying "enemies." Supporters of the current government often viewed Western European states and even Poland as antagonistic to Hungary's national interests, while critics of the government pointed to Russia as a growing threat.

The shifting perception of the United States also emerged as a key theme. Once seen as a "natural ally," the U.S. is now viewed by many as a power from which Hungary should keep its distance. These views underscore how deeply intertwined geopolitics and domestic politics have become. Many interviewees drew a line between their personal views on Hungary's ideal alliances and the geopolitical direction set by the Orbán government, highlighting a gap between public sentiment and political reality.

[18] The interviewee alludes to a cherished ornament—a dog figurine with a bobbing head—that was an ubiquitous feature in nearly every Dacia, the Romanian automobile of the communist era.

For the Hungarian interviewees living in Romania, the dynamic is somewhat distinct given their bicultural connections. Proponents of the Hungarian administration commend Hungary's steadfast governance. Conversing with our subjects who possess primary or secondary schooling — typically representative of the Transylvanian Hungarian populace — reveals that narratives championed by Orbán's government on various fronts, such as the EU or Russia, find some local citizens favourably predisposed towards both Russia and Trump as Hungary's trusted allies. On the other hand, in their view, Romania appears ambivalent, often depicted as aligning indiscriminately with global political participants.

"I think that the European Union is the biggest enemy of Hungary at the moment, unfortunately, because it [Hungary] has a very good relationship with both Trump and Putin, and Viktor Orbán also has a very good relationship with the Chinese. He is somehow a link for the EU with these countries. The European Union unfortunately has become the biggest enemy [of Hungary] because it [Hungary] doesn't nod its head to everything. Well, Romania is like the [toy] dogs that used to be in the back of the Dacia [cars], the [toy] dogs in the back window that nodded. They [Romanians] are nodding to everyone. [...] Unfortunately, they sold the country out." (man, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 55-64)[18]

Transylvanian Hungarians critical of Orbán's regime narrate a contrasting sentiment, advocating Romania's allegiance to the EU while condemning Orbán's viewpoints regarding the EU, Ukraine, and Russia.

[18] The interviewee alludes to a cherished ornament—a dog figurine with a bobbing head—that was an ubiquitous feature in nearly every Dacia, the Romanian automobile of the communist era.

How interviewees in the Thomson Foundation-MJRC study view international relations through the frames proposed by politicians from Hungary, Poland and Romania

	FB users in Hungarian communities in Romania*	TikTok users in Romania	Facebook users in Hungary	X users in Poland
Your country's biggest friend*	If the mother country is Romania: everyone	United States, European Union	No data	European Union, United States
	If the mother country is Hungary: Russia, US, China			
Your country's biggest foe*	If the mother country is Romania: none or all	Russia	No data	Russia, Belarus
	If the mother country is Hungary: European Union			

**depending on whether Romania or Hungary is considered the respondents' home country.*

Source: Thomson Foundation-MJRC study; See the list of interviewees by country, gender, age, rural/urban area and education level in Annex (interviews conducted in February-March 2025) • Created with Datawrapper

5.2 News Media and Social Media Diet

5.2.1 Culture and Leisure Habits

Generally, the interviewees' preferences for cultural products and leisure activities demonstrate diversity both across international boundaries and within individual communities analyzed in this study. Notably, digital content consumption, particularly via streaming services, emerges as a favored pastime for individuals irrespective of age, nationality, education, or gender. On the other hand, few individuals express a penchant for journalism, as subscriptions to news services scarcely feature in their cultural spending. Only a handful of respondents in Poland and Hungary indicated that they partake in subscription-based or donation-backed news as part of their cultural menu.

In Romania's Dobrogea region, respondents predominantly prefer streaming services for entertainment, frequently highlighting Netflix and Disney networks for movies. Not many people there mentioned reading, cinema outings, concerts, or theater trips as their cultural go-tos. Although travel surfaces occasionally as a leisure choice among respondents, it does not seem to steal the spotlight.

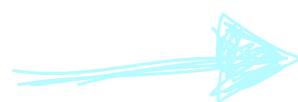
A significant number of Romanian participants in this study confessed a tendency to immerse themselves in online gaming or social media during their free time. Several responders from Bucharest asserted a more balanced mix between online and offline pursuits. Off the digital grid, many dedicate time and money to exploring international destinations and enjoying cultural experiences like theater plays, cinema, or festivals around Bucharest. Holiday periods see their time spent online shrink markedly. Nonetheless, during vacations, many interviewees use social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, or Facebook, alongside specialist websites, to inform their itineraries.

Cultural experiences and recreational preferences among X respondents in Poland lack a neatly defined pattern. Interests are diverse, with many opting for activities like visiting cinemas, theaters, galleries, attending live concerts and festivals, or joining dance classes or local folklore groups. A significant share of individual or household leisure budgets is allocated to holidays—ranging from extended getaways to brief city breaks—and subscriptions to digital entertainment platforms. Streamed content consumption is widespread, with mention of Amazon Prime, Disney+, and Netflix being common.

In Hungary, preferences for cultural and leisure activities can be broadly categorized into three distinct groups. First, there are the minimal consumers who refrain from spending on cultural products, due either to time constraints or preference for free access methods, such as pirated websites for films and TV series. These individuals prefer nature outings or socializing with friends and rarely visit cinemas. An interviewee from this group mentioned purchasing books but favoring libraries for reading. The second group comprises moderate consumers who selectively pay for cultural products. Common expenditures include streaming services like Netflix, HBO Max, and Spotify, with occasional trips to the cinema or theater. Notably, YouTube subscriptions also feature in this group. Lastly, heavy consumers invest extensively, subscribing to multiple streaming platforms—Netflix, HBO Max, Amazon Prime, Apple TV, and Disney+—frequently going to the cinema, and occasionally attending concerts or theater shows. In Hungary, all interviewees emphasized the significance of socializing with friends and family in their free time.

On the other hand, residents within the Hungarian community in Romania experience limited engagement in cultural and leisure activities. With many individuals working during their free hours and those in smaller towns lacking access to museums, theatres, cinemas, concerts, or sports events, such pursuits often require travel to neighboring cities. Some reported enjoying reading, while others preferred outdoor activities such as hiking. Streaming services like Netflix, HBO Max, and Spotify are particularly popular among younger, educated urbanites.

Similarly, Romanian youth canvassed by this research, predominantly around age 18, referenced a sparse cultural life due to their tight schedules leading up to final high school exams. Urban students typically take numerous private lessons to enhance their exam readiness, sacrificing much of their leisure time. An illustrative account comes from a high-school student in Romania who often spends her remaining leisure hours socializing with friends. This entrenched system of private tutoring, paired with the absence of comprehensive civic education in public schools, results in students frequently ill-equipped for political involvement.



Cultural and leisure activities depend on local offer, convenience and socio-demographic characteristics in Hungary, Poland, and Romania, as described by respondents in the Thomson Foundation-MJRC study. Streaming is commonly referred to by interviewees.

	FB users in Hungarian communities in Romania	Facebook users in Hungary	TikTok users in Romania	X users in Poland
How culturally and leisure-life active	Low	Stratified	Diverse and stratified	Diverse
Main activities	Reading, hiking, watching streaming platforms	Heavy consumers: watching streaming services and attending cinemas and theaters	Commonly, streaming services seem to be one of the services most used by most of the people	Combination of cultural activities such as cinema or theater with traveling and online activities (streaming services mentioned)
		Moderate consumers: watching streaming services and occasionally going to cinema and theater		
		Minimal consumers: Going out with friends, using only free content (i.e. pirate movies)		

Source: Thomson Foundation-MJRC study; See the list of interviewees by country, gender, age, rural/urban area and education level in Annex (interviews conducted in February-March 2025) • Created with Datawrapper

5.2.2 Tech Savviness

In our sample, the majority of respondents are adept with technology; however, notable differences surface. For instance, participants from Bucharest in Romania and those in Poland identify themselves as having relatively advanced digital skills. Moreover, generational gaps emerge, primarily with device preferences—older individuals gravitate towards computers, while younger ones favor mobile phones. Work-related technological engagement also varies, with distinctions between those using communication tech at work versus otherwise.

A TikTok user from Bucharest illustrates tech proficiency as the ability to distinguish the specific characteristics of various social media platforms. She said:

"I know almost all the means of communication that both my generation and the other generations use. [...] I know how they behave; I know the way they are structured, organized, the type of content supported by each application. [...] For example, TikTok is strictly entertainment, Facebook is a bit of entertainment and quite a lot of information. [...] On Instagram [...] you see more young people and there you show your funny life, you show your expeditions, [...] that's where you are somehow the best version of yourself."
(woman, Romania, aged 18-24)

Device usage patterns differ significantly across various demographics. In Hungary, older Facebook users tend to favor computers or laptops, whereas younger people primarily depend on smartphones for most activities, except streaming.

Within the Hungarian community in Romania, there's a noticeable divide between individuals who use computers and the web at their workplace and those who don't. Those who are online for several hours daily often display higher digital literacy, using computers and the internet for diverse activities ranging from communication through various software to preparing work-related materials. Otherwise, those not incorporating digital tools into their work show limited IT skills and a lower level of digital literacy. An age gap is also apparent: younger and middle-aged individuals believe they can troubleshoot most digital issues, adapt to multiple platforms, and possess general familiarity with technology. However, older people or those with only basic education mostly use the internet for platforms like Facebook, communicating via Messenger or WhatsApp, and entertainment such as watching videos or listening to music on YouTube.

Irrespective of their digital skill level, most of the respondents in the Hungarian community in Romania favor smartphones over laptops or PCs for accessing information and social media. One woman interviewed said:

"Telephone, telephone. No, we don't use a computer anymore, we don't have one, we don't even have one in the apartment anymore. Everyone has two or three phones, so that if, by chance, [...] [one phone] goes dead, there's no danger of not having access to it."
(woman, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 35-44)

In Poland, advanced users of social media and technology claim a deep understanding of digital participatory media, including the concept of "social media bubbles."

This research also shows that individuals across various countries spend considerable amount of time online, with light users (such as some in Hungary) spending around 45-60 minutes daily, while more intensive usage occurs in Hungary and Poland, where users engage for three to six hours. Romanian TikTok users top that with even higher levels of time spent online, often exceeding six hours. An example of such usage is as a 23-year-old woman in Romania who occasionally spends up to eight hours on TikTok.

For many in Hungary, long screen times prompt concerns. Apart from two older individuals, most Hungarian respondents strive to decrease their screen engagement. Several described browsing activities like news scrolling as pointless and a waste of time. While recognizing that moderate exposure offers relaxation and keeps them informed, many struggle to consume snippets of digital content. This difficulty often results in prolonged screen times, accompanied by guilt and occasionally feelings of emptiness or depression.

Addiction remains a common worry, and although each interviewee seeks to scale down their screen time, many grapple with how to accomplish this. Those who manage to do so report enhanced moods and an empowered sense of self, generally resulting from lifestyle shifts like relocating to rural areas or parenthood.

In the countries where the interviews were conducted, the largest portion of online spending typically goes to streaming services. In addition to that, numerous TikTok users in Romania indicated they make substantial purchases on e-commerce platforms. Interestingly, owing to the relentless barrage of advertisements, respondents in Hungary said that they would not contemplate spending on Facebook.

Social media are accessed mainly by mobile phones in Hungary, Poland and Romania, and music and movie streaming is the main form of online purchase, according to respondents in the Thomson Foundation-MJRC study

FB users in Hungarian community in Romania	Facebook users in Hungary	TikTok users in Romania	X users in Poland
Tech adoption			
Wide use of mobile phone	Older people use computers more than younger ones who use mostly mobile phones	Generally, average technical skills	Advanced technical skills
People using the internet at work and younger ones better equipped to use tech		Higher use of mobile phones than computers	
		Some of the respondents in Bucharest area consider themselves rather advanced technologically	
What people pay for online			
Netflix, HBO Max, Spotify (younger generations)	Netflix, HBO Max, Spotify, YouTube Premium	YouTube Premium, Netflix, e-commerce	Amazon Prime, Disney+, Netflix

Source: Thomson Foundation-MJRC study; See the list of interviewees by country, gender, age, rural/urban area and education level in Annex (interviews conducted in February-March 2025) • Created with Datawrapper

5.2.3 Content choices

Social media life

What people in the Hungarian community in Romania do on Facebook

Among interviewees in the Hungarian community in Romania, Facebook and Google News reign supreme as the most used apps. Often coming pre-installed on devices, they are readily accessible to users. Regardless of whether their daily online activity sums up to 15 minutes or stretches to three hours, Facebook has woven itself into the fabric of people's daily routine. It is frequently checked: over a morning coffee, as a bedtime ritual, while waiting for transportation, or in any short break between tasks.

On the whole, younger, more educated interviewees have developed an acute awareness of social media's pitfalls and attempt to limit their use. Despite this, their browsing habits mirror those users who engage with the platform more leisurely and without much forethought.

"I've noticed that I have this bad habit of just scrolling. I'll scroll and scroll and look, but I don't really care. Maybe when I'm waiting for something, or waiting for the bus, or out of boredom, but sometimes I [find] myself that I am not that interested, I don't really care."
(woman, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 18-24)

Primarily, users flock to Facebook to forge or maintain connections with family and friends. Initially, Facebook Messenger was their tool of choice for staying in touch, and curiosity eventually prompted them to explore news feeds and friend updates. As the platform's content diversified, incorporating a cocktail of entertainment – music, videos, reels, and various activities – the site retained its user base, despite a few users noting these changes. In addition to entertainment, Facebook serves as a source for news consumption among the community.

When selecting content to explore, interviewees generally exhibit one of three behaviors: the largest group engages in scrolling through and reading various posts that catch their interest, often without recognizing the authors' identities. Another set of users similarly browses content but occasionally verifies the information's accuracy. Lastly, the third group reads content exclusively from trusted sources.

Those in the first category feel confident that they can distinguish truthful content amidst digital noise, gravitating towards information that aligns with their political viewpoints while dismissing contradictory narratives. This group largely demonstrates limited awareness regarding the mechanics of social media.

The second cohort displays akin browsing habits, differing only by sporadically fact-checking some content.

"If it's so unbelievable or so shocking, I'll look for it on other platforms. I'll specifically search. See how many sites are reporting the same thing. And then I think there is a basis of truth to it. But I don't always go and read each article individually, sometimes I just check to see if anything comes up if I type in the keywords and fake. And then I look if Google gives me something. (man, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 35-44)

The third category confines itself to reading information from reliable sources or close acquaintances. Despite these safety measures, they fall prey to the platform's ability to dictate their interests, neglecting exposure to news from diverse platforms or portals.

In general, websites receive conscious visits from only a small number of people; most interviewees simply select content from their social media feeds. Similarly, just a handful of the interviewees in the Hungarian community in Romania routinely check the websites of news outlets, though those in older age groups continue to consume news via television. A different trend is noticeable when respondents wish to delve into specific topics of interest or work-related subjects. Education professionals or anyone engrossed in economic updates tend to possess a shortlist of trusted websites, like the education-focused portal Edupedu, or the economy-focused portals Ziarul Financiar and Startup Café for business topics. Additionally, interviewees frequent various sites for culinary recipes, veterinary advice, and other personal interests, though they often display less diligence when it comes to political content.

Facebook is also the preferred source of information for almost everyone interested in tackling local events and political matters. On the platform, there are pages for the majority of politicians, local institutions, and even the local media outlets, and all their posts are shared there. While they may not actively check these pages, their content still pops up constantly on followers' feeds.

However, active participation on Facebook remains limited among our respondents. Most remain passive, observing the content shared by others. Typically, only some older users seem more proactive, using the platform for sharing links and commenting on certain posts. Many interviewees noted that they have been actively engaging in political discussions regarding Orbán and the Fidesz party. Quite a few respondents mentioned taking part in debates where "we Szeklers"[19] faced criticism from Hungarians living in Hungary due to the government's backing of ethnic Hungarians residing abroad.

[19] The Székelys, often known as Szeklers, constitute a subgroup of ethnic Hungarians predominantly residing in the Székely Land within Romania.

"I usually comment when Hungarians scold us Szeklers about how [Hungarian prime minister Viktor] Orbán is giving us money (...) I can't remember exactly, but I think it was during the elections that they said that Orbán won because he gave us a lot of money. (woman, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 35-44)

Facebook is often viewed by interviewees in our sample as the go-to social media platform for "older folks." While some middle-aged people might have Instagram or TikTok accounts, they tend not to visit these sites as often. Younger users, on the other hand, spend much more time on platforms like Instagram and TikTok because they believe the content is more aligned with their interests. Nevertheless, when it comes to seeking more serious or broad-reaching information, such as political or public issues, they might still turn to Facebook.

"It's where people put more information, or should I say it's the place where people put the information that anybody might be interested in, and that's where you can find it. It's really the easiest place to find anybody... You can't find anyone on Instagram unless their real name is in their profile." (woman, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 18-24)

What people do on Facebook in Hungary

Interviewees in Hungary unanimously indicated they spend "too much time" on Facebook, making it an intrinsic part of their daily lives. While a few have set a schedule—dedicating 45-60 minutes in the evening—the majority tend to hop on Facebook several times a day, often without thinking, such as during breaks, while commuting, or even in the restroom. The most avid users clock in about 2-3 hours on the platform each day.

The typical activities on Facebook identified by respondents include chatting, scrolling, exploring content like updates on friends and acquaintances, checking hobby-based groups, watching reels and videos, and viewing event pages. They appreciate Facebook for helping them maintain relationships, discover events, and engage in hobby communities. Additionally, some users find Facebook Marketplace to be useful.

However, interviewees did not shy away from airing their grievances about Facebook. They criticized issues like the flurry of ads, the perceived addiction to the platform, irrelevant and unwelcome content, low-quality interactions, and the platform's role in fostering echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs.

Many voiced their frustration about having to face “so much shit, aggressive content, floods of ads”, calling attention to “outdated, terrible, stupid algorithm with plenty of irrelevant crap and tons of ads” and “all the unwanted content it pushes (from sources like Viktor Orbán and pro-government propaganda posts, which still show up even after they have attempted to block them).

Some interviewees attempted to block various spokespersons from Megafon, a self-proclaimed training facility for conservative influencers used to disseminate government propaganda. They temporarily cleansed their feed only for those figures to resurface later. The stream of political propaganda and unrelated content overwhelms users, making it very difficult to declutter their feeds. In an effort to enhance their experience, some users interact with content they prefer, in hopes of teaching the algorithm their interests, or they craft a special list of select friends whose updates they wish to see, blocking everything else.

To combat the filter bubble effect, some respondents intentionally explore content that opposes their views, or they set up unused Facebook accounts solely for browsing, preventing their main profiles from becoming too insular.

These frustrations have led to a noticeable dip in Facebook activity. Several interviewees mentioned taking “detox days” to unplug from Facebook, while others have chosen to uninstall the app, opting to access it through a browser or the Facebook Lite mode to manage usage. Furthermore, very few people are still actively participating on Facebook by posting, commenting, or liking, including those who were previously active. This is due to a mix of privacy worries, particularly in smaller towns (where interviewees are concerned about Facebook posts barring them from accessing a job), negative interactions, and a sense that discussing issues on the platform leads nowhere.

“Political debates are pointless. I had a disagreement with someone I know, and it escalated into cursing. It was awful. I haven’t commented or shared political content since. I even hesitate to post personal updates now.” (woman, Hungary, aged 35-44)

“Posting on Facebook is like shouting in a pub. No one hears you. If they do, they misunderstand you. If they understand, they ignore you—or just shout something back.” (woman, Hungary, aged 35-44)

Older interviewees often steer clear of most social media platforms, but YouTube remains a firm favorite among them. Many choose YouTube Premium to sidestep bothersome ads. They primarily flock to YouTube for music and content tied to their interests, such as sports or nature videos.

Political content is also a significant draw, with many following sources like the independent online TV Partizán, the YouTube channel Jólvanézígy, and various influencers. On the flip side, younger folks tend to hop between multiple social media platforms. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram feel more like home compared to Facebook for the youngest group. They eagerly consume short-form videos on Facebook Reels, YouTube Shorts, Instagram Stories, and TikTok. Although many take pains to filter their viewing to hobby-oriented content, political videos often seep into their feeds regardless.

What people do on TikTok in Romania

Many individuals interviewed in the Dobrogea region report that they use TikTok primarily for entertainment. However, one respondent stands out by leveraging TikTok for marketing, using it as a platform to connect with her clients.

A popular activity among users is exchanging “funny things” with friends, from whom they often anticipate receiving responses. Other topics on TikTok that people follow include culinary recipes, sports, household tips, videos featuring cats and dogs, makeup tutorials, fashion tips, and more serious content up to and including political content and news about war. Some of the younger audience also turn to TikTok for learning purposes, like studying for final high-school exams with specific preparatory content. Some users shared that they began using TikTok as early as ages 11-13 when the network was still known as Musical.ly.

TikTok's appeal, according to those interviewed, lies in its vibrant community and cutting-edge feel, offering a real-time feast of fresh and rapid content that never seems to dull the senses. Users value that the content aligns well with their interests, highlighting conciseness of messages. To cap it off, a high school principal stated:

“I like that there is this synthesis of information by means of the three factors, visual, sound, and cognitive (...) It is an extremely concise message, but at the same time very rich in information.”
(woman, Romania, aged 45-54)

Numerous TikTok fans in the Bucharest region appreciate the platform's ability to swiftly browse through an array of content. It offers a feature that allows users to fast-forward videos for those impatient to jump to the next part. Nevertheless, this convenience has a catch: it chips away at our attention span, affecting both our behavior online and our interactions in real life.

"At some point, after so many videos, you basically just sit and waste your time with them, scrolling without thinking. [...] The bad part is that because of these high-speed applications, the younger generations, and I think adults even, no longer have so much patience to sit and listen to or consume other types of content or to watch a movie to the end. It seems to them that it is not fast enough for them, that it goes on forever. They got used to information coming in packages, like fast food." (woman, Romania, aged 18-24)

Compared to TikTok, some interviewees see Instagram as "too artsy" (woman, Romania, aged 18-24). When it comes to search experiences, a man from Romania in the same age range mentioned that TikTok "gives me directly what I want to find," whereas Google overwhelms with countless results filled with information. Essentially, TikTok's standout feature is its engaging content delivery; it brings content to users without them needing to search for it. A janitor working at a public institution, a woman aged 45-54, said: "Generally, I do not look for something. I watch as it unfolds."

For others, the appeal lies in the visual and audio quality, with content that entertains and educates ("something that can teach you something") being popular among the platform's enthusiasts.

Accuracy isn't a top priority for many TikTok users in our study; understanding this, some acknowledge the presence of "fake things" on the app. Yet, many heavy users who spend over eight hours a day on the app laud the authenticity of its content.

Influencers play a key role on TikTok; users in our sample can name numerous influencers or define them by their content. Three respondents said that they decide to follow certain content because they are drawn to the person creating it. Despite this, TikTok is praised for giving users much autonomy in handling content, including the easy action of unfollowing, blocking, or simply swiping away or canceling content and creators they do not resonate with.

"It is very rare that I follow somebody. And, if it happens that the person that I follow appears with something that I do not resonate with, I usually wait for the next clip, and if we continue not to resonate, I unfollow. Or block. It depends how much it irritates me." (woman, Romania, aged 18-24)

TikTok is also used as an important source of information and a handy tool for business promotion.

"I would probably recommend you open an account on TikTok because you will find things that interest you. Rather than sitting in front of the TV and watching the news [...] You will find a lot of very interesting things on medicine and studies and everything." (man, Romania, aged 45-54)

Yet, for many interviewees TikTok remains largely an engaging form of entertainment that quickly becomes a daily habit. In Bucharest, users praise the app's wide array of content, which swings from creative edits of travel destination videos to live broadcasts featuring individuals with visible disabilities who openly share their stories to gain support (including earning money). They also appreciate TikTok's algorithm, which crafts such captivating streams that users cannot help but get hooked.

"TikTok's feed is super-smart. It's related to your interests. That is, if a video or content appears in your feed, and you don't watch it for more than three or four seconds, [the algorithm] already classifies it as irrelevant to you. If you repeatedly do this thing in relation to a certain category of content, you don't see that content at all." (man, Romania, aged 45-54)

Still, some respondents argue that the TikTok algorithm often takes the heat for spreading misinformation to users who tend to base vital decisions on the content they encounter while scrolling the app.

"This is something that has both a plus and a minus, because in this way a demagogue can escape undetected. That is, you can be both a Nazi and a communist at the same time, like Mr. [Călin] Georgescu, and Orthodox, and spiritual, because you, in fact, appear with that kind of discourse only to the category that is interested in the type of discourse that you produce, practically, for that category. And in this way, you can have a multiple virtual personality." (man, Romania, aged 45-54)

These negative experiences prompt some people to leave the network. Certain shared content can lead to harsh comments and unpleasant interactions, exceeding the norm of social acceptability seen on other social media platforms or in typical face-to-face encounters.

"People go on TikTok to laugh in general and to laugh at others in general, because there are a lot of people [creating content], including those with physical disabilities, including those with mental disabilities. There are a lot of things like paralyzed people exposing themselves. And people are not the friendliest in their comments. [...] Some [disabled people] expose themselves so that others laugh at them, just to create this absurd effect of... Others simply ask for money and expose their sad story, but people... There is no comment filter there and you see very, very stupid things."
(woman, Romania, aged 18-24)

TikTok appears to contribute to feelings of alienation, even among older individuals interviewed in this project who rarely use the platform. Take, for instance, a 57-year-old woman in Bucharest who has minimal social interactions and leads a life of isolation. Despite recognizing that digital media creates a greater gap between her and her family, she nonetheless engages with TikTok content almost every day in a passive manner. Another interviewee, deeply engrossed in gaming and TikTok videos, feels that digital consumption has driven a wedge between her and her son. Her coping mechanism has been to immerse herself completely in gaming or scrolling through social media. In the solitude of her small Bucharest apartment, she mainly watches Chinese home improvement videos and Korean movies on TikTok, enjoying them even when they lack Romanian subtitles.

She regards TikTok as a platform that allows for free expression, contrasting it with Facebook, where self-expression is hindered as one can immediately get reported for various actions taken on the platform (woman, Romania, aged 55-64). She neither tunes into television nor refers to verified sources to keep up with current events or double-check information appearing on TikTok. She harbors a deep distrust of television, believing that all channels tell lies. Besides TikTok, she occasionally uses platforms like Olx for buying and selling goods and services, alongside Temu, the Chinese online store where she sometimes shops.

What people do on X in Poland

In examining personal experiences, respondents from Poland commend X for being swift and “very uncensored,” enabling access to “absolutely everything.” They also value the succinct nature of the information, with one interviewee describing it as being condensed due to its “aggressive character limit.” The rapid access to information is further enhanced by its global outreach, as there is an enduring belief that “everyone is on Twitter.” Additionally, a noteworthy benefit of X over other social media platforms is the lower amount of advertising, which led some users to migrate their activities from Facebook to X.

X is widely visited for information, entertainment (including adult content), inspiration, and to engage in online communities with shared values and interests. But despite its advantages, participants in the Polish sample admit to being mindful of potential misinformation and the platform's sluggish response to sensitive content and hate speech.

“I would also be happy to use X for political issues, but it doesn't make sense because I don't trust any information from this platform. Because always, no matter if the person is verified or not, and because I don't control my feed and what appears on it, whatever is there, I have to check it twice in another place, so it doesn't make sense.”
(man, Poland, aged 45-54)

For some respondents, X offers the possibility to get out of one's bubble and understand how other people think.

“I use Twitter [X] because there you can meet people from the ‘other side’ and read what they have to say, what their arguments are, and what their perspective on the same thing is; we see them differently, they see us differently, and that's what's interesting, and that's my reason for using Twitter [X].” (woman, Poland, aged 18-24)

In the Polish sample, most participants actively follow profiles of both national and international politicians, such as Donald Trump, along with well-known American pop stars and basketball players. Regarding the political aspect, the significance of X lies in how straightforward political messages can be. X is increasingly influential in international politics, illustrated by the recent public message exchange in March 2025 between Elon Musk and Radosław Sikorski, Poland's Foreign Minister, regarding global support for Ukraine.

Participants' engagement on X is primarily about browsing content passively and occasionally hitting the like or retweet button. Commenting is uncommon and tends to focus on posts dealing with politics and media, while sending private messages is more prevalent. There's no obvious connection between using X and engaging with other social media platforms on specific days. X users often mention leaning towards using Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok.

Facebook, TikTok and X serve different interests and needs in Hungary, Poland and Romania: business tool (TikTok), private messenger (Facebook and X), provider of entertainment and information (all three), as described by respondents in the Thomson Foundation-MJRC study

	Hungarian community in Romania: Facebook	Hungary: Facebook	Romania: TikTok	Poland: X (formerly Twitter)
Purpose of using the favored	Connecting with relatives and friends; Listening to music, watching videos and reels; Reading news; Following local politics and current affairs	Chatting; Checking on friends and acquaintances; Checking groups; Watching reels and videos; Exploring event pages	Entertainment (Dobrogea); Use as a pastime, seeking information, and tool for business promotion	Information; Entertainment; Social engagement
Content most consumed	News and information (some users check facts or only consume content from sources they know); Content related to work (education or business) or issues of interest (recipes, finding vets, etc.)	Updates and content from friends	"Funny things" including recipes, sports, household advice, videos with cats and dogs, make-up, clothing, alongside war and politics	Passive browsing of content; Private messaging
Competitive edge	Easy to use and find people and content about specific issues; More complete (most of the people have an account on Facebook)	Useful in maintaining relationships, discovering events, and engaging in hobby-related groups; Use of Facebook Marketplace	Perfectly targeted content; Availability of diverse content, never letting one feel bored; Concision: messages are straight to the point; Fast browsing of content	Freedom (lack of censorship); Brevity of information and fast pace of information flow; Lower amount of advertising; The feeling that "everyone is on Twitter"

Source: Thomson Foundation-MJRC study; See the list of interviewees by country, gender, age, rural/urban area and education level in Annex (interviews conducted in February-March 2025) • Created with Datawrapper

How people view media and journalism

Hungarian Facebook users in Romania

While members of the Hungarian community in Romania can, in theory, differentiate between traditional media and social media, their online activity does not always align with this understanding. A lack of trust in both journalists and the media is a common sentiment among the interviewees, leading to two main explanations. Chiefly, many respondents across various socio-demographic groups feel that the media is biased and echoes the viewpoints of those who hold the purse strings. Alternatively, there is a widespread belief among the interviewees that journalists in general lack interest in reporting the truth, making them unworthy of trust.

"I have my doubts, I also have the feeling when I read an article, that it would be worthwhile to look at the event from a slightly different perspective, because the journalists always tend to present it to us from a single angle." (man, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 35-44)

"You can't always trust the media, because usually a media outlet is somebody's mouthpiece and puppet." (woman, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 45-54)

When asked about the essential qualities a news source must possess to earn trust, three main ideas emerge: 1) independence, 2) truthfulness, and 3) transparency and professionalism.

Firstly, many respondents—particularly younger and urban dwellers—seek evidence of the media's non-partisan, independent, and objective nature. Achieving this is a tall order. A handful of interviewees suggest that true independence can only be reached through crowdfunding and complete transparency concerning their sources of funding. Some cite Romanian media outlets like the investigative video-based news outlet Recorder as examples that tick these boxes.

Secondly, for those who believe the media tends to hide or warp the truth, a news source should be bold in stating the facts outright. For this group, fewer conflicting views prevalent in the public arena are preferred, while integrity is found in reports that align with their own views even if they are not part of the mainstream conversation.

Lastly, a more balanced perspective focuses on transparency and professionalism. Trustworthy news portals are expected to be well-established and reputable, with journalist bylines clearly visible and an absence of dubious ads.

"For example, on whichever website you want to read the news, [if] it is full of ads for fungus cream and [images with] these huge nails with foot fungus. I don't know. If it's full of idiotic ads, it is a no-go from the start." (woman, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 45-54)

"I would be quite happy to read a media outlet, or a newspaper, where facts are published, just [as] facts, and not opinions, because I don't like to read opinions from here and there. I am aware that they are not facts, and that everyone wants to pull me on their side, and one can feel that someone is pulling them towards something." (woman, Hungarian community in Romania, aged 25-34)

Facebook users in Hungary

When discussing their media and news preferences, most respondents in Hungary indicated a strong interest in online sources. While older individuals still include television in their media consumption, they are very picky about channel selection, dividing Hungarian TV stations into two categories: pro-government and anti-government. Radio channels are seldom used for getting news, according to interviewees in this project.

For nearly all interviewees except the youngest, Facebook remains a significant news platform. YouTube is becoming more popular as a source for news, whether following influencers such as Pottyondy Edina and Vona Gábor, or watching programs and discussions hosted by established media outlets and journalists such as Partizán, 444, Telex, and Friderikusz (a podcast produced by Hungarian journalist Friderikusz Sándor). Users typically browse through news sites or feeds on Facebook, only reading headlines and lead paragraphs rather than full articles. For most people, interest in the topic is what usually prompts a deeper dive into an article, with the source—whether individual or news platform—being of less importance. However, some rely on a "mental list" of trusted sources, which includes both media outlets and personal contacts for news-filtering purposes, but even these individuals are influenced by the relevance of the topic when they engage with content.

A few interviewees (three, to be exact) referred to using Google News and Google Discover as their primary go-to for news. However, they expressed dissatisfaction with the personalized nature of these feeds and yearn for a broader variety of uncensored news content.

Many access news portals directly through browsers, with hardly anyone using news applications on their phones; only one person reported doing so. Among the frequently mentioned direct-access portals, Telex tops the list, followed by the media outlets 24, 444, Partizán, Hvg, and Atlatzso. Although Index, another news portal, is accessed by several users who are critical of the government, they acknowledge its evident pro-government bias. Some interviewees also occasionally turn to international news by visiting the BBC, NYT, CNN, or Washington Post websites.

People frequently use podcasts, especially from familiar sources, due to their benefit of offering deep conversations while allowing listeners to multitask effortlessly. Only the most engaged and news-savvy individuals turn to apps, notifications, or newsletters. The majority prefer to seek out news at their convenience, rather than having it thrust upon them.

Nearly everyone highlighted the importance of personal networks for news, opinions, and judging credibility, a notion particularly prevalent in tighter-knit communities. This rings especially true for residents of small towns, where personal relationships are key, particularly regarding local reporting. While Facebook partially fulfills this need for a “personal touch,” many feel that its algorithmic nature detracts from the experience.

For many, news consumption is a fragmented activity; they frequently but briefly glance at their phones, either scrolling through Facebook or skimming news headlines to see what grabs their attention. Some find the time for deeper news engagement during their commute or while doing chores, as these periods permit more focused attention. However, consuming news often juggles competition with entertainment and socializing—commuting is as much a time for conversation, catching up via phone calls, enjoying music, or gaming as they are for staying informed while waiting for the bus.

A majority of interviewees voiced worries about the dependability of the information they encounter. Some proactively evaluate the credibility of sources by consulting multiple outlets, sticking to media brands they have consistently trusted, seeking assurance from reputable individuals, or applying their critical reasoning skills—something one participant termed their “own bullshit detector.” These fact-checking endeavors, however, are time-intensive and primarily undertaken when the topic holds personal importance. On an average day, most individuals demonstrate less diligence in their news consumption, opting instead to place faith in a select group of what they consider to be reliable media sources and familiar individuals, rather than cross-checking every detail.

Some interviewees deliberately steer clear of the news entirely, viewing it as too overwhelming or emotionally taxing.

"I haven't been following the news for years because it makes me wanna puke. It just gets me worked up and depressed, and I have no impact at all on what is going on". (man, Hungary, aged 45-54)

As mentioned earlier, only a handful of those interviewed pay for media content. Of those who do, YouTube and Spotify are the preferred platforms. Among the 20 individuals interviewed in Hungary, just one subscribes to Telex, and another has a subscription to the New York Times. While many agree they "should support journalism," they are hesitant due in part to financial constraints, dissatisfaction with media quality, or the belief that media organizations should sustain themselves through advertising. Some voiced frustration with paid, gated content, feeling that putting information behind a paywall is not "cool." Others indicated they might be swayed to subscribe if there was a unified program offering access to a range of news portals.

In essence, Hungarian Facebook users in the sample fall into three categories. First are heavy consumers who invest substantial time in news, often following discussions about current affairs and politics while frequently participating in political or civic endeavors. People in this bracket trust their own judgment to gauge credibility. The second group, moderate consumers, have an interest in news but choose to keep their consumption in check, finding the overflow of information daunting and draining. Members of this group set limits for social media and develop strategies to handle information overload, often relying on personal sources (both online and offline) deemed trustworthy to distill and summarize news for them. The third group, the news avoiders, actively distance themselves from news due to fatigue from the relentless information barrage. Though they hold political views, they neither have the time nor the appetite for daily updates, finding political content on social media troublesome and not worth their while.

These categories transcend demographic traits, and several interviewees have shifted from one type to another, most often moving from heavy consumers to moderate ones, or from moderate consumers to news avoiders.

TikTok users in Romania

Journalism does not seem to be a priority for many interviewees in Romania. Residents in the Dobrogea region mainly view TikTok as an extension of their personal sphere, not the public one. There are only two supposed local journalists recognized by those in Dobrogea, but neither fits the traditional mold. Bobby D is a self-styled “journalist” who creates short videos for TikTok, boasting the tagline ‘Independent journalist. A drop of truth in an ocean of lies.’ Despite this claim, Bobby D has a well-documented history of paid political work, a fact that seems lost on users. The other is Emil Tatu, a lawyer by trade, who moonlights as an interviewer for a local online TV station, charging over €1,000 for an interview during election campaigns.

Many Romanian interviewees express a general distrust of the media. One Dobrogea respondent notes that media functions like a business, reporting on issues only when the people running it allow it. Media outlets would earn their trust by avoiding financial reliance on politicians and delivering news rooted in tangible evidence rather than recycling content from other sources. Additionally, many believe it is crucial for news content to clearly identify the person behind the story.

“[To me a credible source is] something that's somewhat mainstream, but not very mainstream but known pretty widely and [that I] have heard of that source as being reliable. Not to be a local source that no one has heard of, but also not to be something too mainstream like on TV. Because if it's on TV, the media can be controlled. I would trust a source that's somewhere in the middle. Because being in the middle, from my point of view, means that it's not necessarily funded by political or other means. (man, Romania, aged 18-24)

In Dobrogea, a young respondent expressed skepticism toward journalists, claiming that they lack knowledge. “Especially those from Antena 3^[20] are very stupid. I noticed. They lie a lot.” (man, Romania, aged 18-24)

In contrast, a high school principal from Dobrogea, a close follower of the all-news channel Digi24, acknowledged the key role journalists play, saying that they have exclusive access to information and praising them for their capability to package that information effectively for the masses.

In the Bucharest area, many interviewees turn to social media for news, albeit with caution. They admit the information available is often mixed with contradictions, and cross-verifying takes up too much time. As a result, some choose just one social media platform as their sole news source.

[20] Antena 3 is an all-news channel part of the Intact Media Group. The channel is known for its controversial, politically biased coverage.

"Honestly, [I take news] just from TikTok. Unfortunately. I don't have the patience to check websites because I feel like I'd have to research too much just to get to the core information. It seems like every news outlet has its own version of reality. And it's tiring to compare them all, so I'd rather listen to people who've already done the research." (woman, Romania, aged 18-24)

With few exceptions, the majority of those interviewed rarely watch TV for news; it is more of a once-in-a-blue-moon occasion than a regular habit. Several participants mentioned abandoning the television arena due to a lack of trust in its content. Meanwhile, young folks typically watch TV only when their parents do so. One TikTok aficionado from Romania, who is between 18 and 24 years old, opts for YouTube as his news source, following influencers and several journalists there. Many of the older interviewees joined the social media bandwagon thanks to their children. A notable example is a 71-year-old woman from Romania who became a TikTok user with her nephew's guidance installing the app.

Youth around Bucharest appear to gravitate more towards independent news platforms. They are inclined to source information from venues like *Politica la Minut*—a politically-driven Instagram page founded in 2020 by two budding Political Science minds from King's College London—and *Recorder*, which is admired for stirring investigative video content. Furthermore, many interviewees indicate their appetite for international news in both English and French.

"I think [...] there are very good journalists, and there are also journalists who are controlled by the system, because the media is a whole system [...] I think that everyone pursues a specific interest. And the media now, at least in our country, seems to me to focus more on making money. Many channels do not want to deliver correct information and are influenced." (woman, Romania, aged 18-24).

Good journalism is grappling with increasing demand for accountability from every audience member, while also contending with tough competition for attention from entertainment content on social media and disinformation sources.

"I don't know what I would do, if I were a journalist, it seems very complicated to me. It seems to me that misinformation and the things you do with disinformation are extraordinarily good, it's like doping for athletes, you can't compensate for it by doing sports correctly. [...] It's clear that clean information is difficult to process and difficult to anchor readers with and disinformation is extraordinarily catchy. [...] Quality journalism is hardly super-entertaining." (woman, Romania, aged 25-34)

X users in Poland

The evaluation of professional journalists and online influencers hinges largely on their expertise and experience. Many interviewees in Poland have consistently noted that a variety of perspectives is vital for establishing trust in a news source. To a certain degree, the social network X is valued for its ability to showcase a wide range of viewpoints. Similarly, the most trusted media sources are those that present all facets of a story, offering a balanced narrative, without the journalist picking sides.

"If [a source] is actually presenting information from different perspectives, then it certainly somewhere there increases the element of trust in this source, if there is a comprehensive range and rhetoric. [If it's] only from one perspective, from one view, then no." (man, Poland, aged 25-34)

In Poland, the most popular news sources are those tied to reputable brands, which benefit from a high level of public trust. Respondents also favor articles that draw on multiple sources, such as international media like the BBC or The New York Times. Additionally, one respondent highlighted the importance of news outlets that own up to and rectify their errors instead of sweeping them under the rug.

"If I know that this is a verified source, that it is not some fake profile, because such profiles also happen; if I know that this is the authentic one, then I believe in the information provided, but if the profile seems suspicious to me, then I check whether it is really the profile of this person, or of this company, this institution that I would like to learn about." (woman, Poland, aged 55-64)

This occasionally leads people to place their faith in certain politicians because they address the audience straight from the horse's mouth, bypassing the media middleman.

"You know how it is, for example, Donald Trump writes on Twitter that there is something, well, for me it's a credible source, because it's his official profile. And it kind of means that this is his official message. And it's hard to verify on websites whether someone said it or not. Besides, there's so much fake news now that it's hard to trust the internet. Everything can really be a total fake or a hoax. I trust it less and less." (woman, Poland, aged 25-34)

A common element in news media portals that can turn audiences away is advertising. To some, the presence of numerous ads signals that a media outlet prioritizes gaining clients and followers over delivering relevant content.

Many people tend to follow their preferred media through social networks, with X being a popular choice. Instead of following media outlets themselves, some of the respondents said that they often track individual journalists, like Patryk Słowik from the internet news portal Wirtualna Polska, knowing that journalists may move between outlets. Following journalists on X offers a sense of authenticity since journalists often have freer rein to express themselves without the constraints of editorial policies. For local news, internet news portals Onet and Wirtualna Polska are frequently mentioned by interview participants as go-to sources.

In summary, our Polish interviewees determine the trustworthiness of a news source based on several key factors: the source's credibility, correct writing style, clarity and organization, dedication to the topic at hand, presentation of diverse viewpoints, clear separation of news from commentary, focus on local content, and use of trustworthy sources in reporting.



6. Conclusions

The study conducted by the Thomson Foundation and MJRC brings to light a series of trends that have been brewing for over a decade, tracing back to the early rise of social media. These patterns—such as deepening polarization, the spread of filter bubbles, growing public disillusionment with politics, and the unstoppable rise of influencer culture—mirror shifts seen around the globe, from wealthy nations to developing ones.

What's truly striking, though, is how the ever-growing pull of social media—especially the new forms of digital socializing introduced by platforms like TikTok—has further chipped away at the public's trust in professional journalism. In many cases, the lines have become so blurred that users struggle to tell real journalists from influencers merely playing the part.

Media outlets themselves are partly to blame. By bowing to the interests of sponsors or cozying up to political patrons, many outlets have eroded their own credibility. This creeping sense of disillusionment—or sheer apathy toward journalism—comes through loud and clear in the voices of many respondents interviewed for this study.

Judging by the attitudes, beliefs, and habits captured in this study, journalism finds itself in a tight corner. One telling sign is where people are putting their money online: subscriptions to streaming services like Netflix, Spotify, and YouTube Premium top the list, while news subscriptions barely register. Few are willing to pay for journalism now—and even fewer see themselves doing so in the future. This paints a grim picture for an industry already scrambling to stay afloat, often forced to lean on any financial support it can get.

The truth is, the industry has largely dropped the ball when it comes to building a strong, engaged community around journalism. It's been outpaced and outgunned by social media giants that wield deep pockets and global clout, giving them a dominant edge in today's communication ecosystem. While this outlook may seem bleak, it is hard to ignore the lack of bold, long-term solutions coming from within the news sector itself.

Some of the more prominent outlets may stay above water thanks to loyal audiences. Others will limp along with help from philanthropic grants and project-based funding. But for the majority, especially in countries where financial independence is out of reach, the writing is on the wall. In Poland, for example, some media companies have achieved a level of financial resilience that supports their independence. In contrast, many Romanian outlets remain dependent on political patrons and are likely to continue hobbling forward under their wing.

This leaves the media sector in an unusually tough spot for the years ahead, as the damage done by social media shows no signs of slowing down. The ripple effects are likely to go far beyond journalism itself—potentially reshaping people's values, knowledge, and even how they respond to the world around them.

Yet, amid the gloom, the study reveals a silver lining. Civic engagement remains strong across the region. With a few exceptions—such as members of the Hungarian community in Romania, who tend to stay within close-knit circles of family and community—most respondents report consistent participation in democratic life, including voting in every election. In Hungary, local causes like environmental cleanups and school fundraisers enjoy wide support. In Romania, TikTok users in particular show striking levels of civic involvement, regularly taking part in protests, signing petitions, or volunteering. (Their political leanings, however, are a different story altogether.)

Moreover, despite widespread distrust in politics, expectations for political leaders remain remarkably high across the board. With the exception of some ethnic Hungarian Facebook users in Romania—who tend to vote out of a sense of duty to support their community's party—most respondents in Hungary, Romania, and Poland demand much more from their representatives. Facebook users in Hungary prize credibility and authenticity. TikTok users in Romania look for a clean record and strong professional conduct. And in Poland, users on X (formerly Twitter) expect political coherence and a solid background in education and professional life.

Traditionally, the media has played a guiding role in helping the public make sense of complex social and political issues—including many highlighted in this report. Today, however, more and more people are turning to social media for that same information—often accepting it at face value, with little scrutiny. This raises an urgent question: can professional journalism reclaim its position as a central, trusted source in today's chaotic information ecosystem?

It's a tall order, but not an impossible one. A few key interventions could help journalism begin to regain public trust and reposition itself in the communication landscape.

Policy is one lever. Governments can create regulatory environments that nurture a truly independent media sector. Among the countries in this study, however, only Poland's government shows signs of addressing some of journalism's systemic challenges. Romania has seen little to no meaningful policy action in this regard, while Hungary's government remains widely criticized for tightening its grip on the media and using it as a political tool.

Another critical area is media literacy. The confusion evident among social media users—about where information comes from and whose interests it serves—points to a pressing need for educational initiatives. Teaching young people how media really works could yield long-term benefits in restoring clarity and trust.

Yet both policy and literacy are slow-burning solutions. For more immediate impact, journalism funders and editorial leaders who care about independence and integrity must take a hard look in the mirror—and begin reimagining the future. While this report does not offer a blueprint, it points to one key idea: journalism must rethink how it measures its relationship with audiences.

For years, journalism funders have urged media outlets to step up their game when it comes to audience engagement. Some have risen to the challenge; many have not. But as this and other studies suggest, the real problem may lie in the outdated, and possibly ill-suited, metrics upon which newsrooms still rely on. Traditional media has long followed a “build it and they will come” model: create a product, distribute it, and hope the audience shows up. But in the age of social media, that logic has been turned on its head. Today's dominant platforms start by drawing audiences in—listening, observing, and interacting—and only then do they target content and products based on what users actually engage with.

News media should not mimic that model wholesale—but a shift toward audience-led journalism could offer a much-needed edge in the battle for attention and trust. In today's media environment, listening first may prove to be the smartest move.

Annex

List of topics and questions used in interviews

The questions below were designed to serve as adaptable prompts for meaningful discussion with interviewees. The list of questions is structured into two distinct sections as detailed below.

Section 1

The first segment seeks to understand people's perspectives on civic engagement, political inclinations and cultural interests.

1.1 Civic Engagement

This part seeks to unearth information about participants' attitudes and behaviors regarding civic participation, aiming to uncover the impact, motivations, and obstacles associated with being actively involved in their communities. **Sample questions include:**

- Which civic activities do you normally engage in (e.g., voting in elections, participating in protests, volunteering with local organizations, contacting elected representatives, attending town hall discussions, etc.)?
- Who are the people you typically converse with about social or political issues (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, etc.)?
- What topics or issues interest you the most (e.g., education, healthcare, corruption, climate change, economic conditions, etc.)?
- How would you evaluate your understanding of how local and national governments operate?

1.2 Political Preferences and Opinions

The aim of this part is to gauge respondents' political leanings and understand the criteria they use when forming judgments about political candidates and ideologies.

Illustrative questions include:

- Which political party do you trust to address the issues that matter the most to you?
- What key factors do you consider when assessing a political candidate's suitability?
- How would you characterize yourself in terms of political beliefs (allow interviewees to refer in their own words to their political identity, i.e. left, right, liberal, etc.)?
- Which foreign nations or global powers do you view as the most reliable, supportive, or beneficial allies to your country, and which ones do you consider untrustworthy or the least amicable towards your nation?

1.3 Cultural Interests

This portion of the interview seeks to uncover the types of cultural experiences and events individuals are most attracted to and prefer engaging with. **Suggested questions include:**

- When it comes to your cultural and leisure pursuits, which areas dominate your spending (i.e., tickets to theatre/cinema/concerts/sporting events, museum visits, purchases such as books, streaming services, or digital media subscriptions, etc.)?

Section 2

The second section is dedicated to exploring people's affinity for technology, the driving forces behind individuals' engagement with social networks, with an emphasis on their primary uses, such as seeking and consuming content, the nature and purpose of the information pursued, and so on. **Proposed questions include:**

2.1 Tech Use

- On a scale of “baby steps” to “tech wizard,” how would you rate your expertise with modern communication technologies?
- On average, how much time do you spend online each day, and which types of websites, platforms, or apps dominate your browsing habits? Please share as much detail as possible, including insight into how much of this activity occurs on mobile devices.
- What kinds of products or services do you most frequently pay for online?

2.2 Content

Social media use

- What are your primary uses of the social media platform **Facebook/TikTok/X** (e.g., communication, entertainment, activism, etc.)? Please expand on your usage patterns in as much detail as possible.
- Why does social media platform **Facebook/TikTok/X** appeal to you more than other media: what value, benefits, or unique incentives does it offer that stand out to you?
- How do you decide what content or information to engage with on the social media platform **Facebook/TikTok/X**? For example, what factors influence your choices when deciding what to watch, read, or listen to?

Media use

- What kinds of media content do you typically consume, and how do you go about searching for it? (confirm how the interviewee defines “media,” whether that includes media platforms, social networks, or other types of content providers.)
- What are your thoughts on a). the media and journalists and b). influencers in your local community and in your country overall: do you trust, interact with, or follow any of them?
- What qualities must a source (medium) possess to gain your confidence? With that in mind, where do you typically look for information, and what approach do you take to find information regarding the following topics:
 - a. Elections and political matters, including candidates, ideological debates, or international politics.
 - b. Issues of your interest, including topics like education, healthcare, or corruption.
 - c. Local cultural and sports events of interest.

List of respondents in the Thomson Foundation-MJRC Project

Notes:

The term **"County of Provenance"** refers to the county or, in the specific case of Poland, the voivodeship from which the interviewee originates. For individuals residing abroad on a temporary basis—whether for employment or other reasons—this status is noted under the "type of settlement" category.

Rural areas encompass villages and smaller towns, specifically those with populations below 30,000.

In terms of educational attainment, university students are considered part of the tertiary education category.

The interviews in this project were carried out between 19 February 2025 and 17 March 2025 by four teams of researchers.

List of respondents: users of Facebook in Hungary

Country	County of provenance	Gender	Age	Level of education	Type of settlement	Main social media use
Hungary	Komárom-Esztergom	M	18-24	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Hungary	Tolna	M	55-64	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Hungary	Budapest	M	35-44	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Hungary	Pest	M	55-64	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Hungary	Budapest	F	Over 65	Elementary	Urban	Facebook
Hungary	Tolna	M	55-64	Tertiary	Rural	Facebook
Hungary	Budapest	F	18-24	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Hungary	Budapest	F	35-44	Secondary	Urban	Facebook
Hungary	Budapest	F	45-54	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Hungary	Budapest	F	45-54	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Hungary	Pest	M	45-54	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Hungary	Pest	F	35-44	Tertiary	Living abroad	Facebook
Hungary	Budapest	M	35-44	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Hungary	Vas	M	25-34	Elementary	Rural	Facebook
Hungary	Komárom-Esztergom	F	45-54	Tertiary	Rural	Facebook
Hungary	Nógrád	M	45-54	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Hungary	Budapest	F	35-44	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Hungary	Budapest	F	35-44	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Hungary	Tolna	M	45-54	Tertiary	Rural	Facebook
Hungary	Baranya	M	45-54	Elementary	Urban	Facebook

List of respondents: users of X in Poland

Country	County of provenance	Gender	Age	Level of education	Type of settlement	Main social media use
Poland	Kuyavia-Pomerania	M	25-34	Tertiary	Urban	X
Poland	Kuyavia-Pomerania	F	55-64	Tertiary	Rural	X
Poland	Warsaw	M	45-54	Tertiary	Urban	X
Poland	Pomerania	M	18-24	Secondary	Urban	X
Poland	Kuyavia-Pomerania	F	35-44	Tertiary	Urban	X
Poland	Kuyavia-Pomerania	M	35-44	Tertiary	Urban	X
Poland	Kuyavia-Pomerania	F	25-34	Tertiary	Urban	X
Poland	Lower Silesian	M	35-44	Tertiary	Urban	X
Poland	Podkarpackie	M	35-44	Secondary	Rural	X
Poland	Warsaw	M	35-44	Secondary	Urban	X
Poland	Masovian	F	18-24	Secondary	Rural	X
Poland	Lodz	F	18-24	Secondary	Rural	X
Poland	Warsaw	F	18-24	Secondary	Urban	X
Poland	Warsaw	M	25-34	Tertiary	Urban	X
Poland	Warsaw	M	25-34	Tertiary	Urban	X
Poland	Warsaw	F	25-34	Tertiary	Urban	X
Poland	Warmian-Masurian	F	18-24	Secondary	Rural	X
Poland	Warsaw	M	35-44	Tertiary	Urban	X
Poland	Cracow	F	35-44	Tertiary	Urban	X
Poland	Warsaw	M	25-34	Secondary	Urban	X

List of respondents: users of TikTok in Romania

Country	County of provenance	Gender	Age	Level of education	Type of settlement	Main social media use
Romania	Constanta	M	18-24	Tertiary	Rural	TikTok
Romania	Dambovita	M	18-24	Secondary	Living abroad	TikTok
Romania	Constanta	M	18-24	Secondary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Dambovita	M	25-34	Secondary	Living abroad	TikTok
Romania	Constanta	F	18-24	Tertiary	Rural	TikTok
Romania	Constanta	F	45-54	Tertiary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Constanta	F	45-54	Tertiary	Rural	TikTok
Romania	Tulcea	M	35-44	Secondary	Rural	TikTok
Romania	Constanta	F	45-54	Secondary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Constanta	F	25-34	Tertiary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Constanta	M	18-24	Tertiary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Bucharest	F	45-54	Secondary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Bucharest	F	55-64	Secondary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Bucharest	M	18-24	High-school student	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Bucharest	M	18-24	High-school student	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Bucharest	F	18-24	High-school student	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Bucharest	F	18-24	Secondary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Hunedoara	M	45-54	Tertiary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Bucharest	M	45-54	Tertiary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Bucharest	F	18-24	Tertiary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Bucharest	F	18-24	Tertiary	Urban	TikTok
Romania	Bucharest	F	25-34	Tertiary	Urban	TikTok

List of respondents: users of Facebook in the Hungarian community in Romania

Country	County of provenance	Gender	Age	Level of education	Type of settlement	Main social media use
Romania	Cluj	F	45-54	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Romania	Harghita	F	45-54	Secondary	Urban	Facebook
Romania	Harghita	M	35-44	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Romania	Cluj	F	45-54	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Romania	Mures	M	25-34	Secondary	Urban	Facebook
Romania	Harghita	F	18-24	Secondary	Urban	Facebook
Romania	Harghita	M	55-64	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Romania	Harghita	M	55-64	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Romania	Harghita	M	Over 65	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Romania	Harghita	M	55-64	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Romania	Harghita	M	55-64	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Romania	Timis	F	18-24	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Romania	Cluj	M	35-44	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Romania	Timis	M	18-24	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook
Romania	Harghita	F	45-54	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Romania	Bihor	F	Over 65	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Romania	Harghita	M	Over 65	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Romania	Covasna	F	35-44	Secondary	Rural	Facebook
Romania	Covasna	F	25-34	Tertiary	Rural	Facebook
Romania	Timis	M	45-54	Tertiary	Urban	Facebook

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