



A Comparative Assessment of Political Participation Through and In the Media in Ten EU Countries

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Deliverable 4.6 combines the results of studies on journalism's pro-democratic functions and participation *through* and *in* the media. The basis for a comparative analysis is research consisting of both qualitative and quantitative methods, respectively: interviews with media professionals (explored previously in Deliverable 4.3) and surveys conducted among journalists and media professionals (Deliverable 4.5) across ten EU countries. Both approaches aim to better understand standards and practices in media production that facilitate democratic participation. For this purpose, seven comparative categories of media's pro-democratic functions were identified: (1) providing accurate and reliable information, (2) controlling power holders, (3) participation of an audience in the debate, (4) representing social diversity, (5) participation in the production, (6) electoral participation and activism, (7) media freedom and democracy.

The analysis shows that media representatives are aware that independent journalism is a crucial factor for maintaining democracies. In general, media professionals support fulfilling pro-democratic functions in different ways, for example by counteracting disinformation, scrutinising political actors and institutions, reflecting societal diversity, providing fora for informed political discussions and encouraging public's participation in political and social life.

In practice, the most importance is attached to providing accurate and reliable information: media professionals underline a role of internal fact-checking, backing their content with multiple sources and strict editorial control regarding covered topics and actors. The watchdog function, although declared as crucial, is met with a number of challenges, mostly financial ones, which affect newsrooms' ability to conduct in-depth investigations. Furthermore, media, including the PSM, put more emphasis on querying politicians than inviting citizens to take part in direct debates. The public's involvement in content production and media management is not prioritised, either, as newsrooms use rather passive forms of facilitating participation. These include foremost encouraging voting (in particular in national elections and referenda, less so in the European and local ones) and, to a smaller degree, taking part in democratic processes such as activism, community engagement, demonstrations, as well as activating forms of associations, self-organisation and collective structures.

On the other hand, steps to reflect a political and societal diversity are declared to be commonly taken by the European media. However, this form of enhancing participation is also met with difficulties, including geographical barriers and gender bias. As a result, the media content often lacks perspectives of, for example, ethnic minorities from peripheral areas and female experts.

At the same time, in media professionals' views, journalism's pro-democratic role is constantly negatively affected by dependency on digital platform operators, financial difficulties, information overload, ownership concentration and political influences. European newsrooms, therefore, prefer ensuring high standards and quality of their everyday work, rather than involving the audiences in media production.

1. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In recent years, the role of the news media in democracies seems to be more important than ever. On the one hand, some European and other Western societies experienced democratic backsliding that presented not only sudden democratic breakdowns, but also an incremental erosion of democratic standards, in some cases leading to the dismantling of domestic checks and balances and civil liberties (Wunsch et al. 2025). On the other hand, professional news media have been exposed to attacks on their credibility, and journalists have found themselves under threat from numerous parties, including their own governments in certain states (Horton, Assersen-Skadberg, 2025).

As the qualitative research of MeDeMAP WP5 has shown, while there is a certain consensus about core democratic values among media users, democracy means different things for different people (Miconi, Ferri, Risi, Barile, 2025, 2025a). Mortenson and Nisbet (2025:5) distinguish three different forms of understandings of democracy: political equality and the rule of law (procedural democracy), freedom of expression (liberal democracy) and economic well-being (distributive democracy). The professional news media undoubtedly constitute a necessary component of each of these understandings, and in the model of liberal democracy - also an institutional dimension of its deliberative function. Yet, in the platform-driven hybrid news ecosystem, professional news providers do not occupy anymore a dominant role, as they have to compete for users' attention with "new epistemic authorities" such as news influencers, commercial news content creators, politicians, celebrities, ordinary people and many others (Schneiders, Stark, 2025).

Still, as observed in Deliverable 4.3, professional journalism and news production have a great potential to facilitate citizens' involvement in democratic life by providing knowledge, promoting discussion, fostering democratic values, generating both trust and criticism, encouraging various forms of activism and civic engagement and offering support in opinion-formation and practical issues such as elections (Klimkiewicz, Szafrńska, Vanevska, 2025). In other words, democratic participation is facilitated by the news media when directly linked to principal pro-democratic media functions. These can be divided into three groups.

The first is linked to an everyday journalistic routine and includes practices that distinguish professional journalism from other spheres of social life. In particular, this refers to the provision of accurate, reliable and relevant information that helps news users being informed about politics and the civic environment. In addition, journalism scrutinises the government and other powerful political, economic and social actors, providing monitory and watchdog functions. Finally, deliberative dimension manifests through the creation of fora for the public debate.

The extent to which these primary functions are realized vis-à-vis media users depends not only on professional attributes, but also on the participatory and representative dimensions, which belong to the second group. These two dimensions are operational in relation to the primary functions. The representational dimension refers to the extent to which demographic, societal and cultural diversity is reflected in the news production. The participatory dimension shows an extent to which users are involved in media production and what role they play in professional journalism, also given different

dimensions of participation: cognitive, deliberative and action-related aspects. The cognitive dimension refers mainly to the capacity of the news media to create spaces, where news users can engage in an everyday practice of “being informed”, forming orientation, values, collective interests, and identities. The deliberative dimension reflects involvement in commenting and discussion; building collective fronts around common interests, issues and problems.

Both these aspects are linked to participation *through* the media or mediated or indirect participation that includes a wide array of activities that enable users to interact with the news produced by journalists and newsrooms contributors. The action-related dimension stands for users’ contribution to news production and engagement in various forms of activism, including protests, creating alliances, self-governing forms and practical aspects concerning elections at various levels (European, national, local). This form of participation *in* the media or full and active or direct participation, manifests in the direct involvement in the media production, be that through the selection of topics to be covered, investigation or direct production.

Finally, the third thematic group is linked to more general conditions that support or hamper media freedom and pluralism, as well as the role of news media in democracies. In this sense, the assessment takes into account political conditions that potentially support/hamper media freedom and pluralism, economic conditions and social conditions. Finally, a better understanding of the news media’s role in democracies integrates normative expectations with actual actions and practices.

How do journalists and media producers respond to these normative expectations in everyday practice? How do they ensure accuracy, watchdog reporting, deliberation? How they respond to representation and participation in news ecosystems where it is more and more difficult to attract potential users? To answer these questions, the comparative analysis in the following sections combines categories and criteria that help to integrate news production research based on data from interviews and surveys with journalists and media managers (see: Table 1).

Table 1: The conceptual framework of democratic participation in and through the media

COMPARATIVE CATEGORIES	ASSOCIATED CRITERIA
PROVIDING ACCURATE AND RELIABLE INFORMATION	1. Journalistic standards ensuring the reliability and accuracy of information
CONTROLLING POWER HOLDERS	2. Conditions for investigative journalism
PROVIDING A VOICE IN THE DEBATE	3. Letting an audience to express their views 4. Organising public debates by the newsroom with participation of an audience
REPRESENTATING SOCIETAL DIVERSITY	5. Taking some steps in order to represent societal diversity and different groups in news produced in the newsroom
PARTICIPATION IN THE PRODUCTION	6. Enabling an audience to schedule, plan the programming or participate in decision-making processes related to content production 7. Enabling an audience to participate in strategic planning or in the management of the media organisation 8. Enabling an audience to autonomously produce media content for the newsroom
ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVISM	Encouraging to participate in: 9. European politics and elections 10. national politics, elections and referenda 11. local politics, elections and referenda 12. democratic processes beyond the act of voting (such as activism, community engagement, demonstrations and citizens' initiatives) 13. activating forms of associations, self-organisation and collective structures
MEDIA FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY	14. General conditions for professional journalism and media freedom

Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

2. PROVIDING ACCURATE AND RELIABLE INFORMATION

The analysis of journalistic standards in the context of ensuring reliability and accuracy of information across ten countries, participating in the MeDeMAP project, reveals a robust, near-universal adherence to the principles of accuracy, verification, and accountability. While the two-source principle serves as the common bedrock, the operationalisation of standards is significantly differentiated by factors such as legal/political pressures, resource constraints and the institutionalization of internal quality control.

Media, across the public, commercial and community/non-profit sectors, prioritise the meticulous verification of information, viewing it as the primary distinction between professional journalism and content provision lacking source evidence.

The demand for content based on at least two independent sources is the explicit foundational rule in Czechia, Germany (the two-eyes principle - DE-C-5), Ireland, Poland, Slovenia, and Portugal. Journalists in Austria and France achieve this standard via the demand for “several pillars of evidence” or striving for “multiple sources” underscoring the universal caution against relying on single accounts.

2.1 SOURCE VERIFICATION AND PROTECTION

A crucial mechanism is the mandated use of multi-sourced verification, a non-negotiable professional standard across all surveyed countries. These include multi-person oversight, where collaborative editorial review ensures collective responsibility for factuality, as Czechia’s multi-editor control systems (CZ-C-4). Furthermore, some outlets employ specialised verification methods, such as Slovenia’s rigorous requirement for an uninvolved fact-checker to verify every sentence against primary sources (SI-J-6), or the maintenance of dedicated fact-checking departments in large German press outlets (DE-C-2). Finally, journalists in Poland (PL-J-3) and Germany stress the necessity of securing documentary evidence - written, authenticated sources and document hoarding - not only to establish what is true, but also to serve as a crucial legal safeguard against defamation lawsuits or demands for corrections.

Across the competitive private and digital sectors in France, Slovenia, Portugal and Italy, reliability is explicitly prioritised over the speed of publication. Managers in France state they “can forgive anything, but not false information” (FR-C-4-2), while interviewees from Slovenia and Portugal emphasize that verifying documents and securing the presence of ‘the other side’ in the material justifies delaying a publication, even if competitors publish a given the information first (SI-C-1; PT-J-6).

This ethical stance is complemented by the value placed on professional expertise in Czechia and Italy, where a journalist’s professional and cultural depth (e.g. a “humanistic background” in Italy - IT-C-5) is considered essential for critical source assessment and complex contextualisation.

Journalists reinforce accuracy through sophisticated methods of source engagement and contextual information management. Source protection is paramount, with one of the French interviewees highlighting the “contract of trust” (FR-J-1) between journalists and sources as essential to guaranteeing future information flow, thereby supporting the quality and scope of investigative reporting. Moreover, in Austria, proactive verification of factual claims is systematically used as a mechanism for mitigating editorial risk before publication, where meticulous pre-research supports real-time environments, like live political shows (AT-C-1). This preparation ensures the journalist is equipped to contradict false statements instantly with verifiable data.

2.2 ENFORCING OF JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS

A significant divergence exists among the observed countries regarding the primary mechanisms employed to enforce journalistic standards. Specifically, in Germany, Ireland, and Portugal, noticeable importance is placed on guidelines imposed by external regulatory institutions, indicating a reliance on external bodies for defining and ensuring

compliance. Conversely, media in Austria, Czechia and France demonstrate a strong emphasis on internal fact-checking and the implementation of strict editorial systems, suggesting a preference for self-regulatory models and robust internal accountability. Interviewees from Estonia further highlight this internal orientation by specifying adherence to the Estonian Code of Journalistic Ethics, underscoring the role of professional codes as foundational standards for practice. In this way, a formal ethical framework is universally central, although it is underpinned by both formal determinants (official codes of conduct) and unwritten principles stemming from universal values, as exemplified in Estonia (Estonian Code of Journalistic Ethics), Germany (Press Code, JTI certification), Poland (commitment to truth as “most valuable currency” - PL-J-2), and Slovenia (Slovenian Journalists’ Code).

2.3 COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

Furthermore, disinformation and fake news are major concerns, particularly exacerbated by social media and, increasingly, the use of AI (Germany, Italy, Poland). The digital rivalry crisis is visible, as traditional media face unequal and devastating competition from social media and global digital platforms (Austria, Estonia). These platforms siphon off advertising revenue and force cost-cutting, with dependency on Big Tech infrastructure further exacerbating financial asymmetry (Poland). The social media is overwhelmingly viewed as a threat due to its role in speeding up production, spreading disinformation, creating echo chambers and fragmenting the audience (Czechia, Estonia, France, Ireland, Poland, Portugal). In different countries, media respond to the digital age differently. In Germany, resisting the “digital attention market” (DE-J-1) through institutional rigour is emphasised, while in Italy, reporters are demanded to focus on tracing the original source to combat the “excess of information” (IT-C-1).

2.4 FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

The most critical and pervasive threat to accuracy is the widespread lack of resources, particularly pronounced in countries with weaker economies, which directly leads to the erosion of essential quality control mechanisms. The ability to perform the watchdog function of journalism is fundamentally compromised across nearly all countries (Austria, Czechia, Germany, Estonia, France, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia) due to financial factors. The erosion of oversight is evident, as Irish media professionals report staff haemorrhaging and the consequent elimination of quality control layers, such as sub-editors in local media (IE-C-2). This shifts the entire burden of accuracy onto individual, overstretched reporters, dramatically increasing the risk of error. One of the Portuguese interviewees notes the widespread absence of dedicated fact-checking departments, forcing a duty for verification onto individual reporters (PT-C-4).

The most critical determinants of effective investigative reporting - time and money - are consistently cited as lacking (Poland, Slovenia, Portugal). This scarcity directly limits the capacity for in-depth research and the development of critical questions (Austria, Ireland). Investigative journalism is universally identified as economically demanding, costly and time-consuming (Estonia, France, Slovenia), directly leading to its reduced priority in resource-strained newsrooms (Ireland). Compounding this situation, the need for immediate “clicks” (EE-J-3) in markets like Estonia creates a clear conflict. This pressure

forces journalists to choose speed over ethical standards, often sacrificing the time needed to fully verify sources just to publish the content quickly.

Financial pressures directly erode the quality of the journalistic workforce and professional standards. This begins with an exodus of expertise, as low salaries, job insecurity and harsh working conditions (Italy, Ireland, Portugal) force experienced journalists and young talent to leave the profession (Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia). This departure of skilled professionals directly compromises the depth and quality of output (Ireland).

2.5 STRATEGIC LAWSUITS AGAINST PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SLAPPS)

External pressures related to political and legal constraints risk actively distorting information flows and stifling challenging investigative reporting. Polish journalists must mitigate lawsuit risk through meticulous documentation (PL-J-3), while Irish journalists are made “cagey” about sensitive reporting due to unnecessarily harsh Defamation Laws (IE-J-6). This caution makes editors wary of reporting on powerful figures, effectively undermining the core journalistic function of holding those in power to account. The fear of lawsuits is not merely a legal risk, but a potent financial instrument used to weaken and silence media outlets (France, Portugal, Italy). This legal pressure creates a chilling effect, deterring challenging investigative reports on powerful figures. Furthermore, countries like Poland face political manipulation tactics where political actors may strategically “burn topics” - releasing sensitive information prematurely via friendly media - in order to weaken the impact and distort the narrative of legitimate investigative reports (PL-C-4). The reliance on unnamed sources and bias in some countries, such as Portugal, contributes to transforming journalism into a passive conduit for political propaganda (PT-C-3), thereby threatening the objective standard of fairness to both government and opposition that is non-negotiable in nations like Czechia (CZ-C-2).

2.6 SECTORAL DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

In the context of providing accurate and reliable information, the differentiation in mechanisms across media sectors appears to be complementary, collectively reinforcing the overall integrity of the media ecosystem.

The public service media are characterized by highly institutionalized internal quality control (Austria, Czechia) and adherence to formal legal mandates (Austria, Poland, Estonia). The PSM embeds additional quality layers, such as mandatory editorial conferences and daily broadcast reviews (Austria), and structurally enforces pluralism and political fairness through defined quotas (Poland). Public sector focuses on supplementing trusted baseline data with expert interpretation for contextual accuracy (Austria).

The commercial sector prioritises accuracy over speed, but its processes are often influenced by market competition and resource constraints (France, Ireland, Estonia). Private media rely heavily on multi-editor control systems (Czechia) and formal self-regulation (Germany) to maintain reliability.

The community and non-profit media sector displays a unique focus on ethical vigilance and inclusivity (Austria, Estonia), often explicitly working to avoid the reproduction of

stereotypes and ensuring diverse voices are heard. Community media rely heavily on codified ethical frameworks (Estonia, Czechia) and, because of resource constraints, may deliberately avoid ‘breaking news’ to prevent the spread of inaccuracies (France). Their commitment to the separation of opinion and news is crucial for maintaining integrity despite limited resources (Czechia, Italy).

In sum, the journalistic landscape across the ten European countries is characterized by a strong, unified adherence to truth-seeking principles (fact-checking, source verification) alongside a shared struggle to maintain professional standards against the destabilizing forces of the digital environment - particularly social media’s negative impact, financial pressures and the rising threat of AI-driven disinformation. While media in all countries strive to foster public participation and diversity - often forced by legal obligations in public service media - they encounter obstacles such as resource limitations within their newsrooms. The variations primarily lie in the specific nature of the political and economic pressures faced, the extent of regulatory versus internal control, and the success of implementing diversity goals.

3. CONTROLLING POWER HOLDERS

Investigative journalism, recognised universally as an essential democratic watchdog function, currently confronts a pervasive systemic crisis across all analysed national media environments. While its necessity is commonly affirmed by media professionals, its execution is systemically constrained by debilitating economic austerity, widespread staffing deficits and significant interference, whether direct or indirect, from both political actors and owners’ interests. This multifaceted crisis diminishes the institutional capacity of newsrooms to support the demanding financial and temporal requirements inherent in robust investigative practices.

3.1 FUNDAMENTAL PRACTICES OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Across the examined countries, investigative journalists distinguish themselves through a profound commitment to their role as the “fourth pillar” of democracy and a primary check on power holders. In Austria and Czechia, this is manifested in a “historically verified” mission to “keep an eye on the powerful” (CZ-C-4) and uncover abuses that would otherwise remain hidden, as democracies would “otherwise lose transparency without a critical press” (AT-C-5). In France, investigative journalism is frequently operationalised through “long formats” (FR-C-2) and specialised “investigation cells” (FR-J-1), particularly within public service media. These units are designed to be “detached from the vicissitudes of everyday work” (FR-C-1), allowing journalists to bypass the immediate pressures of daily news cycles. Similarly, in the Polish context, professionals argue that a medium’s credibility is predicated upon its capacity to sustain long-term, high-cost research that remains “completely independent of external conditions” (PL-C-2).

Effective practitioners maintain a high level of editorial independence - a principle explicitly articulated by newsrooms across all ten countries - ensuring that reporting is conducted according to “exclusively journalistic criteria and not economic criteria” (AT-J-

3). This professional rigor is particularly evident in the “watchdog task” where journalists actively “highlight this discrepancy between saying and doing” (AT-J-2), refuting political falsehoods and holding authorities accountable to their public promises. This watchdog function serves a broader mission of “controlling the authorities” and protecting the public interest (SI-C-2, SI-C-4).

Modern investigative methods have been significantly enhanced by technological modernisation, which serves as a vital enabler of high-impact reporting. In France and Estonia, technological tools have “considerably improved access to information” (FR-J-3) allowing for rapid data sourcing and the verification of complex leads. Beyond mere exposure, journalists in Germany and Estonia have successfully pivoted to an “orientational function” acting as “buoys” (DE-J-4) in a flood of information and disinformation. By providing “adequate, verified information” (EE-J-1) and acting as gatekeepers, they offer citizens the “tools to make their own choices” (EE-J-1). Italian journalists emphasise that investigative journalism “allows giving readers a key to really understand the truth and thus true freedom” (IT-C-4).

This strategic curation is essential in an era of information overload, as it helps the public distinguish between “reliable and unreliable information” (AT-C-3), thereby facilitating informed democratic participation.

Successful investigative units are increasingly finding resilience through innovative funding models and deep community roots. In Estonia, the “dramatic increase in the willingness of society to pay for paid online content” (EE-J-1) has diversified revenue streams, reducing the “one hundred percent dependence on advertising money” (EE-J-1) and bolstering editorial freedom. Furthermore, investigative work often serves a broader social purpose by providing a “basis for understanding in an increasingly complex world” (AT-C-1). Investigative journalists provide critical insights into the effects of policy-making, thereby creating the transparency necessary to prevent systemic corruption and maintain public trust in democratic institutions.

3.2 PRIMARY CONSTRAINTS

The most critical and common impediment across all ten countries is the lack of dedicated time and financial resources, often driven by a market logic that favours instant, high-volume content over slow, high-effort investigation. In countries with severe financial pressures (Czechia, Slovenia, Ireland, Poland), newsrooms are dramatically understaffed, making the allocation of a journalist to a weeks- or months-long project a “luxury that managers cannot afford” (SI-C-1). This is formalised in environments like the Slovenian PSM, where journalists must adhere to a “productivity norm” that eliminates the necessary time for true investigation.

Even in economically stable countries like Austria and Germany, investigative journalism is explicitly recognised as an “investment” in reputation, not a “concrete business case” (DE-C-4). The market does not reliably reward time-intensive work, leading to a focus on “clickbait journalism” (SI-C-3) and reducing complex investigations to a minimal scale.

The local and regional sectors are universally the weakest link, having suffered a profound loss of staff and institutional support (Ireland). In Poland and Portugal, dedicated

investigative journalism is described as “non-existent”, replaced by basic “intervention journalism” (PL-C-5) due to the impossibility of delegating the requisite two or more journalists.

The integrity and independence of investigative journalism are frequently compromised by ownership structures, political interference and reliance on external, risky sources.

One of the most salient structural impediments to independent investigative journalism in the analysed countries, notably France, Poland and Slovenia, is the increasing problem of media ownership concentration and the resultant rise of self-censorship. In France, ownership concentration, exemplified by figures like Vincent Bolloré, raises immediate concerns that investigations into specific topics will simply be removed from editorial priorities. In Poland and Ireland, the phenomenon, where journalists become political advisors, creates public distrust, while self-censorship is practiced to avoid losing access to powerful figures or due to fear of retribution from owners.

A major democratic vulnerability exists in some countries (e.g. Italy, Portugal), where investigative journalism often becomes an “amplification of the prosecutor’s investigations” (IT-C-6). This high-stakes reliance on “judicial sources” (PT-J-3) means most content is reactive, based on leaks from ongoing criminal inquiries, and the content is often not fact-checked by the journalists themselves, creating a severe ethical risk.

The capacity for independent investigative journalism is severely hampered by prevalent mechanisms of political and legal intimidation across several European countries, notably Italy, Poland, and France. In Italy, the digital native media, despite their investigative focus, operate under the threat of direct state coercion, facing “censorship” and “economic or legal threats” emanating from “higher authorities” (IT-C-4). Concurrently, Polish journalists confront a highly litigious environment, regularly enduring Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), intimidation, and then lawsuits designed to financially and psychologically exhaust them. This hostile environment results in a tangible absence of a “sense of security” (PL-J-6), further compounded by a widespread lack of accessible legal support (DE-C-6) for all but the largest news organisations. This sustained pressure acts as a palpable structural barrier, leading to self-censorship and rendering the pursuit of high-risk, impactful stories economically and personally prohibitive for many journalists.

Even in environments where editorial independence remains structurally robust, such as in Germany, investigative journalism is increasingly hampered by institutional barriers to information access. Furthermore, fundamental shortcomings in freedom of information regulations pose critical challenges. In Slovenia, highly limited access to public information compels journalists to circumvent formal processes and rely precariously on leaks provided “under the table bypassing the rules” (SI-J-4), thus elevating the risks associated with sourcing and verification.

A distinct yet equally significant obstacle arises in small media markets, such as Estonia, where the high social proximity within local communities creates a substantial deterrent to whistleblowing. In this setting, the lack of anonymity means sources are highly reluctant to speak to journalists due to a pervasive fear of being identified, thereby blocking the flow of critical information essential for local accountability.

3.3 SECTORAL DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

Investigative journalism is sustained through distinct, yet highly conditional, sectoral models. The public service media are the institutional backbone where public funding grants protection, enabling dedicated, transversal investigation cells and fostering high editorial freedom, exemplified by the “oxygen in the air” (DE-J-1) dynamic in Germany and structural independence via governance reform in Portugal. Conversely, this PSM resilience is highly conditional; severe under-resourcing in countries like Ireland, Poland, Czechia, and Italy forces capacity reduction, leading it to becoming “non-existent” in-house (Italy) or necessitating reliance on external producers (Ireland).

Major press outlets strategically employ investigative journalism as the reputation basis and a commercial differentiator, considering it their “core DNA” (DE-J-3) and a value-add compelling subscriptions in markets such as Germany, Poland, and Portugal. However, this sector is profoundly vulnerable to market demands and ownership interests, where the pursuit of short-term profits often erodes systematic investigation, as evident in the Slovenian press.

Digital media act as a new engine for aggressive, independent investigation, using specialised tools and models reliant on reader subscriptions (e.g. Fanpage in Italy, Polish non-profit outlets). Although this offers insulation from traditional pressures, these outlets remain highly exposed to intense political and legal threats, including censorship (Italy), while battling the market’s preference for “instant journalism” and struggling to secure stable, long-term funding (Slovenia).

Finally, the non-profit and community sector covers underserved topics (e.g. student politics in Slovenia). This model shows a potential for sustainability through voluntary reader payments (Poland), but also faces the most acute time and financial deficit, relying on volunteers and often lacking the capacity for rigorous verification and legal vetting, which makes it highly vulnerable to funding threats from political entities.

Investigative journalism across the interviewed media faces a systemic crisis rooted in severe resource scarcity and political-legal interference. The primary constraint is economic, independence is further compromised by structural vulnerabilities, including ownership concentration leading to self-censorship (France, Poland) and reliance on high-risk, unverified judicial leaks (Italy, Portugal). Finally, the capacity for high-impact reporting is stifled by political and legal intimidation (SLAPPs) and institutional barriers to information access, eroding the essential “sense of security” needed for independent work.

4. PARTICIPATION OF AN AUDIENCE IN THE DEBATE

The analysis of media professionals’ views on the media’s capacity to facilitate democratic public debate reveals a striking convergence of challenges and commitment. The provision of a forum for public debate across the studied European media systems is characterized by a central tension: a universal commitment to mandated pluralism and high editorial standards countered by significant structural impediments related to resource scarcity, digital platform disruption, and a deficit in authentic social representation.

A dominant finding indicates the widespread erosion of open digital public sphere functionality, compelling media organisations to implement highly formalized, structured, and context-specific operational strategies as a prerequisite for maintaining journalistic relevance and ethical accountability. As described below, although media recognise the need for integrating an audience into a public discussion, they meet many obstacles in their efforts to facilitate direct, in-depth debates.

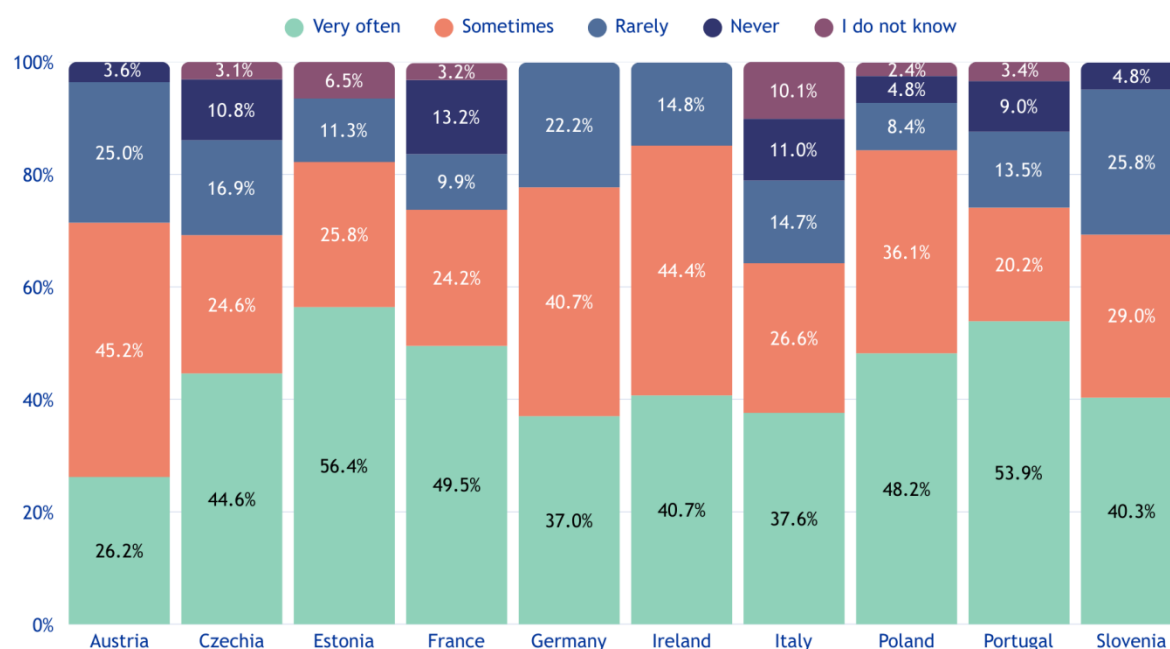
4.1 LETTING THE AUDIENCE EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS

The interviews results suggest media outlets are highly vulnerable to algorithmic filtering on major social media platforms, which increasingly restricts the reach of a serious political content. This leaves professional journalism “at the mercy of the structures of all the platforms” (AT-J-4), fundamentally undermining the media’s ability to set the digital agenda or ensure broad democratic information flows. Despite these obstacles, there is an overall consensus regarding the need to allow the public to express their views.

Based on the survey results, in most of the countries, the majority of respondents state to implement practices such as letting the audience speak on air or comment published content very often. In practice, the audience engagement usually shifts toward controlled, private channels such as curated “readers’ letters” (Slovenia, Estonia), professional newsletters (Germany) and private messaging services (WhatsApp in Italy and Ireland), effectively moving quality civic discussion away from the public eye. The countries with the highest declared level of encouraging the public to express its views are Estonia and Portugal. In both cases, more than a half of respondents claim their newsrooms do it very frequently, while in France and Poland, the rate is at just below 50%.

The only countries where surveyed journalists state to facilitate this form of participation sometimes rather than very often are: Austria (45% vs. 26%), Germany (41% vs. 37%) and Ireland (44% vs. 41%). Still, however, despite not prioritising this practice, the newsrooms in these countries follow a general tendency to recognise the need for interacting with the public.

Figure 1: Letting an audience express their views, in 10 EU countries.



Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

The country with the lowest combined number of positive responses is Italy (total 64% of “very often” and “sometimes” responses). Interestingly, one out of ten respondents in this country claims not to know whether their newsroom lets the audience express their views or not, which is the highest result among all the studied countries.

In the vast majority of the countries, the media that prioritise the audience engagement the most are those operating in a commercial model, namely the audiovisual, print and digital ones. Letting an audience express their views is also largely the domain of the community, non-profit and minority newsrooms.

The most significant differences shown by the survey results are visible within public media. A relatively low PSM’s engagement in allowing the audience to express their views is visible in Czechia, Italy and Portugal (in all cases, a number of positive responses reaches maximum of a half of the sample). In the remaining countries, representatives of the public sector pointed to a similar level of the audience engagement as their commercial and non-profit counterparts; therefore it can be concluded that within the PSM sector, letting an audience to express their views is also a common practice across the MeDeMAP countries.

Implementing this practice is justified by the need to maintain a high viewership, readership or traffic, which - especially in the case of the commercial media - provides a stable source of financing. However, interacting with the public is often a manifestation of the media’s mission to provide diverse voices and ensure plurality of the topics.

A commonness of audience involvement should not come as a surprise, since in a highly social media dependent environment, most of the media outlets keep comment sections on their profiles open. These, according to interviewees, serve the purpose not only of allowing the recipients to share their opinions on the published content, but might also be a platform for the public to, for example, suggest potential topics. This is the case in

Ireland, where social platforms are sometimes used to engage readers in reporting fake news to be fact-checked by outlets. Media outlets across the spectrum also utilize crowdsourcing not merely for information gathering, but as a tool for accountability and problem-solving. Campaigns that collect and aggregate citizen concerns - such as “The Voice of Austria” (AT-C-3)¹ - effectively translate public discontent into journalistic action, helping media fulfil their mission to “help solve some problems” (SI-C-1). Interacting with public also takes more traditional forms, like letters to the newsrooms or live phone calls from the viewers/listeners. A vivid example is a practice of the Slovenian daily “Večer” (“Evening”), which regularly engages audience members with notable societal roles to write personal diaries for publication.

4.2 ORGANISING PUBLIC DEBATES BY THE NEWSROOM WITH PARTICIPATION OF AN AUDIENCE

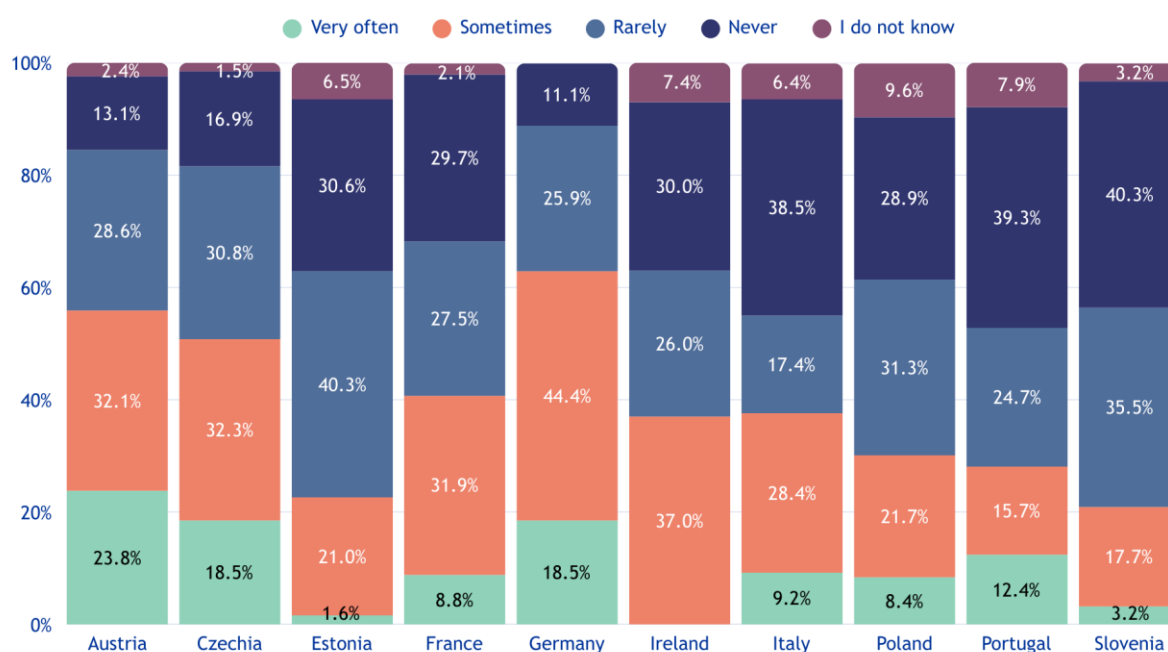
Although the survey respondents declare their newsrooms frequently allow the audience to express their views, this practice is unlikely to take the form of public debates. According to interviewed journalists, the political context exerts a decisive influence: societies characterised by extreme polarisation (Italy and Poland) or prone to simple partisan binary opposition (Estonia) find that substantive debate is often overwhelmed by spectacle and political antagonism, regardless of journalistic efforts. The growing threat of media ownership concentration in the hands of “a few billionaires” (FR-C-4-2) also introduces a structural inequality, allowing powerful owners to impose opinions and stifling smaller, independent voices, such as members of the public.

The only countries where more than half of the surveyed media representatives declared a positive attitude towards debates with the participation of the audience are Germany (63%), Austria (56%) and Czechia (51%). However, even in those cases, the dominant response was “sometimes” rather than “very often”, which shows that organising such events is not a priority for these media outlets.

The lowest rates of positive responses were recorded for Portugal (28%), Estonia (23%) and Slovenia (21%). Slovenia is also the country with the highest percentage of respondents claiming to never organise public debates (40%), followed by Portugal and Italy (around 39% in both cases).

¹ “The Voice of Austria” (“Die Stimme Österreichs”) is a recurring large-scale public opinion series commissioned by Kronen Zeitung in collaboration with research institutes such as Unique Research. Through systematic surveys of voter sentiment and political priorities, the initiative maps contemporary citizen concerns - ranging from socio-cultural debates (e.g. gender-neutral language) to structural political demands - thereby serving as a significant empirical barometer of the Austrian public mood, particularly during electoral cycles (see: <https://www.krone.at/3504605>).

Figure 2: Organising public debates by the newsroom with participation of an audience, in 10 EU countries.



Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

The provision of a public debate forum in European media is highly stratified by sector, each pursuing distinct, yet complementary, strategies while grappling with universal challenges, particularly from the digital sphere.

4.3. SECTORAL DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

The PSM across the included countries (e.g. Austria, France, Czechia) adopt the most proactive and institutionally structured approach to fulfilling their public debate mandate. Their strategies centre on pluralism, transparency, and high-quality information provision. PSM often goes beyond broadcasting to create forums that ensure “dialogue and approachability” (AT-C-1). This is achieved through hosting non-traditional events like science-focused discussions (AT-C-1), political “hearing events” (Germany, DE-C-1) and, uniquely in France, installing an institutional Mediator (Ombudsman) to provide direct accountability to listeners concerning editorial decisions (FR-C-1). PSM consistently sees its fundamental role as providing the “platform” and “facts” (Estonia, EE-C-1) necessary for informed debate, often focusing on “dark corners” or complex issues that commercial media might ignore. The French PSM professionals emphasise interactivity to ensure political balance, often measured over specific timeframes. In countries like Czechia, PSM strongly emphasises the “holistic profession” of journalism and rigorous verification, viewing this as the foundational contribution to a trustworthy public debate.

Despite these declarations expressed in the interviews, the survey results show that engaging the audience in debates by public media across all ten studied countries does not take place frequently. Only in Czechia and Germany, the share of combined positive responses within the PSM reaches a half (in both cases, it is exactly 50%). On the opposite pole, lies Slovenia, for which no positive responses from the public sector representatives were secured.

In the commercial sector, the only media type whose representatives, to some extent, responded positively to the question on organising debates were news portals. For example, in the case of Slovenia, it was the only category, in which all the surveyed responded with “very often”. Similarly, in Estonia, the country with the second-lowest total number of positive responses, more than a half of all positive responses (5 out of 9) came from digital media representatives. The only country with no positive responses from news portals was Portugal (however, the low number of responses in this category, which totalled to three, makes it difficult to draw representative conclusions).

The interviews show that the commercial media approach the debate function with a dual objective: providing a space for diverse views while managing commercial viability and maintaining credibility. Interviewees from the commercial outlets, particularly in Austria and Czechia, emphasise strict editorial neutrality and the ability to “endure the fact that there are different positions” (AT-C-2). They aim to present diverse voices, so the audience can determine “what to think” rather than being told. While in Austria, media often use their resources for high-visibility engagement, such as crowdsourcing campaigns to involve readers in nationwide debates, in France private outlets appear to prioritise debates with politicians rather than with members of the public, as exemplified by citizen-led forums to confront candidates. Furthermore, Italian private TV professionals admit that debate topic selection is heavily influenced by “ratings” and subjects, which are “sensitive to the public” (IT-C-2), suggesting a necessary compromise between public value and spectacle.

Digital native news media and the press often assume a key role in agenda-setting through in-depth investigative series, bringing latent or unarticulated societal problems (e.g. in Estonia) into the public light, thereby triggering structured debate.

The other group of respondents showing a limited willingness to arrange direct debates with the audience are those representing community, non-profit and minority media in many MeDeMAP countries. In six out of nine countries² (Austria, Czechia, France, Germany, Italy and Portugal) positive responses stood for at least half of all responses given by representatives of this sector. However, it should be borne in mind that both for the news portals and community / non-profit / minority media, most of the respondents stated to organise debates with participation of an audience sometimes. It shows that even if such events occur, they are not practiced on an everyday basis, and are rather linked to some specific circumstances.

The non-profit and community interviewees claim to focus on niche audiences, social justice, and connecting with those often overlooked by mainstream commercial or PSM outlets. This sector often embraces an explicit advocacy function, positioning itself as “firmly on someone’s side” - specifically the “weaker party” (EE-C-3) or minority groups (e.g. the Roma in Slovenia’s community media context). Their commitment is to give a voice to the underrepresented, deviating from strict PSM neutrality. Community and local media maintain a strong presence “on the ground” (SI-C-1) and prioritise hyper-local problem-solving (e.g. resolving issues reported by listeners). This fosters a sense of being a “community cornerstone” (SI-C-3) and creates organic civic participation.

² In the case of Estonia, no responses in the community / non-profit / minority media category were retrieved.

Representatives of local and community media are highly sensitive to ethical boundaries, explicitly stating their need to exclude “political right-wing extremist or racist” opinions (Austria, Germany), underscoring a commitment to democratic values within the debate function.

Across all three sectors, the functionality of the public debate forum is severely challenged by two pervasive issues. The abandonment of open comment sections due to “hatred” (DE-J-3) and “vitriol” (IE-C-3) has forced newsrooms to adopt editorially controlled or closed communication mechanisms, effectively reducing the scope of unstructured, public digital debate. The second issue is the necessity of conducting quality, time-consuming fact-checking work, under constant strain from the accelerated, metrics-driven digital environment (Ireland) and staffing shortages (local media in Slovenia and Germany), which impede the moderation required for constructive dialogue.

The future effectiveness and long-term viability of this critical forum function are intrinsically contingent upon two primary, structural factors: the economic resilience of media organisations, particularly their capacity to overcome pervasive resource constraints (e.g. in Poland and Slovenia), and their ability to successfully navigate or mandate the regulation of the dominant external algorithmic structures that currently govern the distribution and reach of professional journalistic content.

5. REPRESENTING DIVERSITY

When asked about diversity, the interviewees point most commonly to its political aspects, which - particularly in the public and audiovisual sectors (France, Germany, Poland, Czechia) - is the most formalised form of efforts to achieve diversity. Mechanisms include time counting (legally required in France by ARCOM) and proportional coverage based on electoral significance (Poland, Czechia’s “graded equality”). The fundamental commitment to source pluralism - covering “all voices” and ensuring multiple perspectives (Italy, Austria) - is the primary operational strategy for achieving perceived fairness in daily news.

5.1 POLITICAL DIVERSITY

Political diversity in the analysed European media landscape is governed by a complex tension between institutional mandates, editorial autonomy and the disruptive influence of digital platforms.

A primary pillar of political representation in the studied countries is the principle of electoral proportionality. In countries such as Poland, France and Czechia, the interviewed media professionals explicitly link media visibility to parliamentary strength or recent electoral performance. In Poland, this is reinforced by rigid legal obligations and monthly emission quotas for PSM; in France, the regulatory framework governing political diversity is characterised by a rigorous system of quotas and time-accounting, primarily overseen by ARCOM (FR-C-1); while in Czechia, a model of “graded equality” is employed. This ensures that while all current issues have visibility, airtime is commensurate with political significance. However, this systemic focus on established powers often results in an

“incumbency bias” as seen in Italy and Estonia, where the activities of governing bodies naturally command more attention than those of the opposition.

The limits of political diversity are frequently defined by the exclusion of extremist ideologies. In the German and French contexts, journalistic policies often incorporate the exclusion of political actors who are monitored by state security or whose ideologies diverge from democratic norms. While this is framed as a safeguard for democratic stability, it presents a challenge to absolute pluralism. In Czechia, the refusal of right-wing extremists to provide statements further complicates securing total diversity. Such editorial choices are made against a backdrop of increasing audience polarisation. Germany, for instance, reports that covering controversial topics often triggers aggressive public reactions on digital channels.

A recurring theme is the conflict between the ideal of diversity and the pragmatic constraints of news production. In Portugal, journalists identify an “availability bias” driven by production speeds, where the “first name that comes up [...] is the name that jumps out at everyone” (PT-J-2). Similarly, Estonian, and Irish interviewees cite a lack of resources and time as primary obstacles to facilitating broad public participation. This often leads to a reliance on established, predominantly male and affluent spokespeople. In Estonia, resource constraints and time pressure lead to a reliance on a repetitive pool of “safe” public figures, narrowing the scope of discourse; furthermore “sourcing homogeneity” is observed in Slovenia, where the pressure to achieve high audience shares leads media outlets to prioritise “mainstream” parliamentary parties over smaller, non-parliamentary actors, thereby narrowing the scope of political diversity to the most prominent players (conversely, Slovenian PSM maintains strict policies of balanced “government-opposition” dialogue, even providing space for non-parliamentary parties, SI-C-1).

The public forum is undergoing a significant transition toward social media. Austrian private-commercial media and Italian outlets actively use online platforms to facilitate debates and receive feedback. However, this shift is met with academic and professional scepticism in Czechia, where social media is perceived as potentially “negative for democracy” due to its tendency to “unite people around shared beliefs” (CZ-C-1) rather than fostering heterogeneous debate. Despite these digital trends, traditional formats persist: Germany and France continue to organise direct meetings between candidates and citizens, bridging the gap between political elites and the local community.

A transformative trend, identified particularly in Austria and Poland, is the disintermediation of political communication. Politicians are increasingly bypassing independent media to organise their own coverage via social media, leading to a “crisis of relevance” for traditional gatekeepers. German media professionals identify social media algorithms as a significant threat, as they create echo chambers that limit the audience’s exposure to diverse political viewpoints. Despite these pressures, the data underscores that the antidote to political pressure remains a strong journalistic ethos and editorial independence, as seen in Austria’s refusal to grant concessions – such as providing questions in advance – to maintain political access.

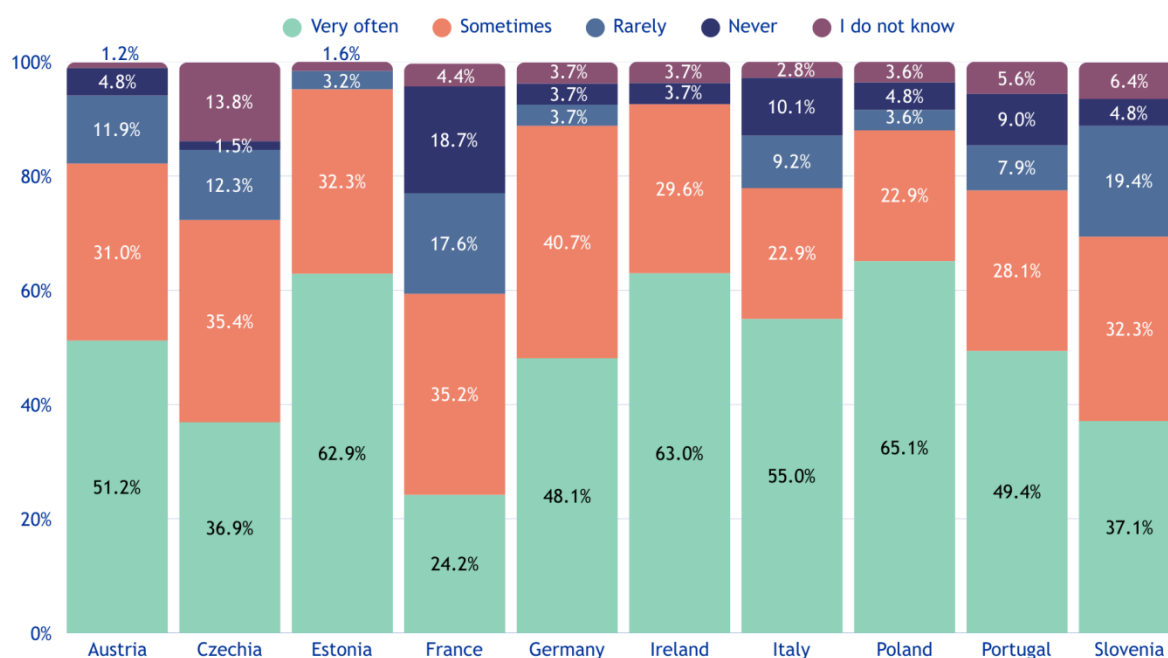
5.2 ETHNIC-CULTURAL DIVERSITY

In the surveys, respondents were asked specifically about the societal diversity, and presented a similar level of willingness to fulfil this mission as in the case of letting the audience express their views. Steps to reflect the diversity are taken commonly across all ten countries, with France being the only country where the response “very often” is not dominant. Still, the number of positive responses in France (59%) exceeds the negative ones, although it is the lowest across all examined countries (see: Figure 3).

Besides France, the countries where, according to surveyed media professionals, editorial efforts to represent diversity are less frequent - although still common - are Slovenia (69% of combined positive responses), Portugal (77.5%) and Italy (77.9%). However, while in Slovenia, the majority of negative responses stands for “rarely”, suggesting at least little space for implementing diversity strategies, in remaining mentioned countries the choice of “never” is dominant (particularly in France, where almost 19% of respondents admit their newsrooms never take steps to represent the diversity).

The highest percentage of surveyed journalists and media professionals who declared editorial efforts to represent societal diversity was noted in Estonia (95% of positive responses), Ireland (93%), as well as in Poland and Germany (around 88% per each). The first three mentioned countries also present the highest rate of responses “very often”: in each case, around two thirds of respondents claimed their newsrooms implement strategies to reflect societal diversity with this frequency.

Figure 3: Taking steps to represent societal diversity and different groups in news produced in the newsroom, in 10 EU countries.



Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

Despite efforts to ensure diversity in the content, the interviewees from all sectors point to a structural failure in providing sociodemographic representation, mainly in the form of profound lack of racial and ethnic diversity within media outlets. Newsrooms in France are acknowledged to be “still generally white” (FR-J-1), while in Germany, this homogeneity is

attributed to the historical legacy of a “white majority society” (DE-C-1), and recruitment difficulties persist in Austria and Czechia. Financial constraints create a significant class barrier to entry. This is explicitly caused by the reliance on unpaid internships in Ireland (favouring the “more privileged backgrounds”, IE-C-6) and the requirement for long periods of low-income work in Germany (DE-C-2), Italy (IT-C-6) and the cost of living in general (Germany, Ireland).

Although the survey results indicate a high level of societal diversity representation, the interviews revealed certain constraints affecting everyday coverage of this topic. Economic obstacles are the main impediment to covering minority groups and peripheral regions. Local/regional media in Austria, Germany, and Ireland lack the time and resources for in-depth “real journalism” devoted to topics that generate low mass-audience interest. Another issue is metropolitan-centrism, which leads to a persistent geographical bias, such as Tallinn-centrism in Estonia and Paris-centrism in France, prioritising convenience and proximity.

5.3 GENDER BALANCE

Another aspect is securing gender balance in the media coverage. As suggested by the survey respondents’ gender distribution, internal staffing may show high female representation: the share of female respondents varied from 46% in Italy to 65% in Slovenia. Achieving gender balance in expert sourcing remains, however, difficult (France, Estonia, Poland). In France, gender representation is treated as a measurable metric of professional performance, as audiovisual media are subject to a rigorous legal and ethical obligation to report the percentage of women appearing on air to ARCOM. This top-down approach is mirrored in Italy, where the “No Woman, No Panel” rule (IT-J-1) has institutionalised the commitment to female inclusion in public debates. In Poland, while less codified, gender balance is pursued through proactive editorial “tactics”, particularly in digital native outlets that consciously invite female experts in numbers equal to their male counterparts. As one Polish digital native observed, a commitment to diversity often “just happens on its own” (PL-C-4) as part of a modern journalistic mission focused on tolerance and openness.

Certain sectors and countries demonstrate success in internal gender balance, but the most significant structural failure lies in securing female expert voices, creating a gender expert gap (Estonia, France). Journalists attribute the sourcing difficulty to women being “less responsive” or requiring more convincing to accept roles as experts or columnists, suggesting a psychological barrier alongside institutional bias. In the case of Italy, it was explicitly confirmed that media have “no policy attentive to gender quotas” (IT-C-2).

The data indicates a strong correlation between the demographic composition of newsrooms and the gender balance of their output. Irish interviewees report a notable dominance of male professionals and a lack of working-class representatives, which creates an inherent bias in the narratives produced. Conversely, in Slovenia and Germany, gender balance is maintained through internal cultural pressure. Slovenian journalists emphasise the need for constant “reminders” within the team to include women in discussions on topics – such as security or economics – that were historically viewed as “exclusively male”. In Germany, an open climate is encouraged, though some

professionals argue that newsrooms must be “forced” to do more (DE-J-4), suggesting that internal obligations for diversity among employees are essential to breaking traditional patterns.

5.4 SECTORAL DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

In the context of various media sectors, the issue of representing diversity manifests itself heterogeneously. The public service media universally accept and rigorously shoulder the primary institutional responsibility for representing societal diversity, fundamentally viewing this commitment as both a legal and societal obligation. For Slovenia and France, the number of positive responses from representatives of the public media was the lowest, still, however, in both cases, around 70% of the respondents (respectively: 14 out of 20 and 13 out of 18) were positive about implementing strategies to represent societal diversity in their content. Poland and Austria are the only countries, for which 100% of representatives of the PSM responded positively.

As indicated by the interviewees, the mandate of representing societal diversity is operationalised through three concrete and reinforcing strategic mechanisms. First, PSM utilises the strategic allocation of resources to create dedicated formats and channels targeting specific minority groups, encompassing migrants and linguistic minorities (e.g. in Germany, Portugal, Slovenia, Poland and Estonia). This deliberate measure ensures that topics pertinent to a “smaller group of the population” receive coverage that would otherwise be marginalised by commercial pressures (e.g. in Czechia and Estonia). Second, this institutional commitment is formalised through codified commitments and robust external reporting; diversity goals are embedded in official legislative documents, subjecting the PSM to strict oversight and mandatory reporting on parity targets, particularly in audiovisual content (e.g. France’s ARCOM monitoring and Portugal’s content quotas). Finally, PSM engages in ethical boundary setting, notably demonstrated in Austria, where it actively manages the risk of the “false-balance debate” (AT-C-1) by strategically prioritising established scientific or public consensus over “pure procedural equality” when covering high-stakes public interest issues, thereby upholding its role as a reliable source of information.

As shown by the surveys, both in the commercial and non-profit sectors, the level of support for representing societal diversity is as high as in the case of PSM. The non-profit sector serves as a pivotal facilitator and a grassroots platform for marginalised voices, functioning as an ethical counterweight to the commercial and political pressures inherent in mainstream media. Interviewees tend to emphasise that this sector deliberately operates “strictly out of the mainstream” (Austria, Czechia), focusing on marginalised topics and offering a low-threshold platform to those lacking a political voice (Czechia, Portugal). Outlets with strong ideological roots, such as left-oriented organisations (Italy), actively champion inclusivity and use their platforms to advocate for underrepresented groups and support civil rights movements. Their key challenges, however, are limited resources (money, time) and the struggle against the “invisibilisation” of minority groups (PT-C-6).

On the other hand, commercial media, although they acknowledge the value of presenting diversity - frequently linking it to augmenting credibility and “tapping into new target

groups” (AT-C-4) or ensuring “balance in reporting” (DE-C-2, IE-J-6) - are overwhelmingly constrained by inherent market pressures and internal operational inertia. A major, cross-sectoral problem is pervasive personnel and sourcing homogeneity, driven by difficulties in achieving workforce diversity, particularly regarding ethnic and migrant backgrounds (Austria, Czechia, France, Portugal). This internal uniformity produces a detrimental “mainstreaming effect” of predominantly middle-class opinions and perspectives (Ireland). Moreover, the operational routine of inviting “familiar and ‘good’ debaters” (Austria, Portugal) systemically excludes new, diverse or disadvantaged voices.

The imperative to generate income in commercial outlets imposes a geographical bias. This pressure leads to “minority programming [being] ignored” (IE-C-6) or topics only being addressed when they achieve prominence in public debate or possess negative connotations (SI-J-2). Finally, the majority of commercial and press outlets operate with uncodified practices, often eschewing formal guidelines (outside PSM and France’s ARCOM regulations) in favour of relying on “intuitive and professional adherence to high standards” (Slovenia) or the inner conviction of individual journalists (Poland), an approach that ultimately proves inadequate against prevailing market forces.

Regarding the representation of social diversity in general, the European media landscape is characterised by a bifurcated commitment: PSM and the non-profit sector serve as the structural and ethical engine for inclusion, while commercial media’s efforts are largely aspirational and fragmented. The pursuit of diversity is fundamentally challenged by a resource-scarcity-driven exclusion and deep-seated sociodemographic homogeneity within newsrooms, which perpetuates a dominant mainstream perspective.

6. PARTICIPATION IN THE PRODUCTION

In the democratic systems, media often present a dual nature. On the one hand, they are self-sustaining, professionalised bodies, with their own organisational and decision-making structures. On the other, however, they are subject to social expectations due to their pro-democratic roles. This translates into the introduction of participatory practices such as contribution of audiences to strategic planning or to the management of the media organisation or production. The survey aimed to explore the level of media engagement in three such practices, namely:

- enabling the audience to schedule, plan the programming or participate in decision-making processes related to content production,
- enabling the audience to participate in strategic planning or in the management of the media organisation,
- enabling the audience to autonomously produce media content for the newsroom.

The overall frequency of implementing these strategies is low. The results, presented in detail below, reveal a clear contrast between media organisations’ aspirations to provide a platform for open discussion and representation and their limited willingness to share the gatekeeper function with the outside, nonprofessional actors, such as the public.

6.1 PARTICIPATION OF AN AUDIENCE IN SCHEDULING AND PROGRAMME PLANNING

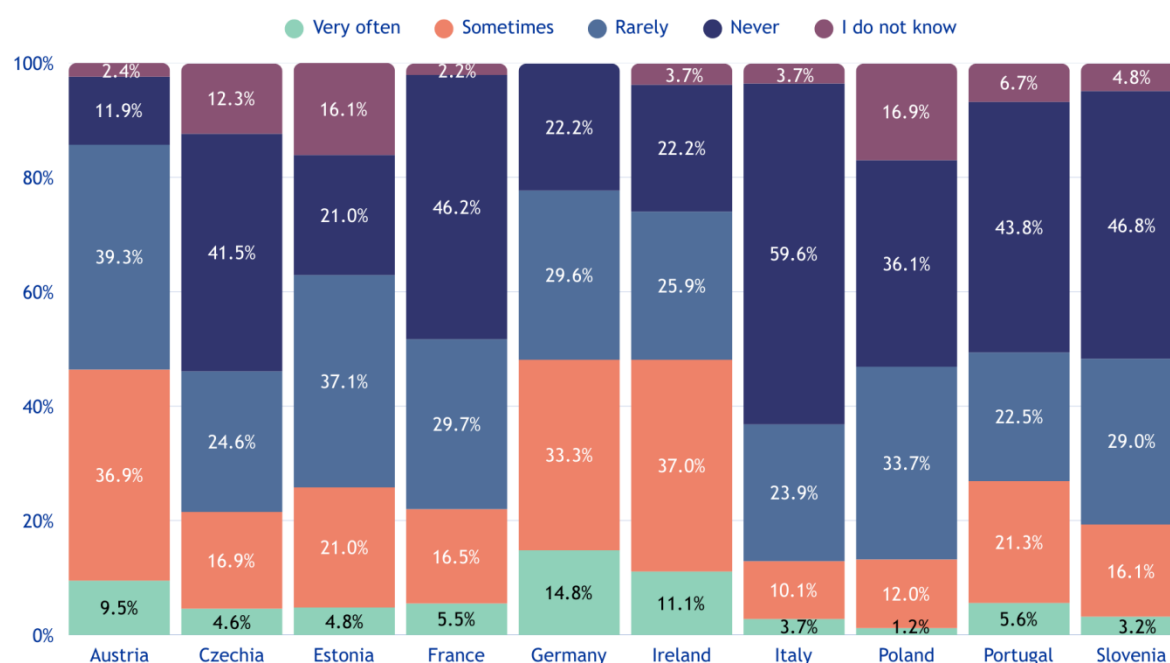
The approach to allowing the audience to participate in decision-making processes varies across the countries. In each case, however, positive responses were given by a minority of respondents, although for some countries, the level of negative and positive responses was relatively balanced (see: Figure 4).

The highest number of positive responses was recorded in: Germany and Ireland (48% per each), as well as in Austria (46%). At the same time, Germany and Ireland are the only countries, where the rate of “very often” responses exceeds 10% (respectively: 15% and 11%). It should, however, be remembered that these two countries are the ones with the lowest total number of responses (totalling 27 in both cases), which makes it difficult to draw representative conclusions about their results.

In the remaining countries, the number of positive responses is much lower. Enabling the audience to schedule, plan the programming or participate in decision-making processes related to content production is the least common in Italy and Poland (around 13% of positive responses per each), as well as in Slovenia (19%).

Interestingly, in three countries (Czechia, Estonia, and Poland), more than a 10% of “I do not know” responses were recorded, followed by Portugal (7%) and Slovenia (5%). It suggests that strategies and policies regarding the involvement of the public in decision-making might not be commonly discussed in the outlets or disseminated among the workers.

Figure 4: Enabling an audience to schedule, plan the programming or participate in decision-making processes related to content production, in 10 EU countries.



Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

According to surveyed journalists and media professionals, commercial broadcasting outlets, especially radio stations, are most likely to give their audiences agency in terms of scheduling and planning for their newsrooms. In particular, it is a case for: Austria,

Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, and Slovenia. For other commercial outlets, the negative responses accounted for the majority of the sample. The results for the PSM are similarly concerning, as only in Estonia and Germany, more than a half of respondents from this sector gave positive responses (respectively: 11 out of 16 and 6 out of 10).

The non-commercial media's approach compares relatively favourably to the public and commercial sectors. Only in France, Italy and Poland, less than a half of community / non-profit / minority media professionals claimed their newsrooms allow members of the public to take part in decision-making processes at least sometimes (respectively: 4 out of 9, 2 out of 10 and 2 out of 14). According to the results, Germany is the only country, for which the non-profit sample consists entirely of positive responses.

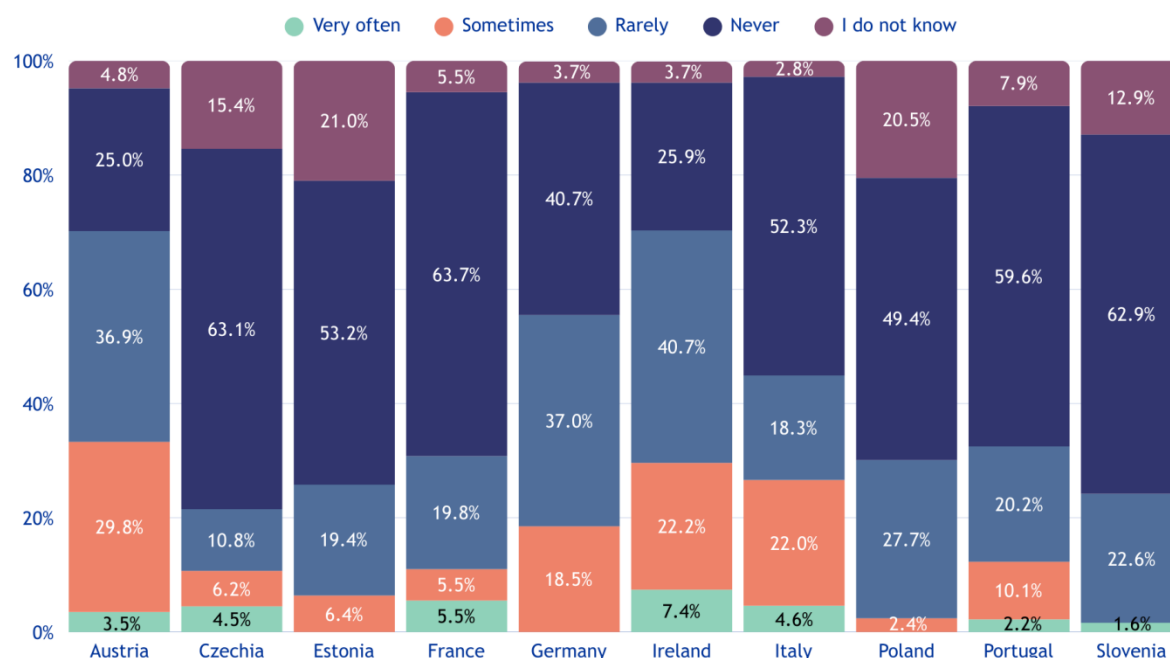
6.2 PARTICIPATION OF AN AUDIENCE IN STRATEGIC PLANNING OR IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE MEDIA ORGANISATION

The audience participation in strategic planning or in the management is even less common than enabling it into scheduling. Again, Austria (33% of combined positive responses) and Ireland (30%) stand out relatively positively, accompanied by Italy (27%). The high result for the latter is particularly interesting, considering Italy was among the countries with the lowest rate of positive responses in the previous question. The dominant response in all these countries is "sometimes", proving that even if the practice occurs, it is not perceived as a priority by the newsrooms.

According to surveyed journalists and media professionals, allowing the public to take part in managing of the media organisations is least frequent in Estonia (6%), Poland (2.5%) and Slovenia (just over 1.5%). These are the only countries, in which the combined percentage of positive responses does not exceed 10% (see: Figure 5).

Again, it can be seen that a relatively high percentage of respondents lack knowledge of audience participation in the management. In Estonia and Poland, more than one fifth of the sample consisted of "I do not know" responses; in Czechia, it was 15%; and in Slovenia - nearly 13%. A relatively high percentage of this response was also noted for Portugal (almost 8%).

Figure 5: Enabling an audience to participate in strategic planning or in the management of the media organisation, in 10 EU countries.



Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

Audience participation in strategic planning and management within the public sector media is not commonly practiced by the newsrooms across all ten countries, as declared by the surveyed journalists and media professionals. In no case, a number of positive responses would reach a half of the sample. For Poland, no positive response from the PSM representatives was retrieved, while for France, Portugal and Slovenia, there was one positive response per each (it is, however, worth noting that both for Portugal and Slovenia, it was a “very often” response).

When it comes to the commercial sector, the audience’s involvement in strategic planning and management is slightly bigger than in other cases was recorded for news portals in Austria (6 combined positive responses out of 12), Germany (1 out of 2) and Italy (7 out of 17). For other commercial media, the willingness to involve the public in strategic planning or in the management is mostly close to none.

As for the non-profit sector, the landscape is a bit more diverse, although the sample is also dominated by negative responses. Only for Austria and Portugal, at least half of respondents from the community / non-profit / minority media responded positively (respectively: 5 out of 6 and 2 out of 4). However, in most of the remaining cases, at least a few positive responses from this sector were secured (apart from two countries: Poland and Slovenia).

6.3 PARTICIPATION OF AN AUDIENCE IN CONTENT PRODUCTION

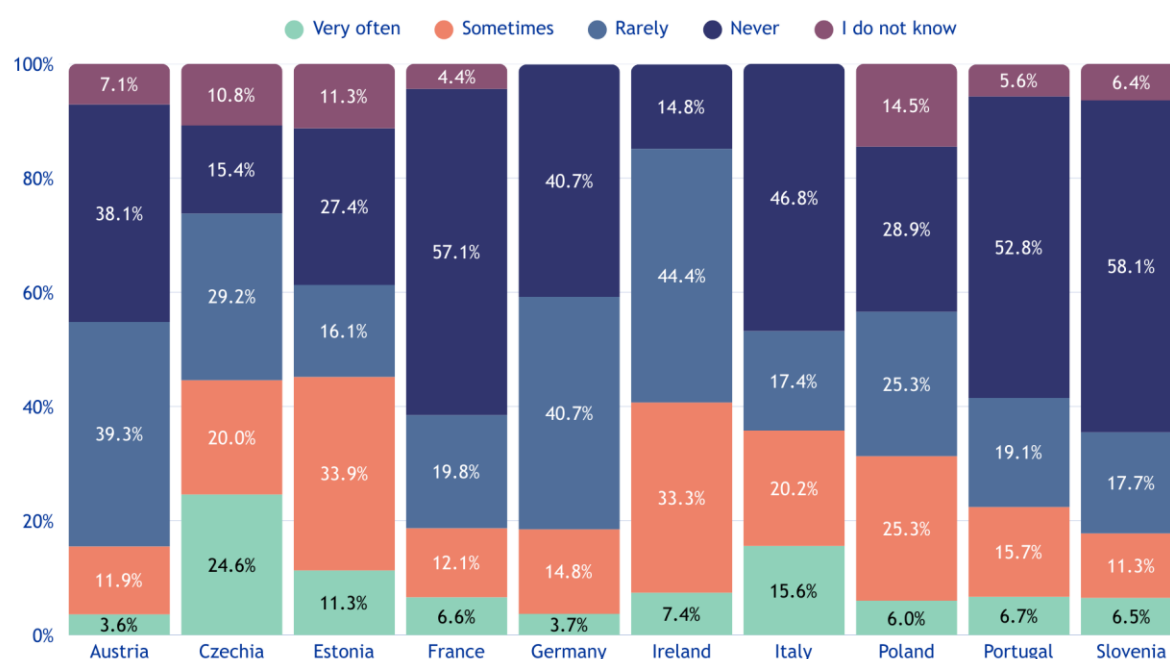
The last studied aspect of audience’s participation in production is autonomous content creating. Interestingly, some countries that in previous questions recorded high results, e.g. Austria and Germany, have one of the lowest rates of positive responses among all ten countries (respectively: 15.5% and 18.5%). Similar levels were retrieved in the case of

France (19%) and Slovenia (18%), which are the countries that performed poorly in the previous two categories, too.

The highest combined percentages of positive responses were achieved for Czechia and Estonia (around 45% per each), followed by Ireland (41%) and Italy (36%). Czechia and Estonia also marked the highest number of respondents who stated that their newsrooms allow the audience to autonomously produce content very often (respectively: 25% and 16%) (see: Figure 6).

Nevertheless, the results confirm a tendency showing a rare participation of the public in the media production. Similarly to the previous two questions included in this chapter, particularly audience's participation in strategic planning or in the management, the sample across all ten countries is dominated by negative responses. A high presence of "I do not know" responses is once again visible for Czechia (11%), Estonia (11%) and Poland (14.5%).

Figure 6: Enabling an audience to autonomously produce media content for the newsroom, in 10 EU countries.



Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

As with previous questions of the survey, the results for the public service media across all studied countries show limited participation. Only in Czechia, a half of respondents from the PSM claimed their newsrooms allow for the audience's autonomous content production at least sometimes (6 positive responses out of 12). In half of the studied countries (Austria, France, Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia) there was only one positive response coming from the public media representatives. Except for the Portuguese case, all these respondents chose a response "sometimes", which further confirms a lack of prioritisation of audience generated content, even if attempts to provide it are practiced.

When it comes to the commercial sector, in some countries, a slight trend is visible for the print media to be more active in this field, which might result from a practice of publishing readers' letters. For example, in Czechia and Estonia, positive responses were retrieved from representatives of national dailies (respectively: 1 out of 2 and 4 out of 8

responses), in Italy, this was the case for tabloids (3 out of 5 responses), and in Poland and Slovenia - for local and regional newspapers (respectively: 4 out of 6 and 1 out of 2 responses).

Representatives of the newsrooms operating in the non-profit sector are more likely to confirm that they enable their audience to autonomously produce media content for them. In Austria, Czechia and Ireland, more than half of respondents stated to implement this practice very often or sometimes (respectively: 4 out 6, 2 out 3 and 5 out of 9), while for France, it is nearly a half (4 out of 9). On the opposite pole lays Portugal, where no positive responses from the community / non-profit / minority media were recorded.

6.4 SECTORAL DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

The overall frequency of participatory practices - ranging from content scheduling to strategic management - remains notably low across the studied European media landscape. This suggests that while media organisations recognise their pro-democratic roles, they largely maintain rigid professional boundaries that exclude the public from core decision-making processes.

Commercial radio stations appear most inclined to grant audience agency in this area, particularly in Germany and Estonia. In contrast, public service media results are concerning; only in Estonia and Germany, more than half of PSM respondents reported implementing such practices, which indicates that the institutional “gatekeeper” function remains firmly entrenched in public broadcasting.

Audience involvement in the strategic or managerial tiers of media organisations is the least common participatory practice. In Estonia, Poland and Slovenia, positive responses fell below 10%, with Poland recording zero positive responses within the PSM sector. This “managerial insulation” is further evidenced by a significant knowledge gap: over 20% of respondents in Estonia and Poland were unaware of their outlets’ policies regarding strategic participation. While commercial news portals in Italy and Austria showed marginal activity, the non-profit sector remains the only space with notable diversity, as seen in the positive results from Austria and Portugal.

The highest levels of public agency were observed in autonomous content production; this trend is particularly evident in the commercial print sector, where traditional practices such as publishing readers’ letters provide a structured, although limited, platform for audience voices. The non-profit sector continues to serve as the most significant ethical engine for participation; in Austria, Czechia, and Ireland, more than half of community media professionals confirmed that their newsrooms actively facilitate autonomous production.

In conclusion, the European media landscape is characterised by a “participation gap”. While the non-profit sector offers a grassroots platform for inclusion, the PSM and commercial sectors maintain professionalised silos that limit public influence over strategic and managerial decisions.

7. ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVISM

The last form of participation studied by the WP4 in the task 4.3. and described in the Deliverable 4.5. encouraging the audience to engage in politics, electoral processes and different forms of public activity (like activism, community engagement, demonstrations and citizens' initiatives, as well as creating associations, self-organisation and collective structures). Both interviews and surveys show a general openness to supporting these types of participation, although not to the same extent. The greatest importance and attention is attached to participation in national politics (including elections and referenda), and the least - to democratic processes beyond the act of voting. Encouraging the electoral participation and activism might include distinct, but sometimes overlapping, strategies tailored to media's institutional mandates, audience profiles and resource bases.

7.1 ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION IN ELECTION

According to the interviewed journalists and media professionals, public service media primarily facilitate participation through normative commitment, structured debate, and bridging the knowledge gap. They are explicitly positioned as a "point of orientation for the viewer in the political system" (CZ-C-1). PSM professionals across countries (e.g. Poland, Estonia) frame election participation as a core component of democratic strengthening. Estonian PSM representatives see the sector's core mandate as ensuring citizens are "as informed as possible" to influence their representatives effectively (EE-J-1). Portugal's PSM, for example, successfully bridges the distance between citizens and representatives by broadcasting numerous debates, which contribute to high voter turnout. PSM interviewees argue that the most effective way to mobilise public interest is not solely through classic electoral reporting, but by focusing on "socially relevant topics" (SI-C-1, FR-C-1) that directly concern people's daily lives (e.g. education, health, local infrastructure). A key operational strategy involves translating complex political and governmental processes into accessible language to lower the barrier to engagement, exemplified by an Estonian journalist's effort to communicate decisions in a language "that their grandmothers can understand" (EE-J-1). PSM journalists across the region (e.g. Austria, France) view the promotion of participation as a core democratic duty, often enforced by quotas or monitoring bodies (e.g. France's ARCOM reporting on gender parity).

The commercial media sector implements a more diverse set of strategies, ranging from commercialised "politainment" (AT-C-4) to investigative mobilisation and local co-creation, often driven by a need to secure audience interest. Private TV and radio outlets (e.g. in Austria and Czechia) prioritise the foundational role of raising awareness, using audience research to tailor topics (e.g. Green Deal and EU in Czechia). They integrate political themes into engaging formats (e.g. games, simple precise language) to target young people and combat apathy. The digital native media (e.g. Italy's investigation Gioventù Meloniana) use their platforms to provide verified information that directly prompts grassroots mobilisation (dozens of antifascist initiatives in Italy). In France, digital native media go further by equipping readers with legal tools (pre-written emails with legal references) to demand transparency, transforming findings into a mass action campaign. Private media (e.g. in Poland) actively support the "public dialogue" by

deliberately creating confrontations, placing politicians opposite a “person who has been wronged” (PL-C-2), thereby giving a tangible face to the consequences of political decisions.

Local/regional media play a crucial role in grassroots political participation by organising debates where residents can “jointly develop some prescriptions” of local problems directly with candidates (PL-C-5).

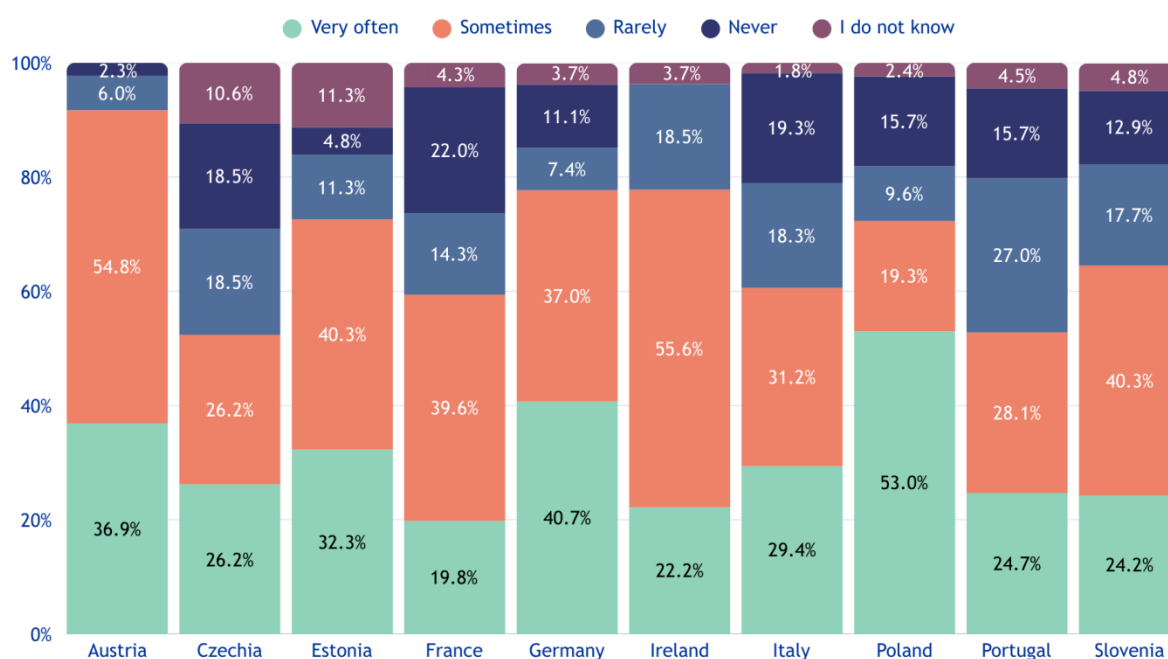
Community and non-profit media sector encourages participation primarily through direct advocacy, specialised platforms, and empowering marginalised voices, often compensating for the commercial deficits of other sectors. This sector focuses its efforts on empowering specific, often marginalised groups. Czech community media, for instance, focus on targeted voting campaigns and post-election analysis in socially excluded localities, while community media in Slovenia organise “election marathons” (SI-C-6) of confrontations in multiple municipalities, often in cooperation with active citizen groups. Community and non-profit media serve as the engines of direct social and political action, relying on allowing cultural associations and individuals to create their own programming. Community media, as demonstrated in Slovenia, deploy sophisticated tools like a special fact-checking platform active before elections, including simultaneous fact-checks of election confrontation statements, to provide the public with instant, verified data, thereby increasing accountability and informing political choice.

The survey results confirm a high level of encouragement for electoral participation. The respondents across all ten countries unanimously admitted that their newsrooms take actions to support the participation regardless of the level: European, national and local. However, the level of media’s engagement varies depending on the politics type: it is the highest and most common in the case of national politics, while the European and local level are given less importance by the newsrooms. The greatest activity in this field is demonstrated by Austria, Germany and Ireland. Below, detailed results for each level are presented.

7.1.1. THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

As mentioned, the media across the examined countries show a significant willingness to encourage electoral participation in European politics. In each case, the number of positive responses exceeds that of negative ones. The highest level of support was recorded in Austria (nearly 92% of combined positive responses), Germany and Ireland (78% per each). However, encouraging the participation at the European level does not appear to be newsrooms’ priority: except for Germany and Poland, the dominant response to the question throughout the sample was “sometimes” rather than “very often” (see: Figure 7).

Figure 7: Encouraging participation in European politics and elections, in 10 EU countries.



Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

Within the PSM sector, encouraging participation in European politics and elections is practiced regularly, although the level of engagement varies across the studied countries. For example, in Germany, which has the second-highest overall number of positive responses, only half of respondents from the public media claimed to support this form of activity at least sometimes (5 out of 10 responses). The situation is similar with Italy, for which out of 22 PSM representatives, 11 responded positively. On the opposite pole, there are Austria, Poland, and Ireland: in each case, there was only one negative response within the PSM sector (out of, respectively: 17, 16 and 7).

As for the commercial sector, respondents report active encouragement of the participation at the European level across nearly all media types. The only exception appears to be tabloid media. Only in the case of Germany, Italy and Poland, representatives of these outlets responded positively. In Austria, Czechia, Estonia, France and Slovenia, respondents from the tabloids unanimously stated “rarely” or “never” (for Ireland and Portugal, no responses in this category were retrieved). This finding should, however, be treated with caution due to the small representation of tabloid workers in the overall sample: the number of responses varies from 1 in Czechia, Estonia, Poland, and Slovenia to 5 in Italy.

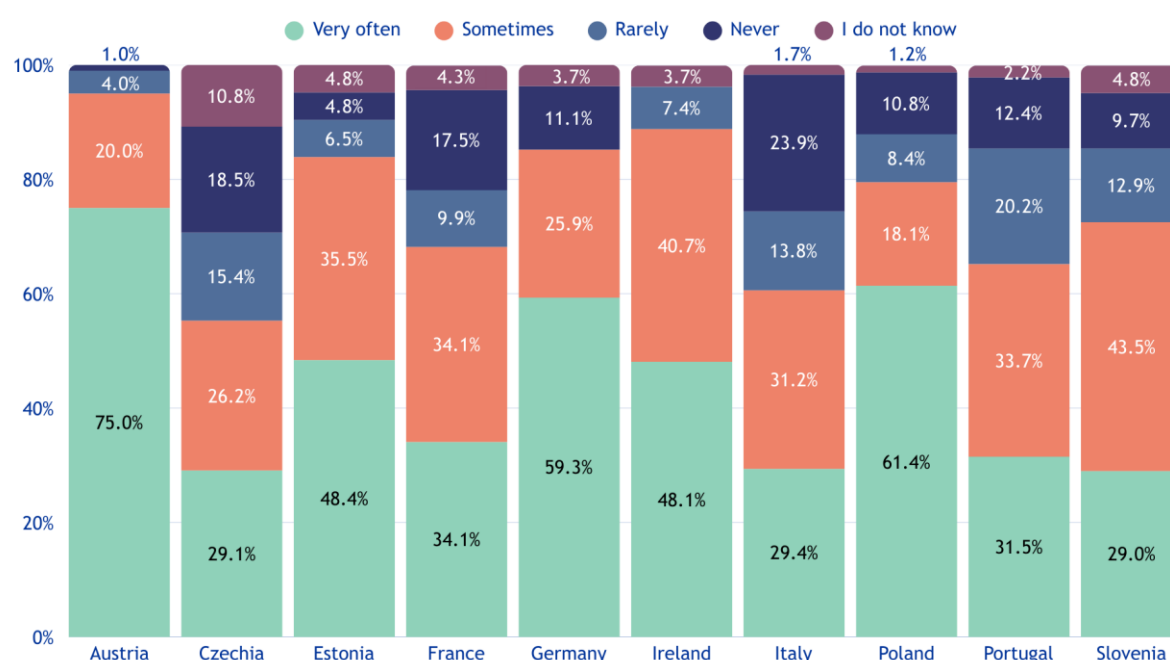
Representatives of the non-profit media also report a high engagement in encouraging the audience to participate in European politics and elections. In Austria and Germany, all respondents from this sector responded positively (out of, respectively: 6 and 3). In other countries, positive responses stand for at least half of the sample. Exceptions in this case are France and Poland, where the involvement in encouraging the European participation is relatively low. As for the former, 3 out of 9 respondents representing the non-profit media claimed to support this kind of participation at least sometimes. For Poland, the share is even smaller: only 3 out of 14 surveyed responded positively.

7.1.2 THE NATIONAL LEVEL

According to the results of the surveys, the importance attached to participation in national politics is even greater than in the case of the European level. Austria, Ireland, and Germany again note the highest combined percentage of positive responses (respectively: 95%, 89% and 85%). The lowest results belonged to Italy (61%) and Czechia (55%).

Unlike the previous question, in the majority of the countries, respondents claimed to encourage the participation very often rather than sometimes. The exceptions are Italy, Portugal, and Slovenia, for which - similarly to the question on the European level - the encouragement, although common, does not appear to be a priority for most newsrooms (see: Figure 8).

Figure 8: Encouraging participation in national politics, elections and referenda, in 10 EU countries.



Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

Just like in the case of the European level, results show that the PSM newsrooms encourage participation in national politics, elections and referenda commonly. In the vast majority of the countries, at least half of respondents from the PSM reacted to the question positively, except for Italy, where out of 22 responses, 10 were “very often” or “sometimes” (which is a lower number than in the question on the European politics).

In the commercial sector, the support for citizens’ participation in national politics and elections/referenda is also very high. Even in the case of the tabloid outlets, in some countries, bigger numbers of positive responses were noted. However, Estonia, France and Slovenia remained the countries where negative responses from tabloids’ representatives accounted for the majority.

Results for the non-profit sector are almost identical to those in the category of European politics. Again, the only countries where surveyed media professionals attach less importance to encouraging participation are France and Poland (respectively: 3 out of 9

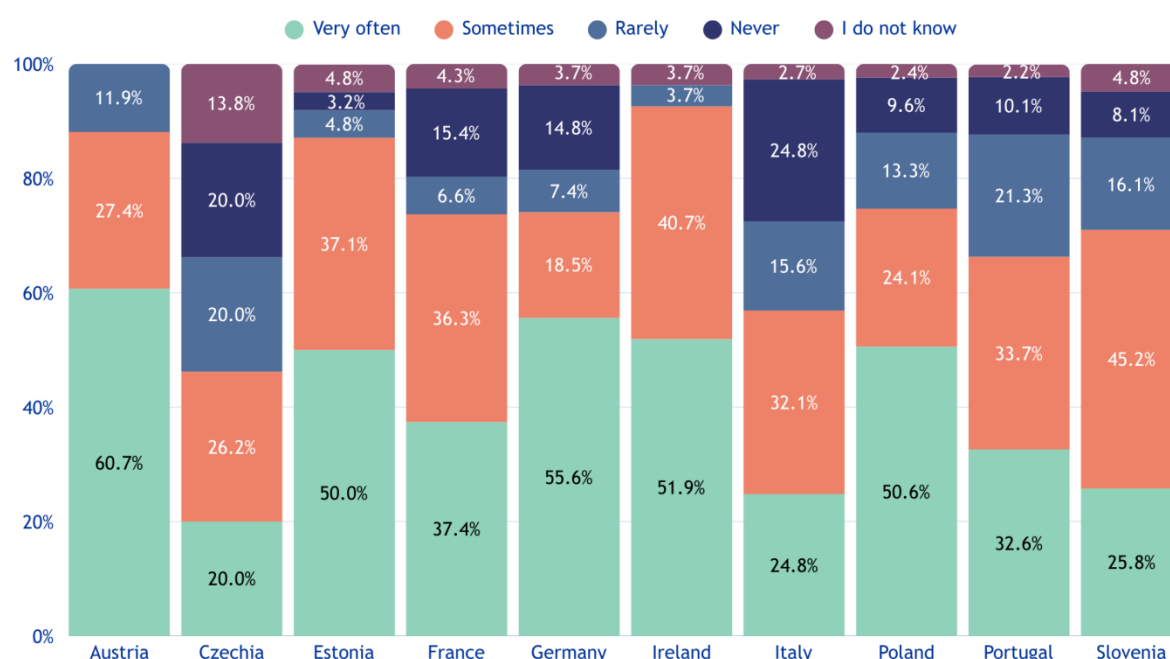
and 4 out of 14). The highest interest was yet again recorded in Austria and Germany: in both cases, all respondents from the community, non-profit and minority media responded positively.

7.1.3 THE LOCAL LEVEL

The interviewed journalists and media professionals observed that newsrooms encourage participation in local politics, elections and referenda primarily through low-threshold local forums, crowdsourcing civic issues and dedicated community advocacy, effectively bridging the gap between local governance and the daily lives of citizens. The survey results show that the level of encouragement to participate in the local political activities is similarly high as in the case of the European level, although lower than the national level. The greatest involvement was recorded for Ireland (93% of combined positive responses), Austria (88%) and Estonia (87%). A relatively significant drop took place in the case of Germany (74%), which noted one of the highest results in two previous questions.

The countries with the lowest number of positive responses were again Italy (57%) and Czechia (46%). The case of Czechia proves the only time when a combined percentage of the positive responses is lower than 50%, regardless of the level of politics. This results from a high number of “I do not know” responses, which - in the question on local politics - stands for almost 14% (see: Figure 9).

Figure 9: Encouraging participation in local politics, elections and referenda, in 10 EU countries.



Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

Public sector respondents generally expressed a favourable view regarding the promotion of political participation at the local level. Once again, it is only Italy where less than half of the respondents from the PSM gave positive responses (10 out of 22 - the same as in the case of the national level).

In the commercial sector, support for public participation in local politics is high across all the media types, not only within those functioning locally or regionally. It is, however,

particularly interesting to look at the local/regional media's approach. In a majority of the countries, positive responses dominated. In Austria, Estonia, France and Germany, the representatives of the local newsrooms shared only positive responses, which, in the vast majority, consisted of the "very often". For the remaining six countries, the negative responses accounted for, at most, 2 cases. In Ireland and Slovenia, none of the respondents representing local or regional media reported frequent encouragement of audience participation. It is particularly interesting regarding Ireland, since it had the highest overall percentage of positive responses (it should be remembered that findings for Ireland are based on a small sample).

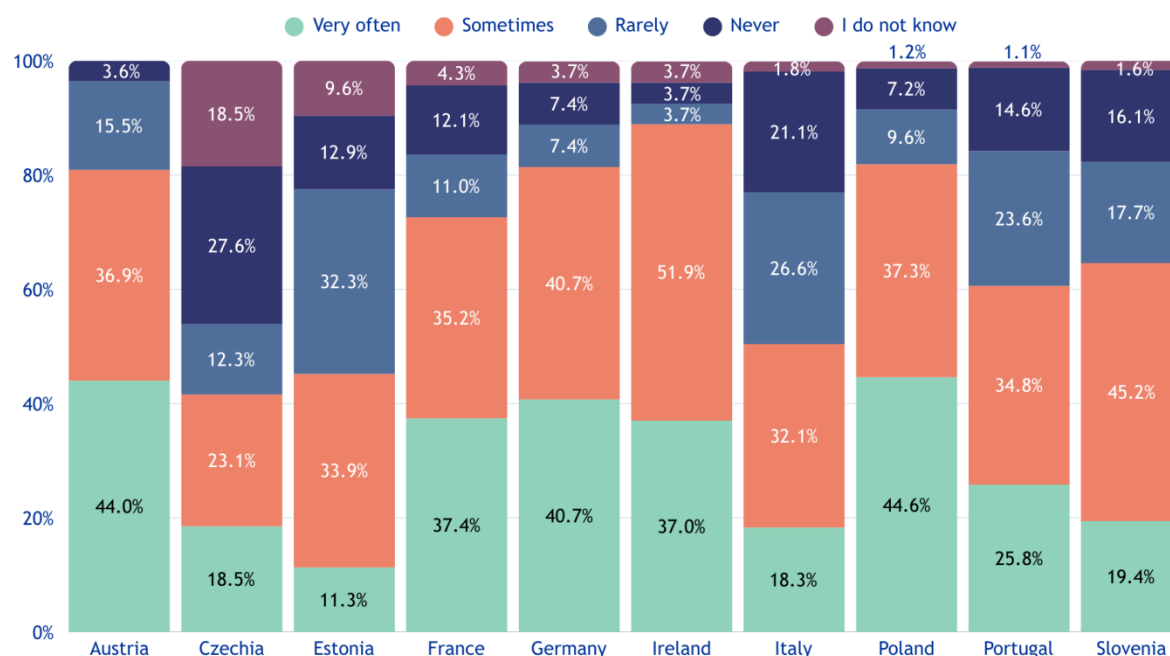
As for the non-profit media, Poland is the only country, where the minority of representatives of this sector reacted to the question positively (2 out of 14, which is even less than in the case of the European and national level). France, which noted mostly negative responses in two previous categories, this time is characterised by positive results, as 6 out of 9 respondents from the community, non-profit or minority media responded with "very often" or "sometimes". In the remaining eight countries, positive responses accounted for at least half of the sample, with Germany being the only case, in which all respondents from the non-profit sector gave positive answers.

7.2 ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES BEYOND VOTING

Encouraging non-voting democratic participation - especially in the form of activism, community engagement, demonstrations and citizens' initiatives - is also common among the media in the studied countries. The interviews indicate that European media encourage these forms of participation by adopting strategies centered on direct community platforming and proactive issue advocacy. Media serve as a crucial mechanism for activating and legitimising non-electoral participation by providing visibility and actionable information.

According to the survey results, citizens' involvement in democratic activism is supported in particular by newsrooms in Ireland (89% of combined positive responses), Poland (82%) and Austria (81%). The lowest number of positive reactions was recorded for Italy (50%), Estonia (49%) and Czechia (42%). These three countries, together with Portugal and Slovenia, are characterised by a higher share of "sometimes" responses than "very often" (see: Figure 10).

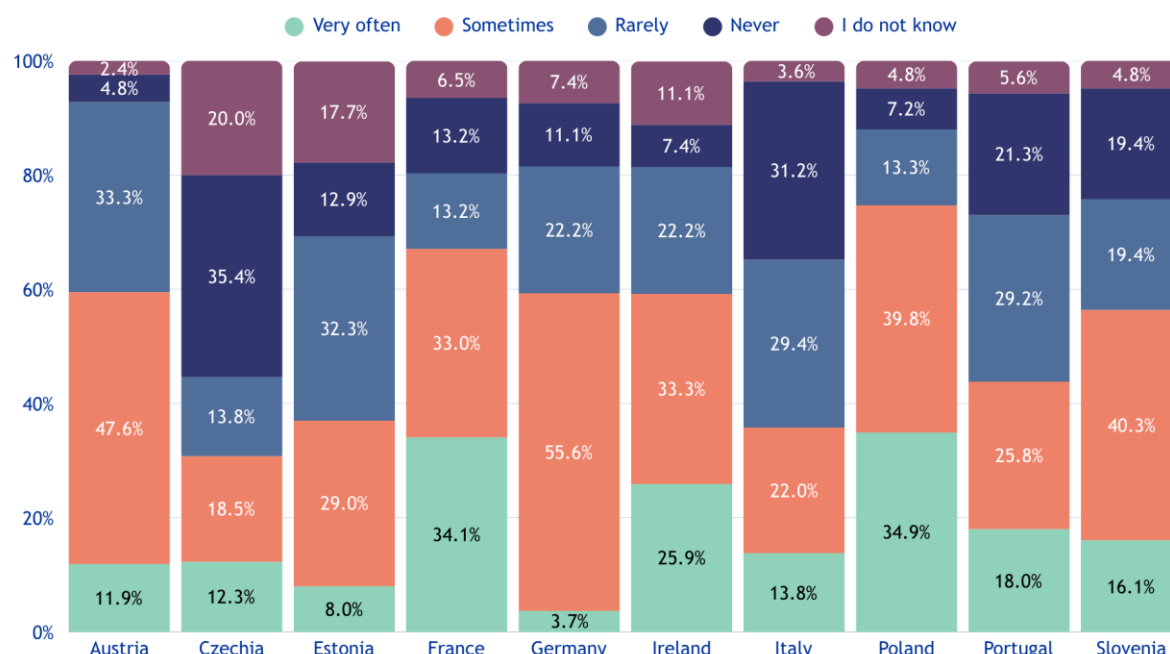
Figure 10: Encouraging participation in democratic processes beyond the act of voting (such as activism, community engagement, demonstrations and citizens' initiatives), in 10 EU countries.



Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

As for encouraging participation in forms of associations, self-organisation and collective structures, in most countries over 50% of the surveyed journalists and media professionals responded to the question positively. The countries where the rate of positive responses did not reach half are: Portugal (44%), Estonia (37%), Italy (36%) and Czechia (31%). The highest number of positive answers was collected in Poland (74.5%) and France (67%). The results for these two countries are comparable to those retrieved in previous categories regarding participation; an interesting finding is, however, significant drop of positive responses in the case of Austria, Ireland and Germany, which were leaders in most of the previous categories (see: Figure 11).

Figure 11: Encouraging participation in activating forms of associations, self-organisation and collective structures, in 10 EU countries.



Source: MeDeMAP, 2025.

For both categories, one can again observe a high percentage of “I do not know” responses in the case of Czechia (around 20% each) and Estonia (10% for encouraging participating in democratic processes beyond the act of voting and 18% for encouraging participating in activating forms). As for the second category, a significant percentage of Irish respondents (11%) also lacked knowledge as to whether their newsrooms implement this kind of practice.

As shown by the interviews, calls for participation in the form of activism and social engagement might take different forms. For example, the digital-native outlet’s investigation in Italy directly “prompted grassroots mobilisation with dozens of antifascist initiatives” (IT-J-4) following its exposé. Similarly, Estonian digital media dedicate resources to in-depth series and crucially include direct appeals for feedback based on personal experience, effectively turning journalism into a crowdsourced investigative tool that can lead to action (EE-J-1).

Private media (e.g. in Poland) see their role as “stigmatising” the government’s inaction or lack of engagement when public concerns are ignored (PL-C-2), particularly when organised public efforts (like consultations) are dismissed. This is framed as a crucial form of supporting the public dialogue by validating the concerns of civil society groups.

Across sectors, cooperation with NGOs is a recognised mechanism. The focus is not on covering the organisation itself, but on concentrating on the “given topic” (e.g. the rule of law or local life issues) that the NGO is discussing, thereby amplifying organised civil society concerns. As shown by the survey results, the non-profit media themselves also demonstrate a high degree of engagement in promoting different forms of non-electoral participation. The results indicate that in all countries, at least half of respondents from the non-commercial outlets answered both questions positively. This also includes France

and Poland, where the respondents were rather reluctant to encourage their public to participate in politics, elections and referenda at the European, national and local levels. In both countries, the non-profit media show a significant willingness to support civic engagement (in France: for the first question, it was 8 out of 9 responses, for the second question, it was 7; in Poland: it was 9 out of 14 responses for both questions).

According to interviewees, public participation in European media is driven by institutional mandates, innovative digital engagement and advocacy for marginalised voices, but is consistently hindered by structural, economic and political constraints.

Commercial logic is perhaps the most acute barrier. In Ireland and Germany, local and private media outlets often operate under the explicit belief that “minority programming isn’t going to bring in any money” (IE-C-6) leading to the neglect of specific ethnic or cultural groups. This lack of economic incentive results in a failure to allocate the resources necessary for in-depth outreach.

Efforts to expand participation are critically hampered by staff shortages and overwhelming workloads. Slovenia’s PSM interviewee exemplifies that uncompensated retirements force journalists to take on multiple technical roles, resulting in “lower quality” (SI-J-1) output and limiting their capacity to pursue high-effort participatory initiatives. Germany’s community media face similar financial strain.

7.3 SECTORAL DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

The media’s capacity to drive democratic involvement is functionally differentiated across sectors. Supporting non-voting forms of political participation within the public sector is relatively often practiced by the media outlets across all ten countries. Only in Estonia and Italy, the rate of positive responses to the survey does not reach a half of the sample (Estonia: in both cases, it is 6 out of 16; Italy: 10 out of 22 responses in the first category, and only 3 in the second category). Additionally, in Ireland, less than a half of respondents reacted positively to the question on activating forms of associations, self-organisation and collective structures (3 out of 7).

In the commercial sector, support for non-voting forms of participation is also high, although yet again, tabloids stand out negatively. Among the countries, where responses from this type of media outlet were collected, only in Poland, tabloid representative was positive about supporting both democratic processes beyond voting and activism. In Czechia, Estonia and Ireland, a small activity among the news portals was also recorded.

PSM interviewees claim their institutions operate under a normative commitment to act as a “point of orientation” for the citizenry. Their primary strategy involves bridging the knowledge gap by translating complex governmental processes into accessible language. PSM outlets, particularly in Estonia and Portugal, focus on “socially relevant topics” such as healthcare and infrastructure to mobilise interest, viewing participation as a core democratic duty often reinforced by regulatory quotas.

The commercial media sector adopts more diverse and audience-driven methods. Strategies range from “politainment” - the integration of political themes into engaging, gamified formats to combat youth apathy - to investigative mobilisation. For instance,

digital native media in Italy and France have transitioned from mere reporting to providing actionable legal tools and prompting grassroots anti-fascist initiatives. However, within this sector, tabloid media consistently show the lowest engagement, often viewing electoral encouragement as secondary to commercial interests.

The community and non-profit sectors function as the primary engines for marginalised voices and direct social action. By organising “election marathons” and utilising real-time fact-checking platforms, community media in countries like Slovenia and Czechia compensate for the commercial deficits of larger outlets. Their role is particularly vital in facilitating local-level debates where residents can directly co-create solutions with political candidates.

Despite a general inclination toward fostering participation, several systemic barriers impede the media’s effectiveness. Commercial logic remains a primary obstacle, particularly in Ireland and Germany, where the perceived lack of profitability in minority or civic programming leads to the neglect of specific cultural groups. Furthermore, the sector is increasingly hampered by economic strain and staff shortages; in Slovenia, for example, uncompensated retirements have forced journalists into multi-role functions, reducing the capacity for high-effort participatory initiatives.

Local and regional outlets are identified as the primary facilitators of grassroots political participation. Unlike national media, which often focus on ideological or partisan competition, local newsrooms prioritise the co-creation of solutions. In Poland, for instance, these outlets are noted for organising forums where residents can “jointly develop remedies” (PL-C-5) for community problems directly with political candidates.

Ultimately, the media landscape collectively enhances participation across all levels, from local referenda to broader activism, by serving as a crucial mechanism for legitimising non-electoral engagement and providing actionable information and platforms for civic self-organisation.

8. MEDIA FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

Based on the data collected via interviews, a clear pattern of both shared and distinct threats to media freedom and professional journalism emerges, even in the context of a universal commitment to the media’s role as the “fourth estate” essential for the functioning of democracy.

The conditions for media freedom are primarily hampered by structural economic weaknesses and the destabilising influence of the digital environment, often exacerbated by political opportunism.

The single most critical and shared hampering condition across nearly all ten countries (Austria, Czechia, Estonia, France, Italy, Portugal, Poland, Slovenia) is the business model crisis. Declining print sales and advertising revenues lead to a severe lack of resources for in-depth research and the employment of sufficient staff (Austria, Czechia, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia). In Estonia, this is compounded by the small market size. This

pervasive financial strain compels media outlets to curtail investigative journalism, often leading to the adoption of a non-confrontational editorial approach (as observed in Czechia), thereby compromising the overall quality and independence of reporting.

As observed by interviewees, media ownership concentration presents a major threat to pluralism and independence (France, Italy, Slovenia, Poland, Ireland). In France and Italy, this is exemplified by billionaire owners (e.g. the “Bolloré Effect” in France, FR-J-2) and conflicts of interest in Italy (IT-J-2) using outlets for non-journalistic, political or capitalist gains. In Slovenia, the “media empire” around Martin Odlazek poses a similar oligopolistic threat (SI-J-2). This model reduces editorial freedom, subjects newsrooms to the short-term interests of owners, and risks shifting the editorial line toward political extremes.

Global technological platforms are universally identified as the primary competitive and destabilising forces across European media markets (Austria, Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany, Portugal, Slovenia, Poland). The platform providers facilitate the rapid proliferation of misinformation, pseudo-journalistic content and highly polarised narratives, frequently bypassing the foundational journalistic standards of verification and accuracy (Austria, Czechia, Germany, Portugal, Slovenia). The media environment is thus severely challenged by the unchecked monopolisation of content distribution by Big Tech, which not only does appropriate crucial advertising revenue but also utilises non-transparent algorithms to shape and often degrade public discourse, thereby posing the single greatest existential threat to the viability of traditional publishers. These platforms operate under “unequal competition” (Austria, AT-C-2), taking advertising revenue without bearing the costs of content production, and their algorithms threaten the findability and reach of verified, professional content (Germany, DE-C-2). Consequently, journalism – as exemplified by the Polish context – operates under profound structural limitations that compromise its traditional functions of government control and critical public information delivery, despite its commitment to the democratic “fourth estate” role (PL-C-3).

Countries like Poland and Slovenia (historically) have seen direct attempts to influence or reorganise PSM funding and management. In Austria and France, political actors attempt to restrict or influence PSM reporting and appointment processes. In Portugal, political agents actively spread disinformation, while in Estonia, the threat is more subtle: overwhelming governmental power and the active restriction of access to public information (EE-C-3). At the same time, in Czechia, political actors withdraw cooperation as a form of practical impediment.

Across the board (Austria, Germany, Slovenia, Poland), populist political parties constantly “scream fake news” (AT-J-1) to undermine the credibility of professional journalism, creating a hostile environment that encourages radicalisation and self-censorship (SI-J-5).

The deterioration of the protection of journalists’ sources (noted in France, Ireland, and Portugal) and the proliferation of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs, cited in Ireland, Poland, and Portugal) constitute significant legal threats employed by powerful entities to silence investigative reporting. Furthermore, journalistic accounts confirm that the danger of such lawsuits and legal actions is a near-constant operational reality in contemporary media practice (PL-C-4).

Conversely, analysing the counterbalancing factors, one must acknowledge the key supporting conditions declared by media representatives, such as a strong professional ethos and firm editorial independence. Despite the pervasive external pressures, a strong self-awareness of the core principles of verification and independence is consistently affirmed across various markets (Austria, Czechia, France, Germany). This internal resilience, where journalists actively “take” their freedom by strictly adhering to ethical and professional standards (FR-C-5), emerges as a critical defence mechanism against external influence.

A key distinction to highlight is the role of the public service media: where PSM remains structurally and operationally independent (as evidenced in Germany, Estonia, and Ireland), it serves as a crucial guarantor of media diversity and market stability. Moreover, its potential stabilising function is broadly acknowledged, even in countries where PSM currently confronts considerable political pressure.

The media professionals across all ten countries share a unified and self-aware perspective on the media’s role, universally defining it as an essential democratic imperative. The primary democratic task is the classic watchdog function - to “control the powerful” (Germany, DE-C-3) and act as the “fourth pillar of the separation of powers” (Austria, AT-C-3).

In the age of information overload, the media’s role is no longer just to report facts but to curate, contextualise and explain (Germany, Slovenia, Austria). Media must provide the basis for understanding in an increasingly complex world and give citizens the “tools to make their own choices” (Estonia, EE-J-1). Journalists stress the need to combat political “bullshit” (Czechia, CZ-J-3) by highlighting the discrepancy between political rhetoric and reality. A critical modern democratic function is to act as a mediator or “buoy” (Austria, AT-J-4) against the forces of polarisation. The media must consciously avoid sensationalism, and ensure that diverse voices, including minorities, are heard. This involves challenging anti-democratic and populist narratives directly.

While the formal legal status of media freedom generally holds across the European nations, the democratic effectiveness of the media is being systemically eroded by economic precarity and the unregulated digital environment, which together create a vacuum exploited by political and corporate interests. The challenge for the democracies is not merely to defend formal media freedom, but to implement structural safeguards (sustainable funding models, platform regulation, ownership transparency) necessary to ensure the capacity for independent, high-quality professional journalism to fulfil its essential role.

8.1 SECTORAL DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

The media organisations across the studied countries face difficulties balancing between their duty to the public and a growing number of threats to their independence.

Public service media occupy a dualistic position within the European democratic framework. On the one hand, they are identified as the essential “safeguards of media diversity” and market stability in jurisdictions such as Germany, Estonia, and Ireland,

where structural independence remains largely intact. On the other hand, the sector faces direct threats from political actors seeking to influence funding models, management appointments and editorial output. This is particularly evident in Austria, where the ORF faces pressure via supervisory board compositions, and in France, where budget dependency on executive power creates a “problem of independence”. In countries like Poland and Slovenia, historical attempts to reorganise PSM represent a more overt form of political instrumentalisation. Despite these pressures, the PSM sector remains committed to an “empowerment model”, exemplified by Estonian journalists’ focus on equipping individuals with information rather than acting as paternalistic educator.

The commercial sector is characterised by an existential crisis rooted in the “business model collapse”. The decline of traditional advertising revenue and print sales has created a resource vacuum that severely limits in-depth research and investigative capacity across Austria, Czechia, Italy, Portugal, and Slovenia. This financial fragility renders outlets vulnerable to external influence; in Poland, economically weak media, in order to survive, often become dependent on state-owned advertising or private entities. Furthermore, media ownership concentration - notably the “Bolloré Effect” in France and oligopolistic structures in Slovenia and Italy - poses a significant threat to pluralism. When media are held by a small group of investors with political or capitalist interests rather than journalistic ones, editorial freedom is often curtailed to serve the owners’ short-term agendas.

While local and regional media serve as critical mechanisms for “grassroots participation” and community-specific information, they are disproportionately affected by structural limitations. These outlets are often the first to experience the lack of staff and resources. Crucially, the local-regional sector is highly susceptible to legal harassment. The proliferation of SLAPPs, specifically cited as an operational reality in Ireland, Poland and Portugal, serves as a powerful tool for local elites to silence critical reporting. The threat of such litigation, combined with the deterioration of source protection in countries like Portugal and France, creates a “hostile environment” that encourages self-censorship at the local level.

The non-profit and digital native media have emerged as critical counter-forces. In Czechia, for instance, digital-native outlets representatives emphasise strict internal editorial controls and team-based fact-checking as a defence against political and commercial pressure. These organisations often prioritise “watchdog” functions, holding politicians accountable even when state cooperation is withdrawn.

Despite these diverse sectoral challenges, a unified professional ethos persists. Journalists across the ten countries define their primary role as the “fourth pillar of the separation of powers” (AT-J-2), tasked with controlling the powerful and combating political disinformation.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Media professionals across Europe are highly aware of journalism's role in maintaining democracies and the importance of democratic participation. This manifests both through adherence to professional standards as well as practices. Yet, when it comes to the quality of democratic participation manifesting mostly through participation in media production and practices, several limitations emerge.

Interviewed journalists across all MeDeMAP countries seem to agree on the importance of journalistic standards that reflect core pro-democratic values. These are visible particularly when it comes to providing accurate and reliable information. Examples of practices that help to enact such standards are: strict internal fact-checking and cross-checking (Czechia, Slovenia, Germany, Austria, France), maintaining a detailed record of sources used in publications to minimise the risk of potential lawsuits (Poland, Germany) and securing an impartiality through presenting full context and different points of view in publications (Portugal, Slovenia), whilst excluding extremist and potentially harmful ideologies (Germany, France, Czechia).

In some countries, such as Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Estonia and Slovenia, interviewed journalists also mentioned external journalistic guidelines, imposed either by regulatory bodies or self-regulated media networks. These standards, in particular, aim to ensure freedom of expression and proper representation of different voices present in the public debate in order to help citizens make informed political choices and facilitate public discussion. Particularly in the public sector, there is a strong presence of codified, legal control measures regarding content quality (Austria, Czechia) and the equal distribution of airtime dedicated to different actors (Austria, Poland). Commercial and non-profit sectors place more focus on internal ethical guidelines.

As regards controlling power holders, especially in the form of investigative journalism, professional expectations or ambitions are severely tested by economic realities. High quality investigative reporting absorbs financial resources and is time-consuming. Those two factors are perceived as the main obstacles to fulfilling the watchdog function by the European media (Czechia, Slovenia, Ireland, Poland, Estonia), especially in the case of the local media (Ireland, Poland, Estonia).

Financial connections between media owners and politicians or other influential figures, resulting among other things from a high ownership concentration, is another issue hampering media's mandate to support democracy through providing accurate information and conducting investigative journalism (France, Poland, Slovenia). Media also face economic or legal difficulties imposed by authorities, including foremost SLAPPs (Poland, Ireland, France, Portugal, Italy), but also limiting access to public data (Germany, Slovenia, Estonia) and forcing self-censorship, especially in the PSM (Austria, France, Italy).

In comparison with these standards and practices, participation *in* and *through* the media seems more demanding and difficult to implement. In general, as observed by surveyed journalists and professionals, media show a proactive attitude in terms of supporting indirect forms of participation, particularly with regard to participation in elections and

referenda. This takes shape not only through informing on political processes, but also organising debates between politicians (which is particularly the PSM's mandate, but takes place also in commercial media, including local ones, e.g. in Poland) and encouraging citizens to hold politicians accountable for their public activity (Estonia). As shown by the surveys results, the greatest importance is attributed to encouraging participation in national politics, elections and referenda. The least common, although still a highly anticipated practice is encouraging participation in forms of associations, self-organisation and collective structures.

With regard to participation *in* the media, or direct, action-based participation, the surveys results have shown that involvement of the public in the content production or management is relatively rare. On the other hand, participation *through* the media, for example, allowing the audiences to express their views on air or, less frequently, take part in debates organised by newsrooms, seems more common, as declared by the interviewed/surveyed journalists. Although media professionals see the audience's importance in democratic processes, its involvement usually takes place only under editorial control (as exemplified by practices of readers' letters popular e.g. in Slovenia and Estonia or moderated chats with the audience in Ireland and Italy). Only in the non-profit media sector, tactics like involving audience in scheduling and content production prove more common than in the public and commercial sectors (e.g. in Austria, Portugal, Ireland). Still, these practices are not perceived as a priority.

Representation of societal diversity remains an important area reflected in journalistic standards, and, to a certain extent, also in practice. According to the surveys results, steps to reflect diversity are frequently taken across all studied countries, particularly in Estonia, Ireland, Poland, and Germany. The interviews indicate, however, that on an everyday basis, newsrooms are challenged with multiple obstacles affecting their ability to cover issues linked with societal diversity. These include mostly economic struggles, but also "soft" issues like geographical bias (Estonia, France) and the gender expert gap (Estonia, France).

Finally, views of interviewed journalists concerning more general conditions that support or hamper media freedom, pluralism and democracy concern common aspects. Among these, one can list disinformation (including AI-driven fake news), growing dependency on digital platform operators and financial difficulties resulting from this unequal relationship, declining trust in journalism, populism and polarisation. In those circumstances, media need to counterbalance an objective to serve democracies and citizens with a necessity to maintain financial viability and organisational independence. This delicate balance seems to be harder to achieve in highly concentrated and competitive markets.

Furthermore, the European media systems remain under a high influence of a widespread crisis of knowledge and trust rooted in the digital environment. Specifically, the toxicity of the unstructured digital sphere - driven by elements such as hate speech and disinformation - has necessitated a strategic evolution of media practices. Although media professionals across Europe are clearly aware of merits of professional standards that ensure provision of reliable information, watchdog, etc., this does not necessarily come in a form of an open forum, in which citizens actively and regularly participate in shaping

democracy through debates and production of media content. Such a potential is being subjected to editorial realities, managerial control and gatekeeping. These realities seem to reflect structured, editorially controlled spaces, and leave relatively little room for collaborative openness. At the same time, observed limitations stem paradoxically also from requirements to safeguard core journalistic values: ensuring pluralism, conducting proper internal fact-checking, enhancing accountability vis-à-vis media users while eliminating harmful, extremist or misinformative content. Needless to add, in a highly information-overloaded media ecosystem, journalistic functions of filtering, explaining and contextualising are becoming increasingly important.

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