D1. ONLINE SURVEY REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Transnational Report is a comparative analysis of MEDIAWISE – An Intergenerational Approach on How Countering Disinformation to Empower Citizens Project [Project No: 101081262] that is funded by the EU Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV). In particular, MEDIAWISE project general objective is to foster active European citizenship and to improve conditions for civic and democratic participation at EU level by raising citizens' awareness of national and EU level initiatives to counter fake news and online disinformation

The Transnational Report recapitulates and contrasts prevalent data gathered from five National Reports (IT, CY, GR, ES, LT) - which are a product of a survey which endeavoured to assess the overall relevance of the issue of disinformation and fake news in partnering countries of the project. Furthermore, the survey aimed to capture the effectiveness of different actions in minimizing the negative effects of disinformation. A total of 452 respondents were interviewed across all partner countries, who have ultimately presented an overview of the current extent of disinformation and fake news, as well as, the present needs and gaps in terms of competencies in countering such phenomena. The Transnational Report provides insight on whether the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated disinformation and fake news - and whether the level of trust to the media was further diminished by the respondents.

The Transnational Report findings suggest that fake news and disinformation are well ingrained in our daily media consumption. Respondents across partner countries are well aware of the existence of disinformation and show some critical ability to navigate this phenomenon through the employment of cross checking techniques. Nonetheless, a significant portion of the respondents do not appear equipped with the necessary competencies in detecting or countering this phenomenon. Rather disinformation appears to be understood as an immutable reality. These Transnational Report presents the need to empower individuals to navigate this challenging reality - whilst investing on their skills and competencies in making the best out of what access to the media can provide to them.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Fake News
It is false or misleading information presented as news. Fake news often has the aim of damaging the reputation of a person or entity, or making money through advertising revenue.

Disinformation
False information deliberately and often covertly spread in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.

Propaganda
Ideas, facts or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause.

Crosschecking
To check something from various angle or source to determine validity or accuracy.

Fact-Checking
The process of verifying the factual accuracy of all the information provided in a piece of writing, a news article, a speech etc.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSNATIONAL REPORT

In this Transnational Report, the main findings of the National Reports on the assessment of the overall relevance of the issue of disinformation and fake news in all five (5) MEDIAWISE partner countries (IT, CY, GR, LT, CY) are summarised and contrasted. In the framework of comparative analysis, common issues and differences in I. Media Consumption, II. Trust in the Media, III. Use of Social Networks, IV. Disinformation and V. Coronavirus Information and Disinformation among partner countries are identified.

Following an executive summary and an introduction, the background to the Transnational Report is presented, whilst insight on the MEDIAWISE project and the National Reports is provided. Furthermore, the chosen methodology is presented, as well as, the limitations encountered. The main findings are explored with an emphasis on the overlapping themes encountered by partner countries, and the needs that appear to be common across them. The themes of mutual interest and concern will then be further analysed and explored at the Transnational High Level Experts Meeting (WP2) - which ultimately endeavours to formulate concrete policy recommendations. The concluding remarks recapitulate the purposes of this report and the prevalent findings of the research conducted.

# BACKGROUND TO THE SUMMARY REPORT

MEDIAWISE Project

MEDIAWISE aims to foster active European citizenship and to improve conditions for civic and democratic participation at EU level by raising citizens' awareness of national and EU level initiatives to counter fake news and online disinformation. The project organises online and onsite events firstly to understand citizens' attitude, habits, needs and ideas about fake news and disinformation - something that will further be explored through the lenses of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The MEDIAWISE project brings together experts in various fields in order to have a pan-European discussion and ultimately I. Ccontribute to a better understanding of the fields of media literacy and critical thinking through citizens engagement at European level, II. Outreach EU citizens and raise awareness about fake news in Europe and their impact on democracy and III. Stimulate an active debate with citizens at a European level to foster a better understanding of different perspectives.

The MEDIAWISE project recognizes the need to provide people of all ages with the practical opportunities to learn the skills needed to understand and operate within the highly complex media communication landscape, through programmes adapted to various target groups, which can be age-specific and context-specific. Hence, the project largely targets adults aged +65, as well as, young people aged 18-30.

Ultimately, the MEDIAWISE project is in line with the EU - European Democracy Plan which calls inter alia for improving EU and Member States capacity to counter disinformation and fake news.

Partner Organizations
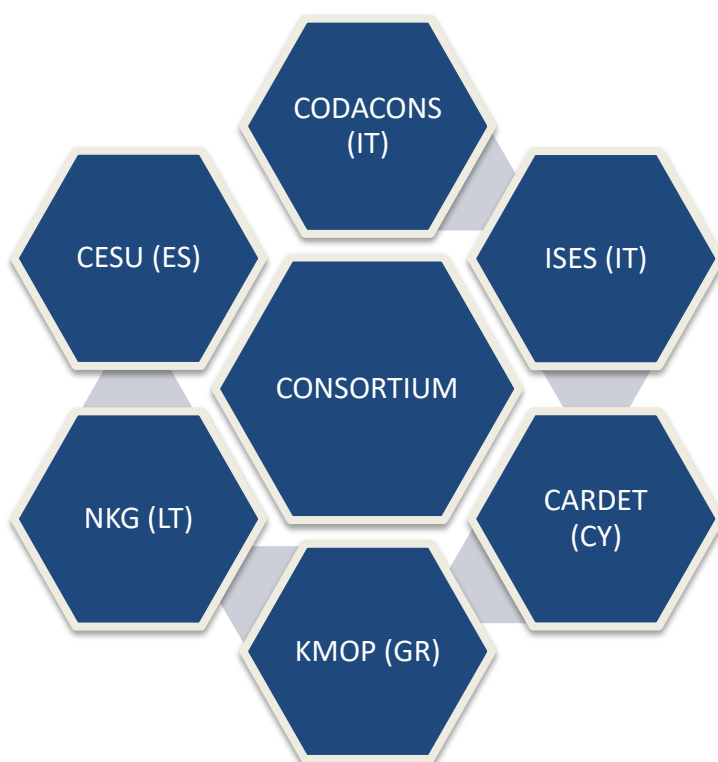
National Reports

The National Reports are a product of the Online Survey which took place in each country partner country analysing citizens' attitude, habits, needs and ideas about fake news and disinformation - with an emphasis to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on such phenomena. The survey took place from the December 2022 until March 31st 2023.

The National Reports objectives are:

- To assess the overall relevance of the issue of disinformation and fake news in the partnering countries of the project.
- To assess the significance and effectiveness of different actions aimed to minimize the negative effects of the disinformation on national and European level - including actions that can be taken by online platforms and the use of e-democracy tools.
- To address the role of politicisation in disinformation strategies as one of the causes of disinformation and fake news.

The total number of respondents across the five (5) participating countries are 452.
The breakdown between each country is as follows:
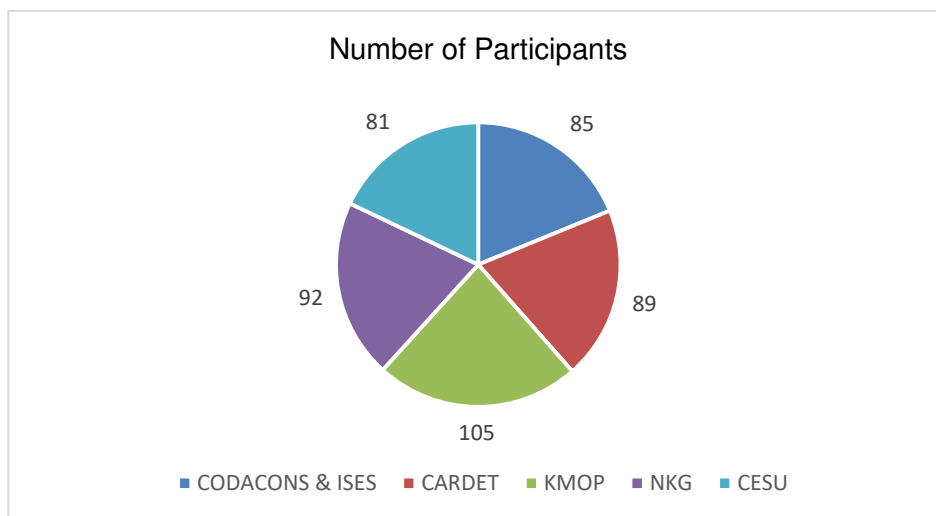
The main target group was academic experts within the relevant fields, representatives from organisations specialising in studying disinformation and its effects on the society, civil society organisations working in the areas of media and democracy, as well as, journalists - and the project's distinct target groups which is adults aged 65+ and young people aged 18-30.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research based approach was utilized to gather the information. A survey was conducted online using the Survey Monkey tool in order to easily process and analyse the data. The tool that was used to conduct the online survey was a self-administered questionnaire. Survey Monkey enabled us to easily create visual surveys with professional content - viewing the collected responses in real-time, using tables, charts, PDF reports and data files for most file types. Participation was entirely voluntary, and responses were analysed only in aggregate. To ensure more sincere and representative feedback, the survey was conducted anonymously. The survey questionnaire was created in English and translated into the partner's languages in order to ensure wide accessibility. Respondents were given ample time to think through their answers, and there were no time limits imposed

The questionnaire consisted of a total of thirty (30) questions - whereas twenty-four (24) of them were related to media consumption habit and experiences with fake news whilst the remaining six (6) questions were designed to distinguish the characteristics of the target group. The questions were of two types: with multiple choice single answer or multiple choice. Questions were based on a Likert scale (1 - 5, with 1 being none and 5 a lot) asking participants for their assessment of the proliferation of false news. Some of the questions were compulsory (such as the socio-demographic ones) whilst others optional in order to avoid incomplete answers.

A thematic analysis was used, detecting the themes emerging and analysing them to compare the findings. Results were firstly assessed at country partner level following the formulation of the National Reports. The National Reports consisted information on the state of fake news and disinformation in each partner country - highlighting the needs, gaps and resilience of the respondents. This report is the basis of the present Summary Report.

Limitations

This report has potential limitations. The first limitation regards the gender distribution of the survey respondents. It commonly appears across the participating countries that the female population is overrepresented compared to the male population. Indeed, studies suggest that women respond to online surveys significantly more than men (Ahmadabadi, 2023). The gender ratio of participants is important to note as the bias skewing gender may influence the results. Nonetheless, it remains unclear how people of different genders perceive and interact disinformation and fake news. It is also worth mentioning that when it comes to the non-binary population, in most of the countries it is completely absent.

The second limitation involves the level of education of the respondents. Across the participating countries majority of the respondents hold a bachelor's level education - with a significant portion of them also possessing a master's level education. Furthermore, the percentage of respondents with doctoral level of education is higher than that of the general population. Although the target group for the online survey are experts in the fields of disinformation, democracy and media literacy, respondents with lower levels of education were not reached. This suggests that the survey findings are not representative of the entire population in these countries - especially when it comes to their skills and competencies in countering the phenomena of disinformation and fake news. It would be worth exploring in future research how these results might be different if a less educated sample is involved.
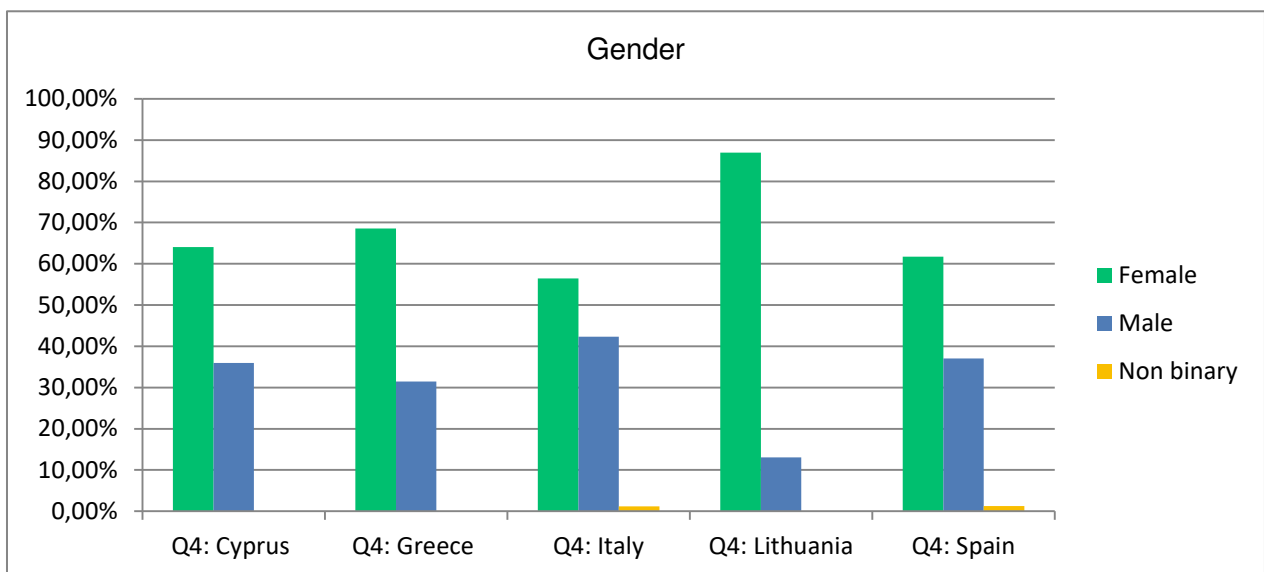
MAIN FINDINGS

## Sociodemographic Data

Table 1
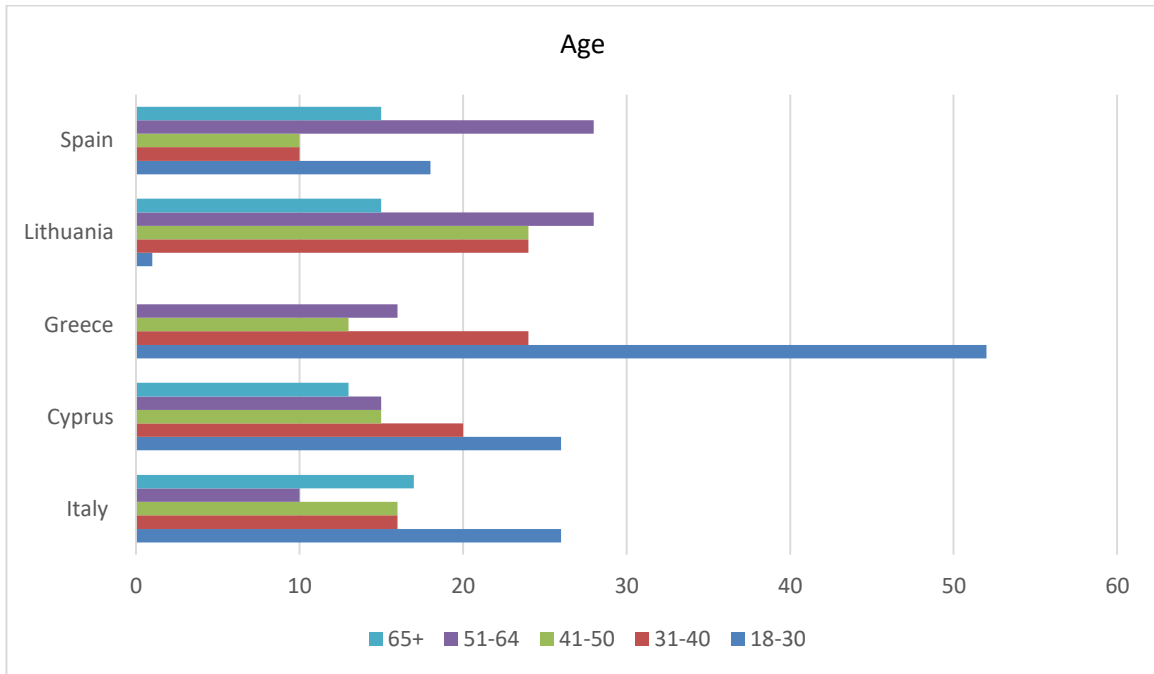
The online survey has reached respondents from various age-groups managing to gather a representative sample across age-groups. People between the ages of 18 - 30 and people 65+ have responded to the survey. The only country that did not successfully reach the target group of adults aged 65+ is Greece.

Table 2

Across all partner countries the female population is represented at a higher rate than the male population. Nonetheless, the representation of male respondents is rather sufficient. Non binary respondents are almost absent from the online survey.
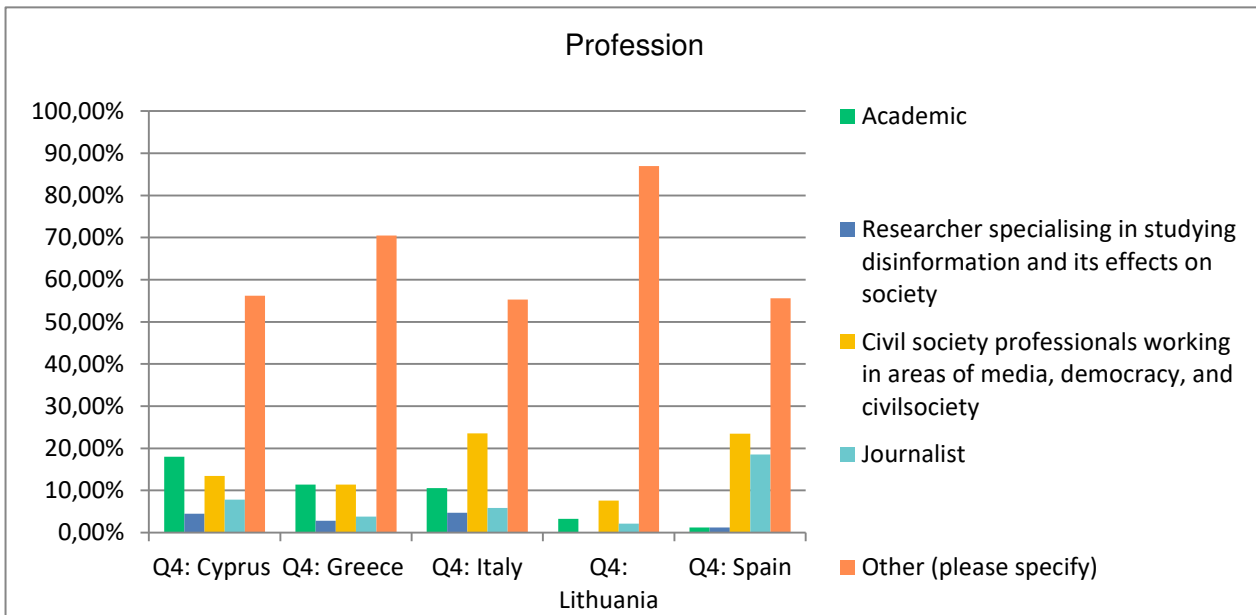
Table 3

The professions of the respondents cover a wide range of disciplines. In reality, the target group of experts is being reached as well as people from other disciplines ensuring a broad representation of viewpoints and experiences.

Table 4
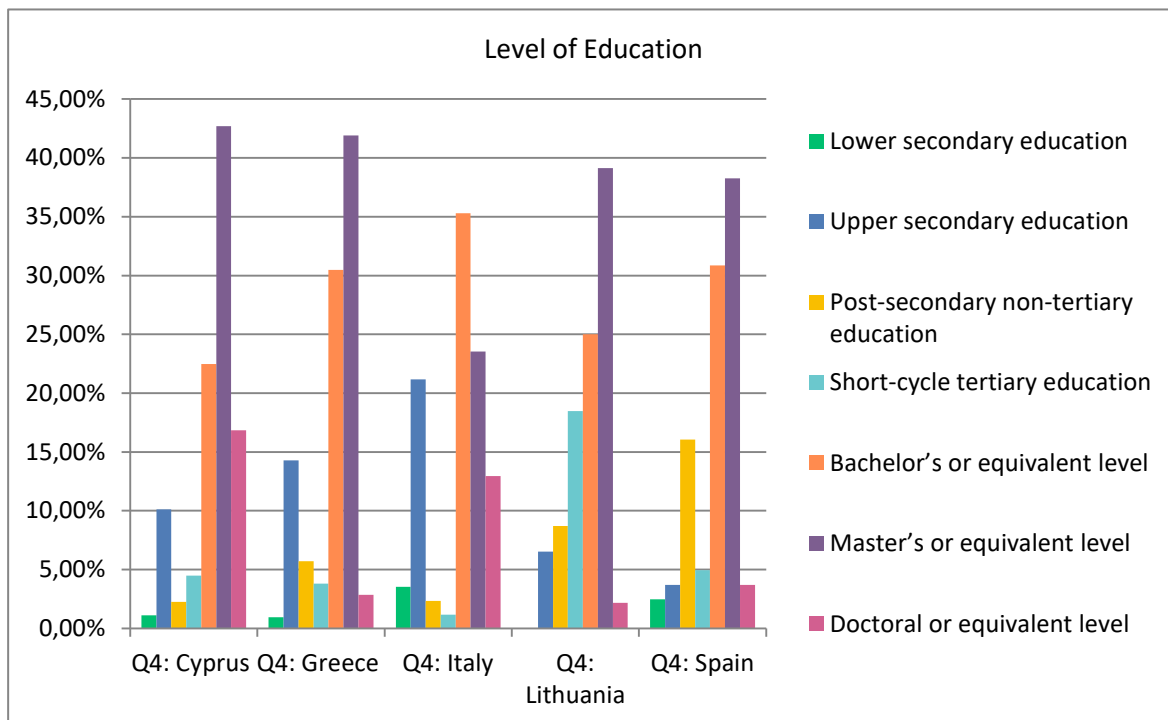
Respondents across participating countries are academically educated or highly educated. Respondents with lower levels education are rather underrepresented in this sample. The high level of education of majority of the respondents could potentially be influential on the survey outcomes.

Media Consumption

Table 5


How often do you use the following media?
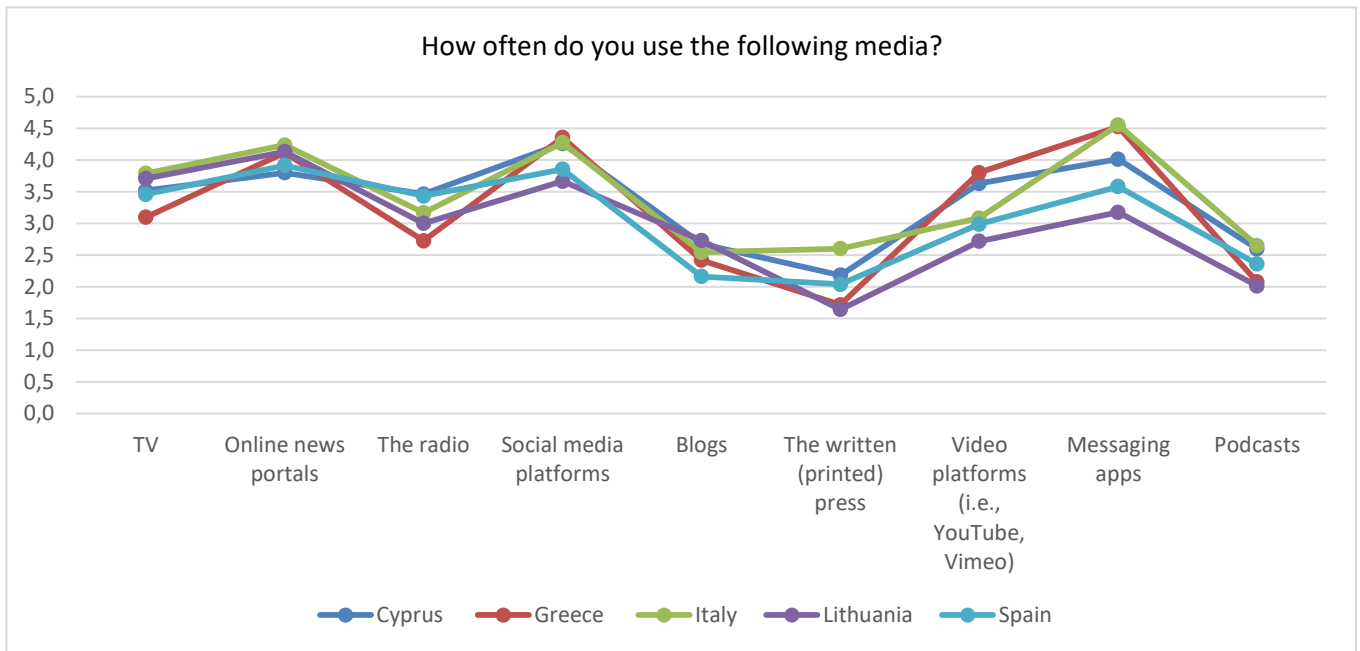
Partner countries appear to follow similar trends in terms of their use of the media. The most prevalent media are I. Messaging Apps, II. Social Media Platforms and III. Online News Portals. On the contrary, the least used media by the respondents are I. Written Press and II. Podcasts. These findings are in line with the consistently increasing use of online media.

Table 6

How do you usually access news online?
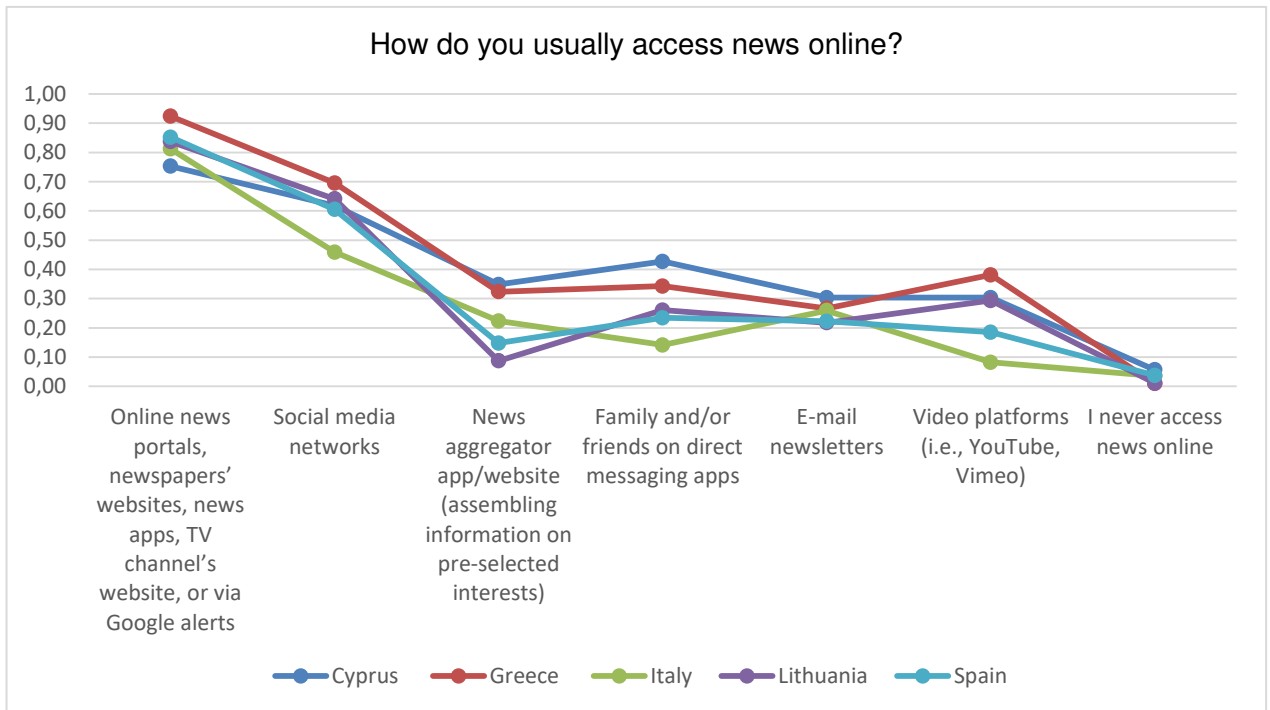
When it comes to the media that is accessed online by the respondents, online news portals and newspaper websites appear to be the predominant source of information across partner countries - followed by social media networks. No significant deviations are observed among partner countries, except video platforms which are mostly accessed by Greek and Cypriot and less by Lithuanian and Italian respondents.

Table 7
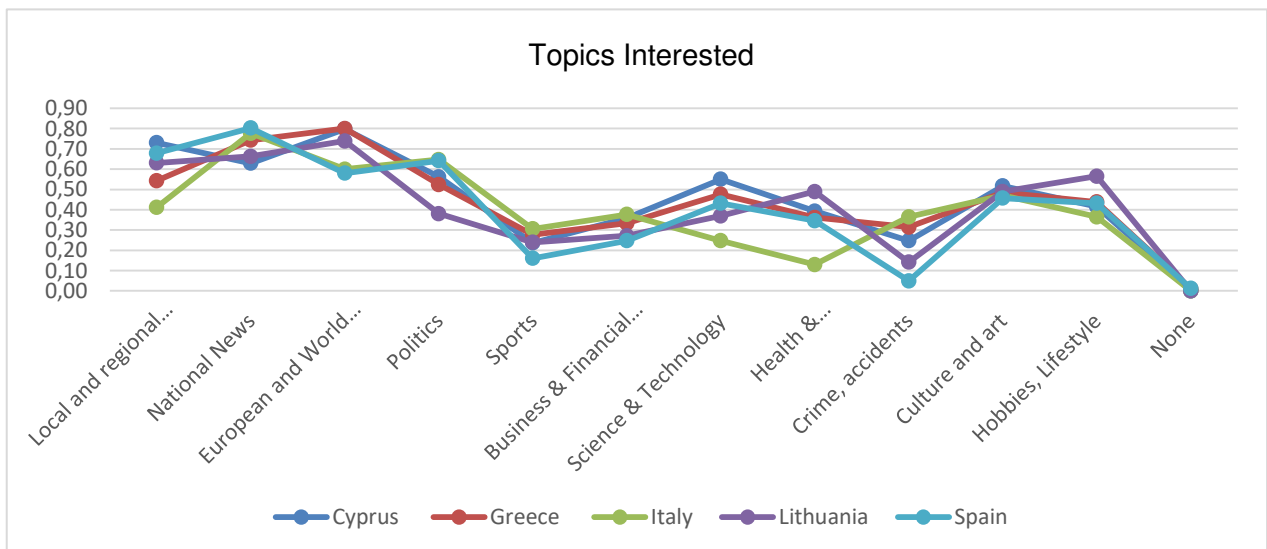
Topics Interested

The topics which respondents are mostly interested in consuming information are: I. Local and Regional News, II. National News and III. European and World News. What is interestingly observed is that Lithuanian respondents deviate from their counterparts in their interest in consuming information on Health & Pharmaceuticals. This could be indicative of the Lithuanian public opinion on the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 8
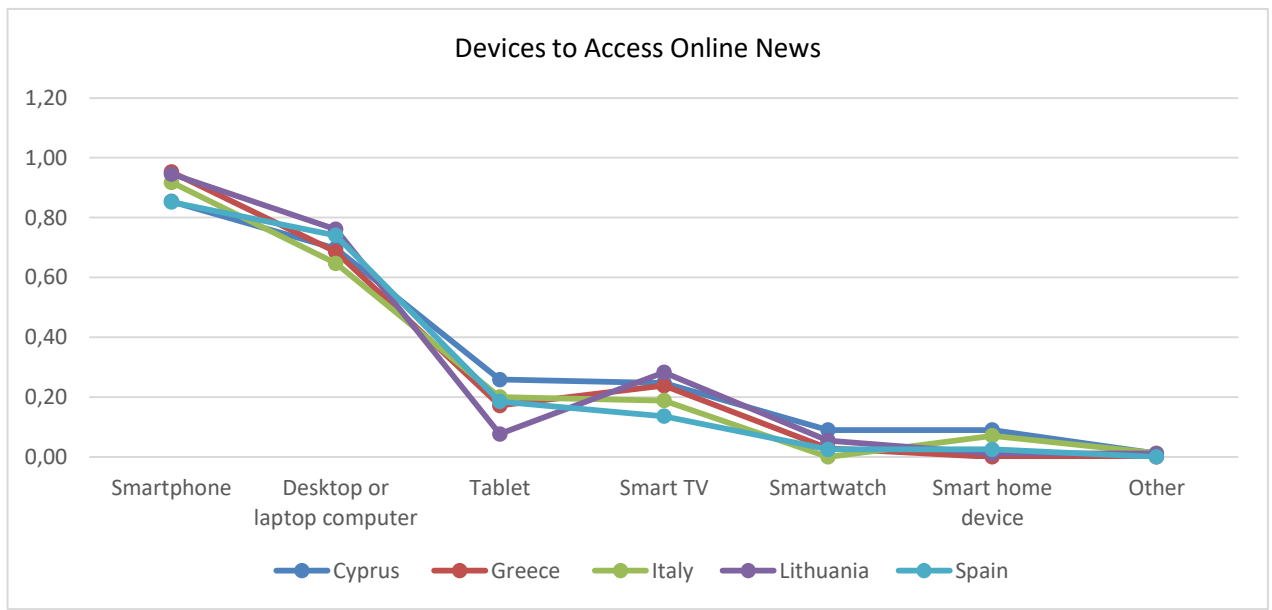
Respondents across partner countries appear to access online news through either their I. Smartphones and II. Desktop or Laptop Computer.

Table 9

Language to Receive Information

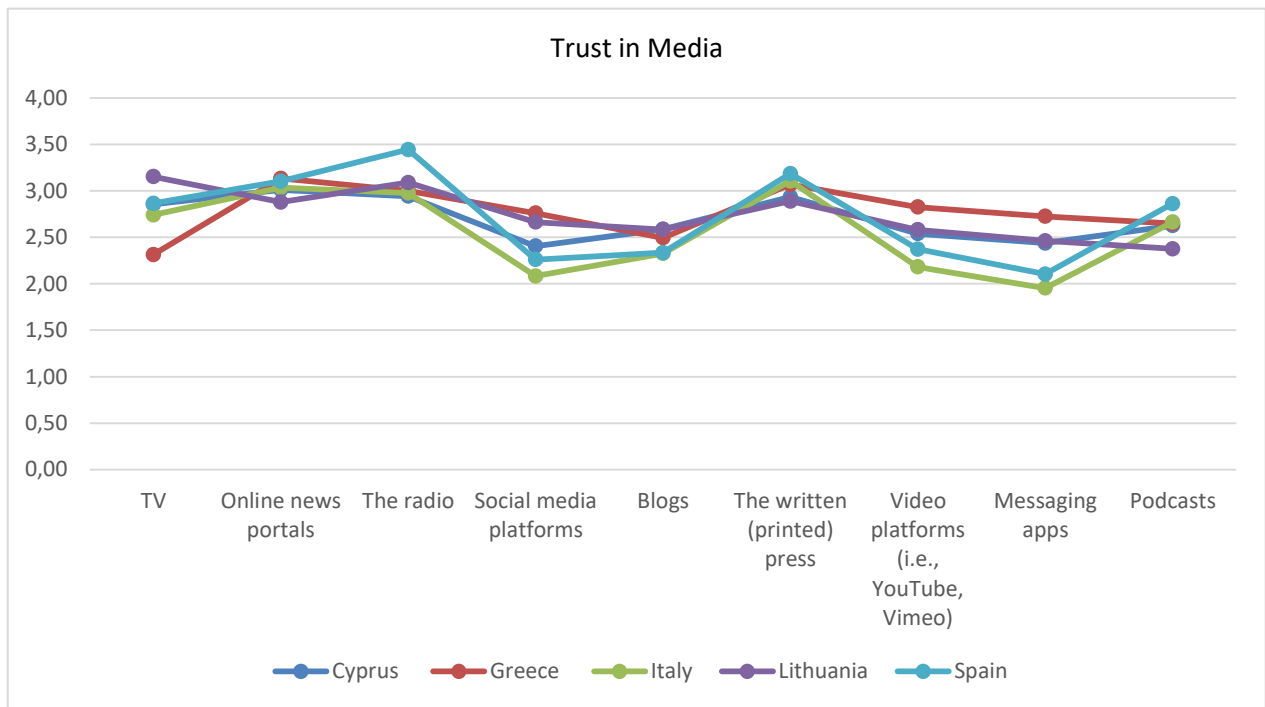| Country	My mother language	English/Other second language
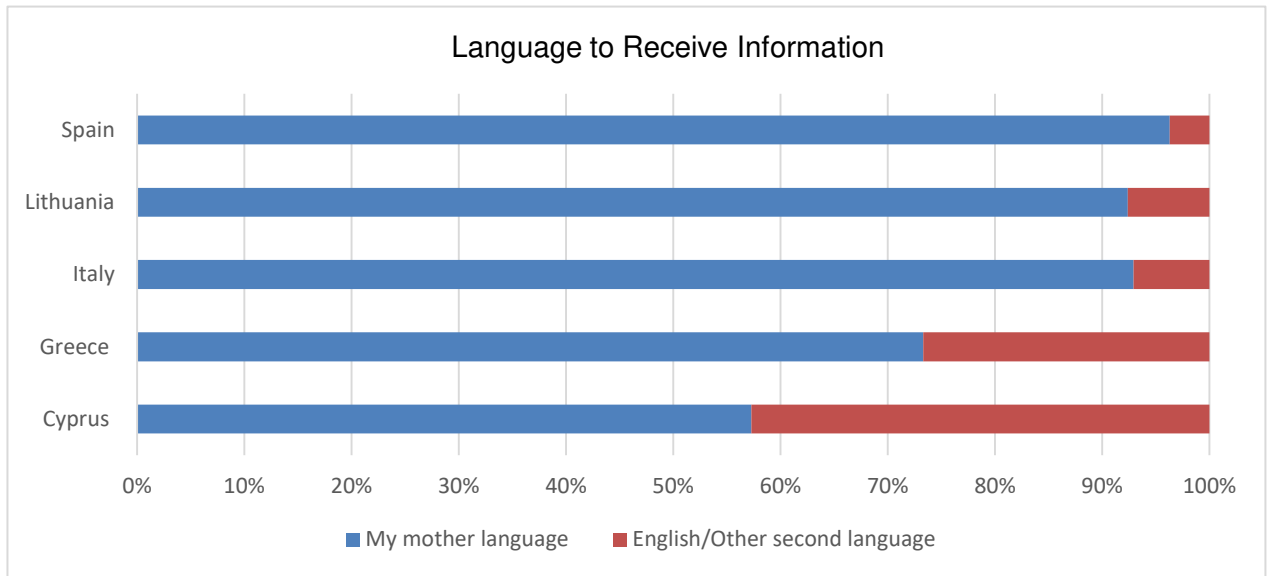
Information is mostly accessed by the respondents across partner countries in their mother language. The countries that do access information in English or another second language on a higher rate are Cyprus and Greece.

Trust in the Media

Table 10

Trust in the media across partner countries appears to be of moderate intensity. The most collectively trusted media by partner countries are I. the Radio and II. the Written Press. At the same, the least trusted media are I. Social Media Platforms and II. Messaging Apps. It appears that the most widely used media are also the least trusted. It would be interesting to assess whether that is because social media platforms and messaging apps are indeed less trustworthy - or whether high use naturally leads to a higher exposure to disinformation and fake news.

Table 11

Cross-Check Information
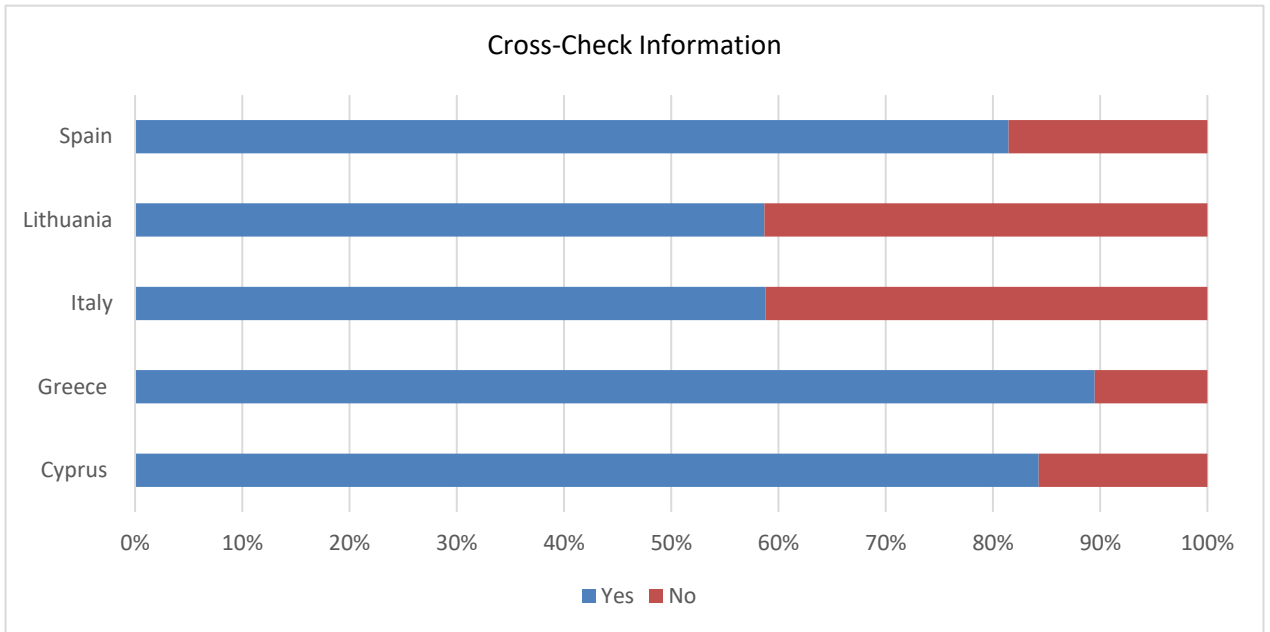
Majority of the respondents report cross-checking the information they consume on the media. This is of particular prevalence among Greece, Cyprus and Spain. These results are indicative of an increased level of critical thinking among the respondents, who appear to maintain at least some consistency in the kind of information they consume.

Table 12
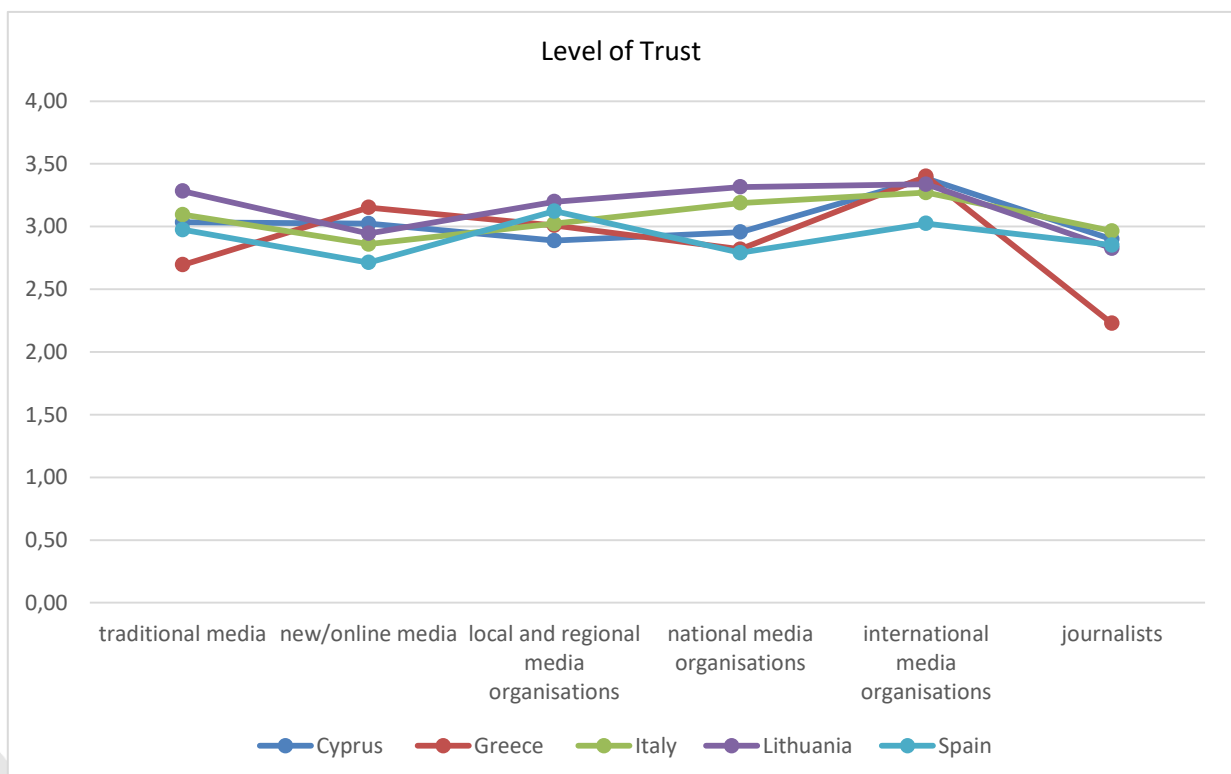
Level of Trust

When respondents were prompted to indicate their level of trust on a number of media sources their response was once again of moderate intensity. The primary important deviation is that Greece is far less trusting of Journalists compared to the rest of the participating countries. Similarly, Greek respondents are also relatively less trusting of Traditional Media.

Table 13
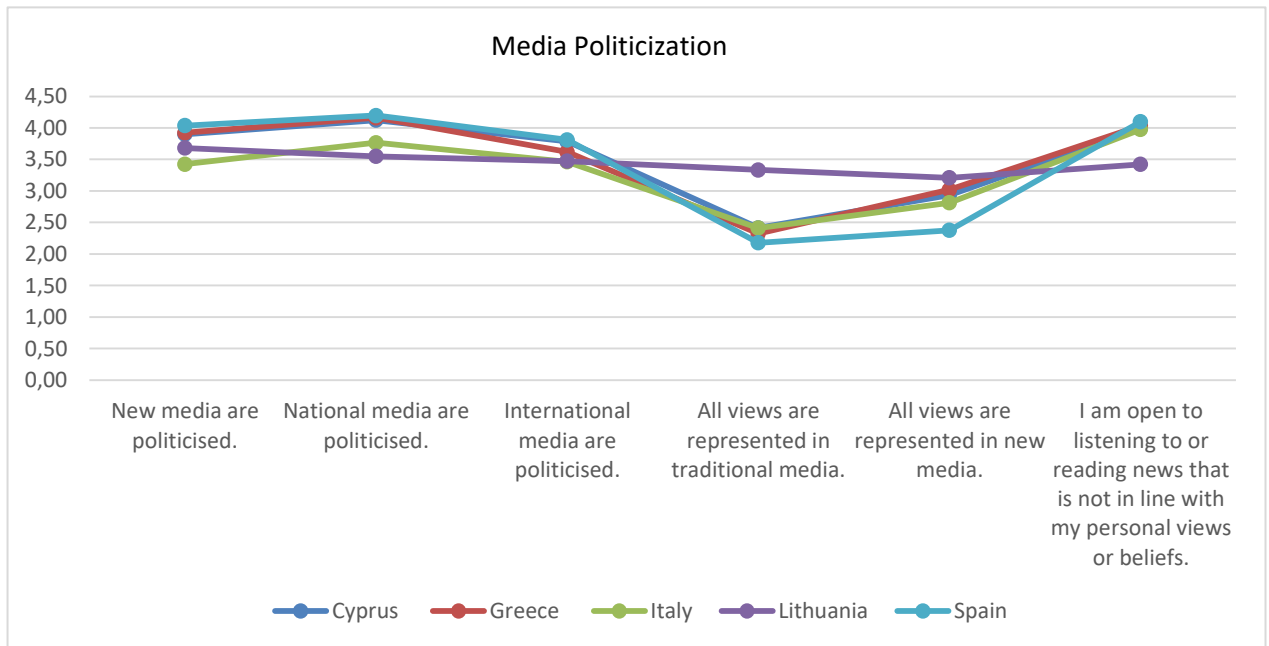
Respondents were prompted to share their perspectives on the extent of politicization on the media. Once again respondents are aligned in terms of their view that I. New Media are Politicised, II. National Media are Politicised and III. International Media are Politicized. Interestingly, Lithuanian respondents appear to be more positive that all views are represented in traditional media which does not appear to be the case for their Southern European Counterparts.

Use of Social Network

Table 14
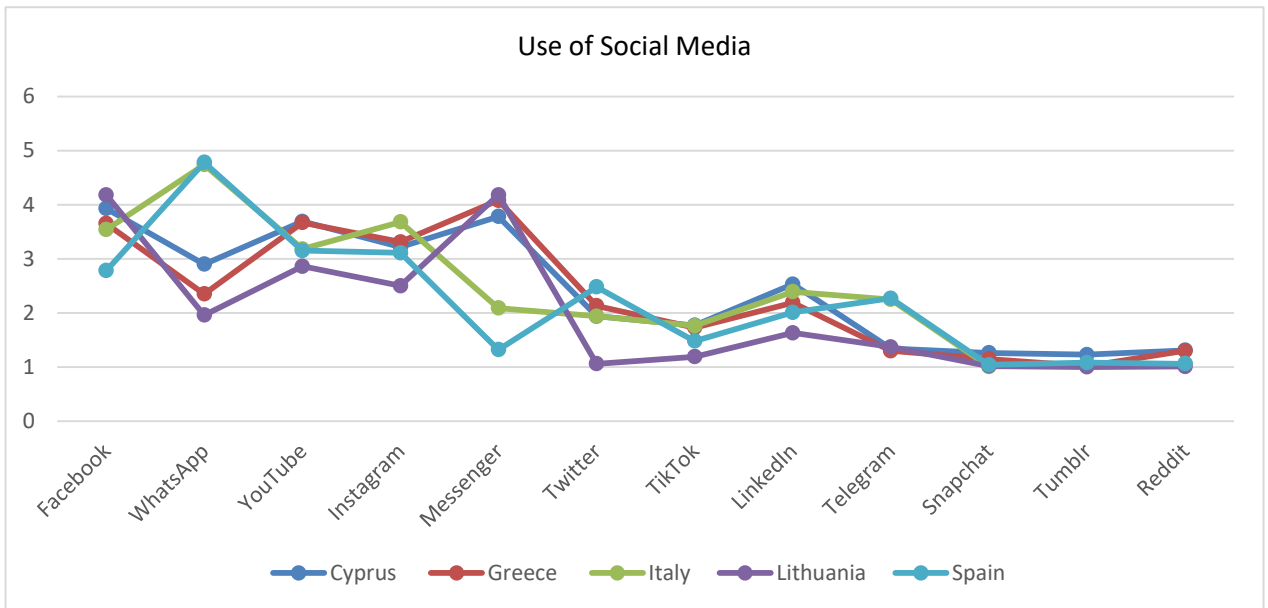
Use of Social Media

Each participating country appears to be using different social media networks. For instance, Italy and Spain mostly use WhatsApp - whereas Greece 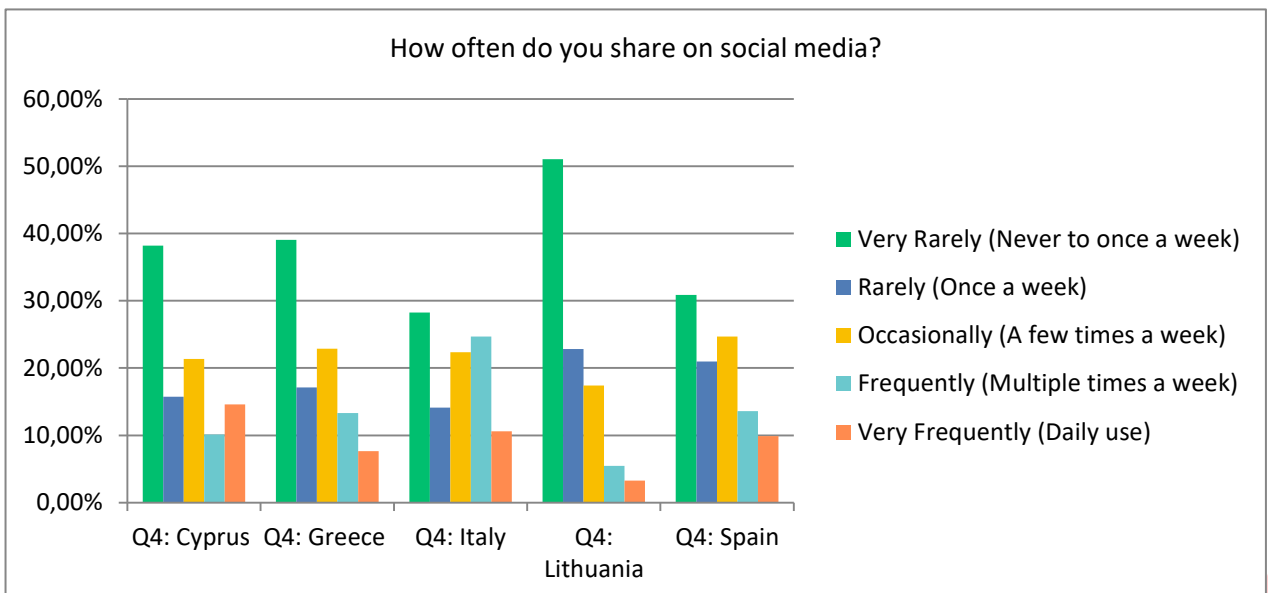and Lithuania and Cyprus mostly use Messenger and Facebook. Snapchat, Tumblr and Reddit are used less frequently by all participating countries.

Table 15

How often do you share on social media?

Majority of the respondents across the participating countries mostly maintain a viewing activity instead of sharing online - with the Lithuanian respondents being the most detached from posting online.

Table 16
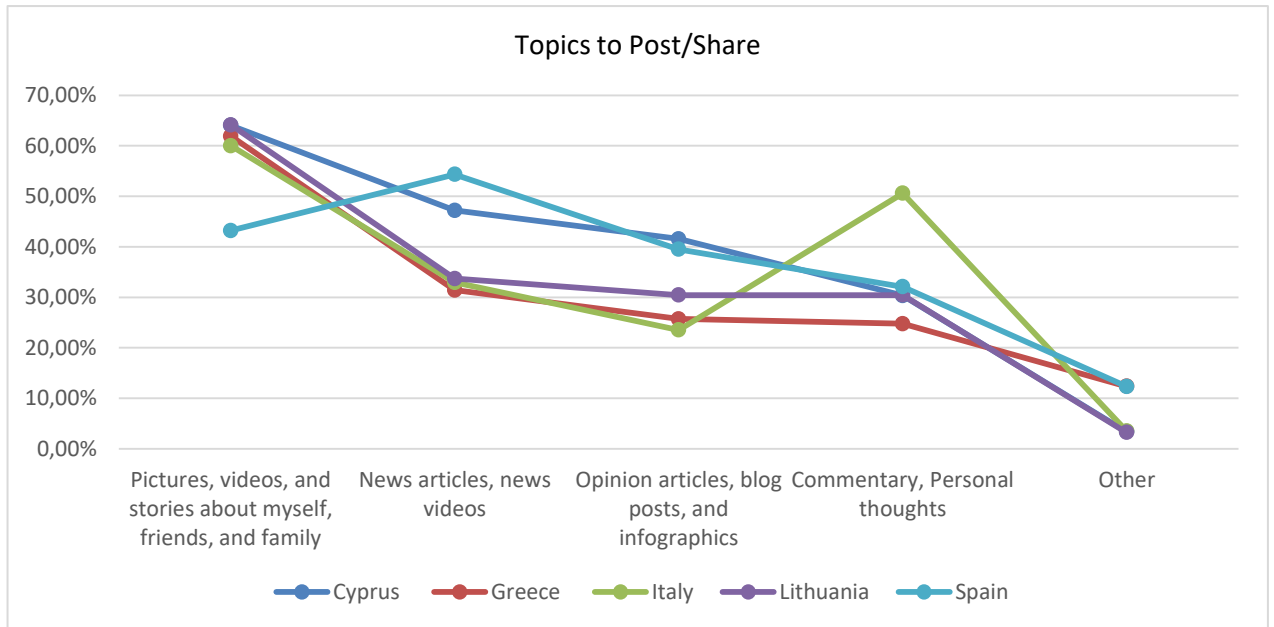
Among the participants who do post or share online, majority of the respondents across the participating countries share personal photos, videos and stories. Interestingly, Italian respondents are significantly more prone to share commentary or personal thoughts online - whereas Spanish and Cypriot respondents share at a higher rate news articles and news videos.

Disinformation and Social Networks

Table 17

Do you understand the difference between propaganda, misinformation, and fake news?
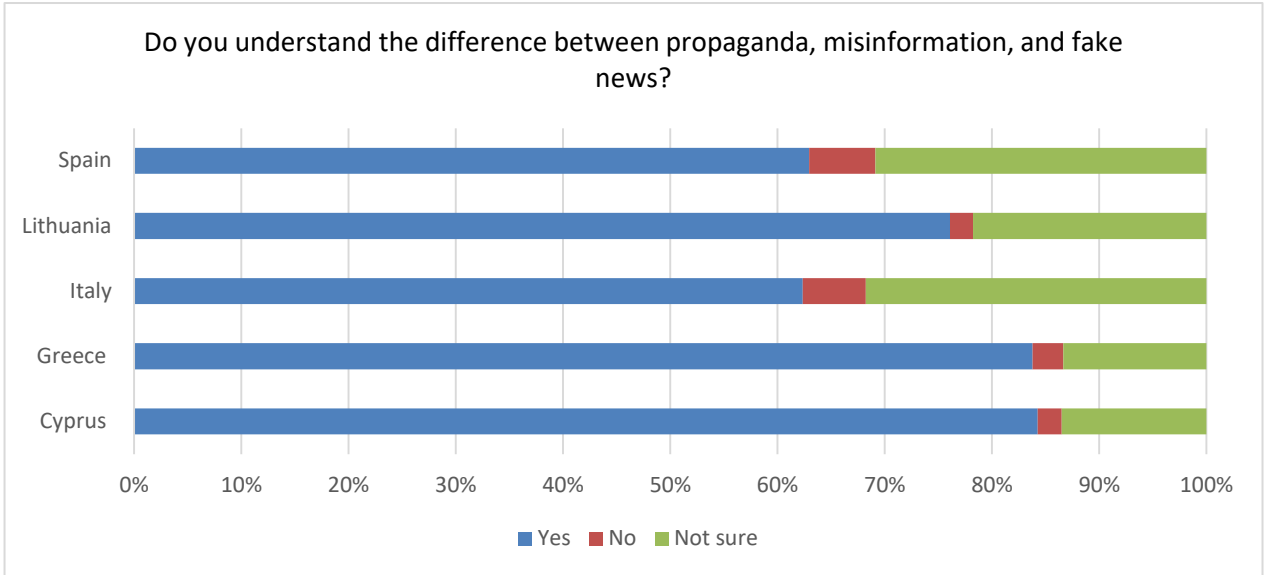
Respondents appear to be able to distinguish between Propaganda - Misinformation and Fake News. These results are rather surprising since these terms are often misconstrued and used interchangeably. The high level of understanding among respondents might be explained by the fact that a number of them work within the fields of democracy and the news.

Table 18

How often do you think that you personally get exposed to disinformation and fake news?
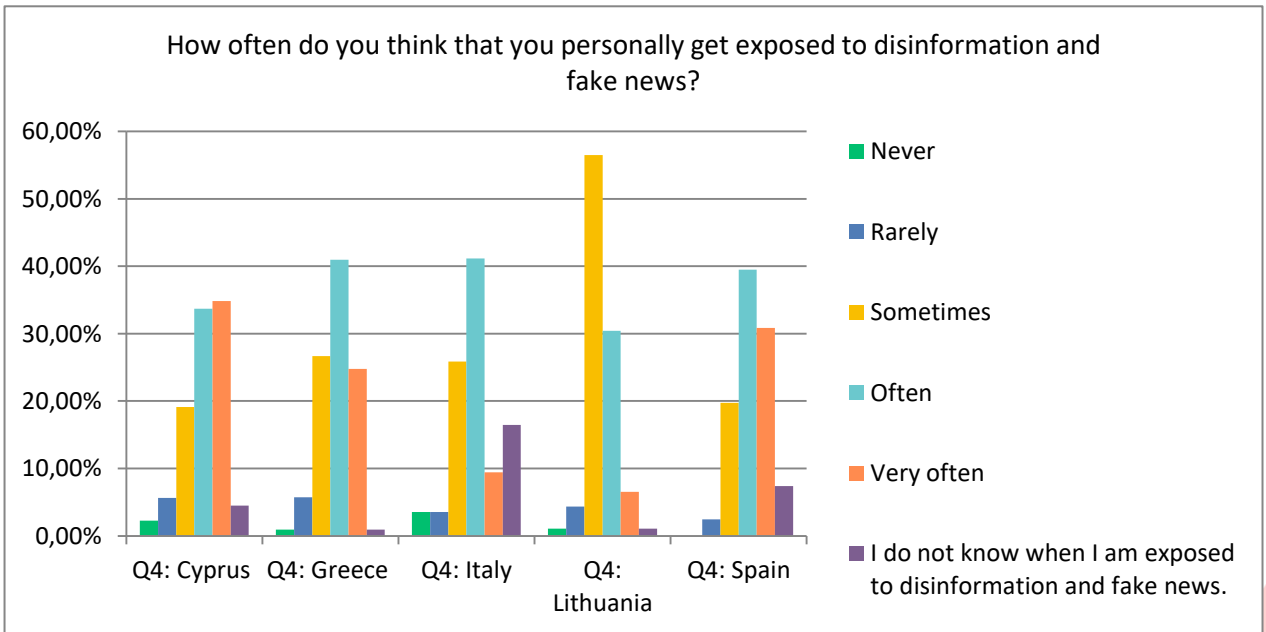
Respondents across participating countries perceive being either often or very often exposed to disinformation and fake news. This finding is interesting since the levels of trust across the participating countries were assessed to be moderate. The only country whose respondents does not perceive as frequent exposure to disinformation is Lithuania.

Table 19

What criteria indicate to you that a news information is propaganda, misinformation, or fake news?
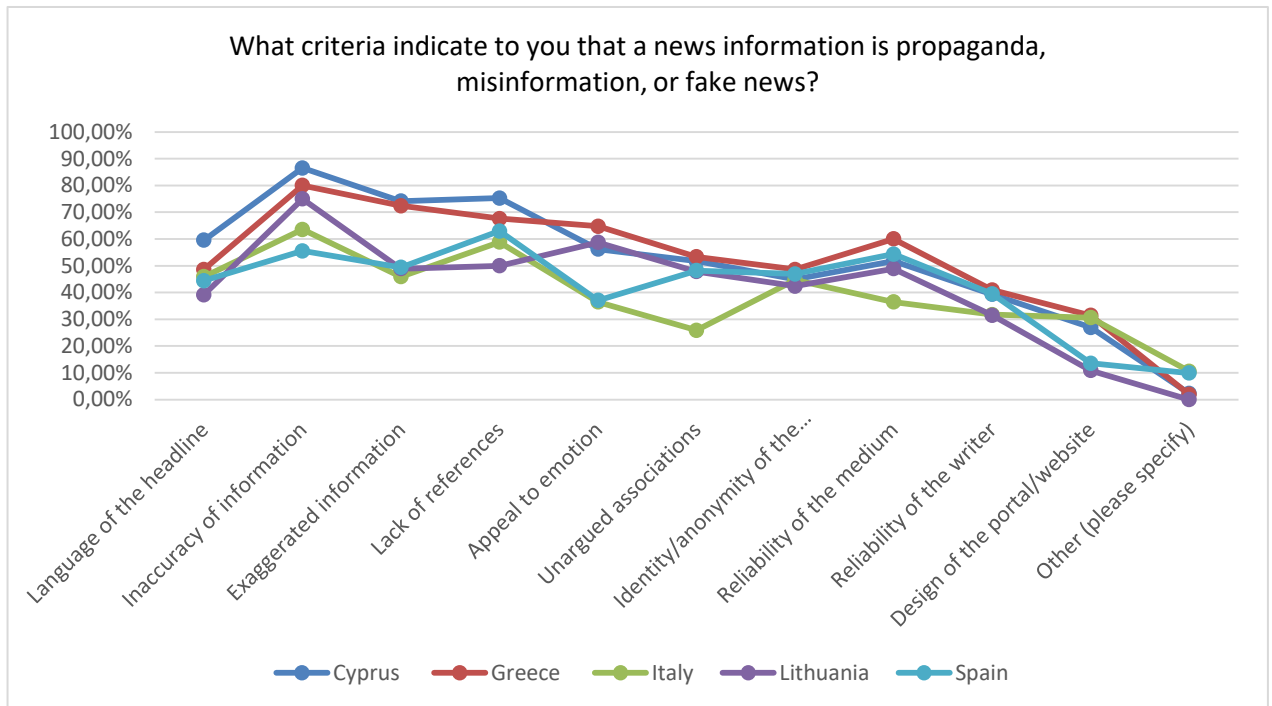
Respondents appear to utilize a number of criteria when assessing whether a piece of information is a product of propaganda, misinformation or fake news. The most prevalent criteria are I. Inaccuracy of Information, II. Lack of References, III. Exaggerated Information and IV. Language of the Headline. Among respondents the Design of the Website is less indicative of misinformation.

Table 20

Do you know what a fact-checker is?
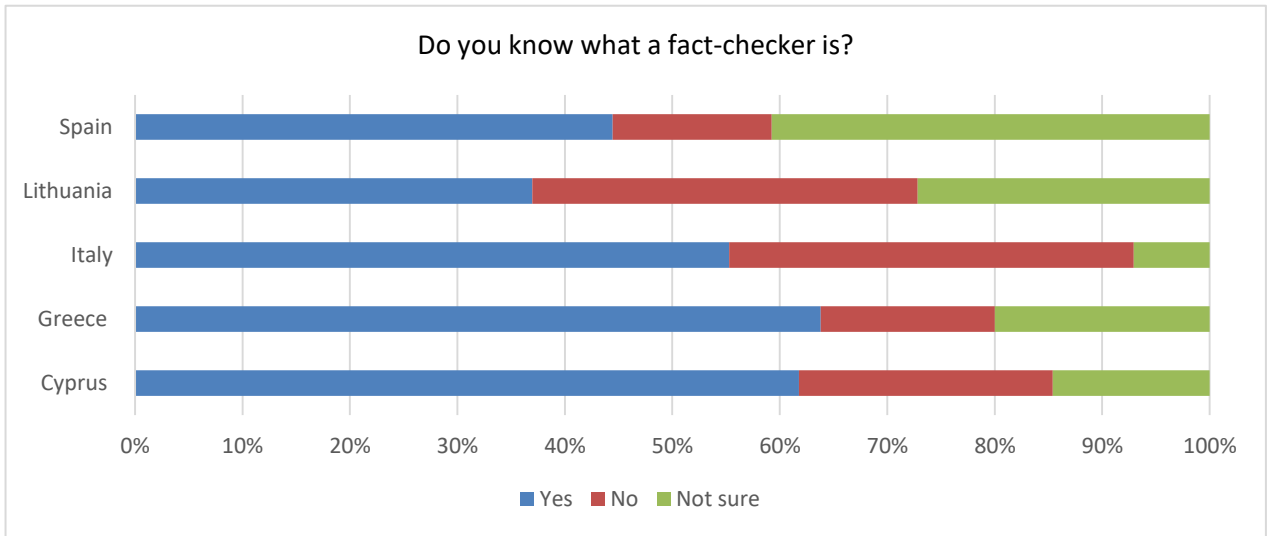
The respondents appear to be overall knowledgeable of what a fact-checker is. That is the case especially among the Greek and Cypriot respondents. On the other hand, Lithuanian and Spanish respondents were more hesitant to disclose such knowledge. Even though a large portion of the respondents appear to be aware of fact-checkers there is still a considerable rate of those who are not informed.

Table 21

Are you aware of any fact-checking websites, tools, and techniques?
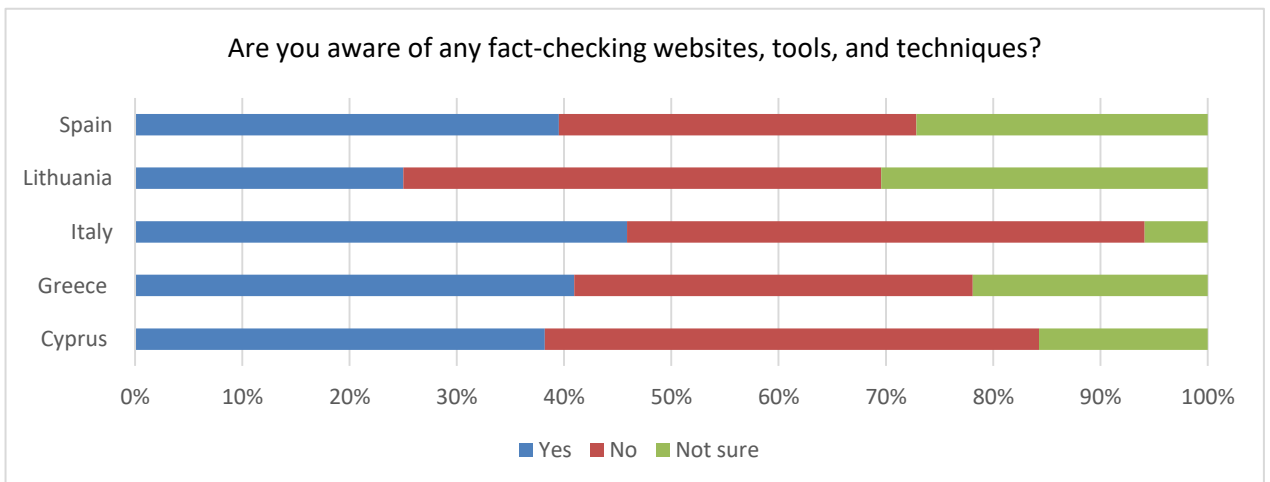
When the respondents are presented with a more specific question - the question of naming any fact-checking websites, tools and techniques - the percentage of those whose confidence in their knowledge is maintained is significantly diminished. That might be because even if some of the respondents feel confident to define fact-checking they did not come across any of these tools and have not utilized them in their day-to-day practices.

Table 22
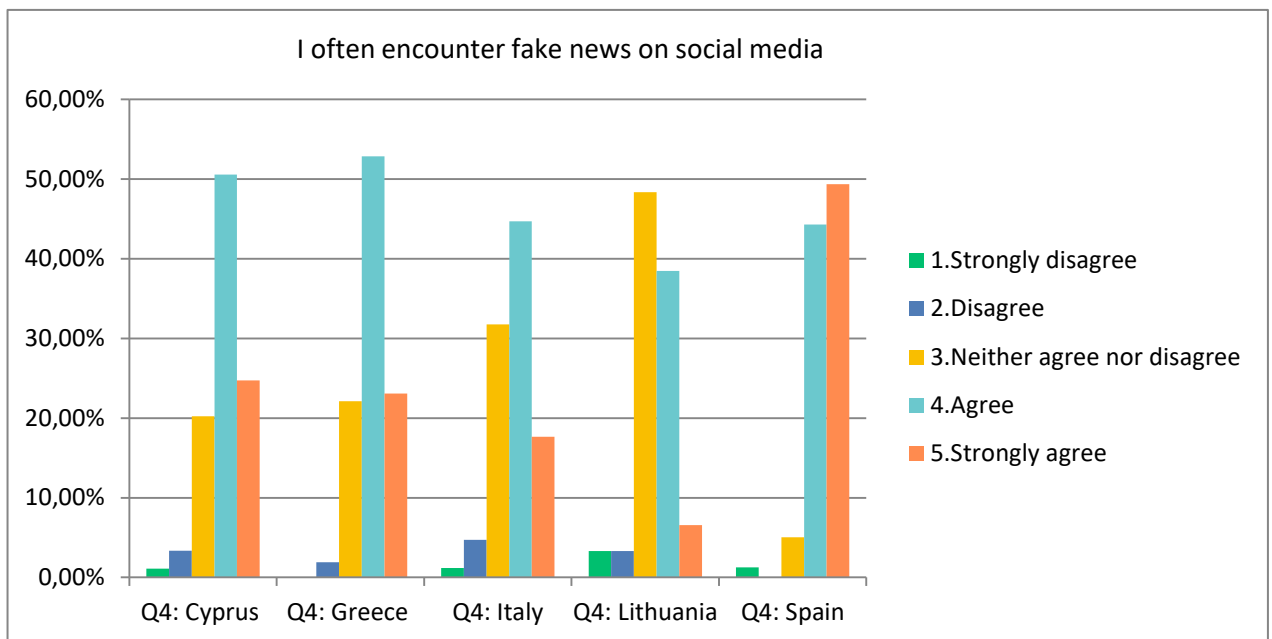
Respondents in most partnering countries agree that they often encounter fake news on social media. Spain is quite unique in the sense that the overwhelming majority of the respondents are positive of their exposure to fake news - whereas the rest of the countries are characterized by less certainty. Lithuanian respondents appear to be the most neutral and ambivalent when it comes to their exposure to fake news. This is a consistent trend among Lithuanian respondents throughout the survey.

Table 23

Fake news is a big problem today
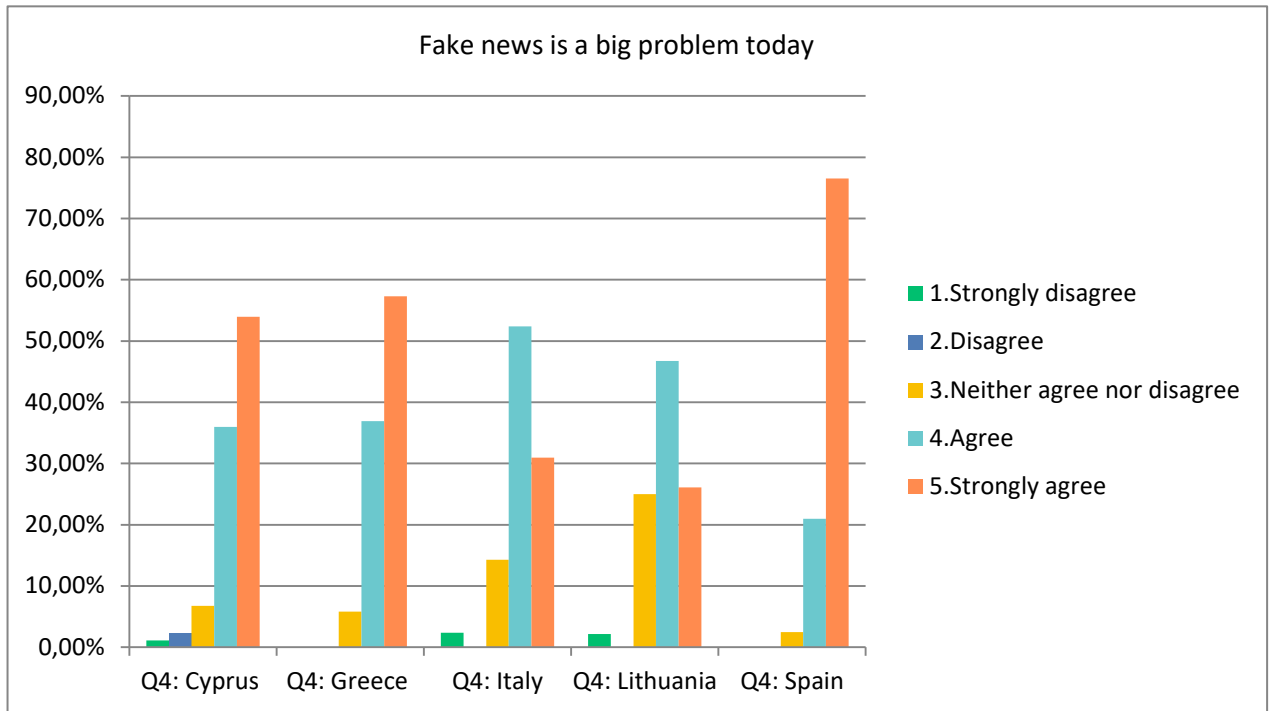
Respondents across the participating countries either agree or strongly agree that fake news is a big problem today. This is especially the case among Cyprus, Greece and Spain - whose overwhelming majority considers fake news to be a problem today. These are the countries whose respondents have been the most vocal in disclosing frequent exposure to fake news.

Table 24

I feel confident that I recognise disinformation when I encounter it.
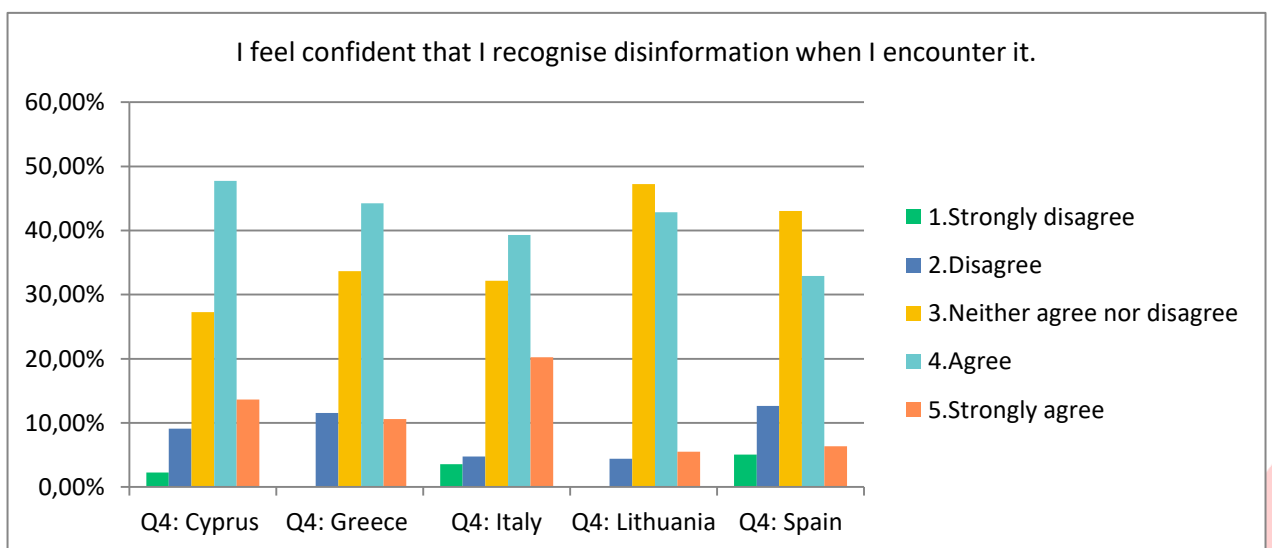
Most of the respondents appear to be somewhat confident in identifying disinformation when encountering it. Nonetheless, there is a significant portion of the respondents who are rather uncertain on whether they are capable of recognizing disinformation when coming across it. This is especially the cases for Lithuania and Spain who appear to be the least confident in recognizing disinformation.

Table 25

I feel confident in my friends' and family's ability to identify disinformation.

Legend:
- 1.Strongly disagree
- 2.Disagree
- 3.Neither agree nor disagree
- 4.Agree
- 5.Strongly agree
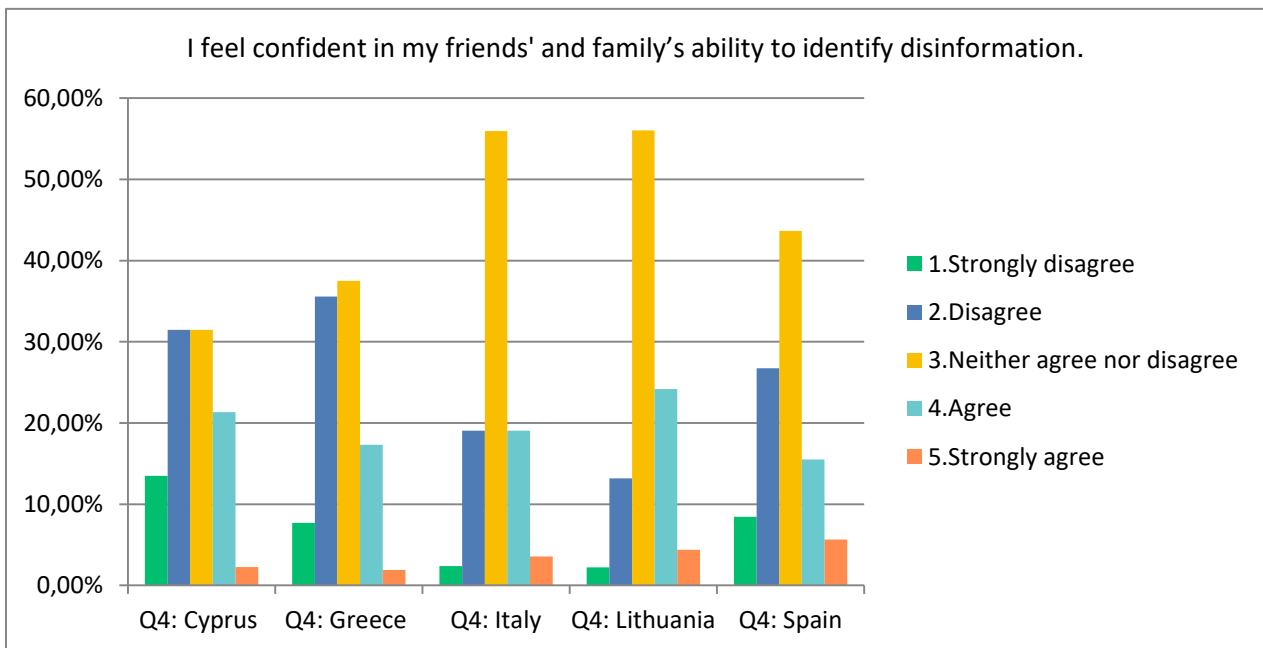
Confidence in identifying disinformation significantly diminishes across participating countries when being prompted to assess their friends' or family's ability to identify disinformation. In fact, more than one third of the Cypriot and Greek respondents report a lack of confidence in their social and family network in detecting such disinformation. This deviation could be explained by an overestimation of one's self and the third person effect.

Table 26

I use different sources to be updated on the news.
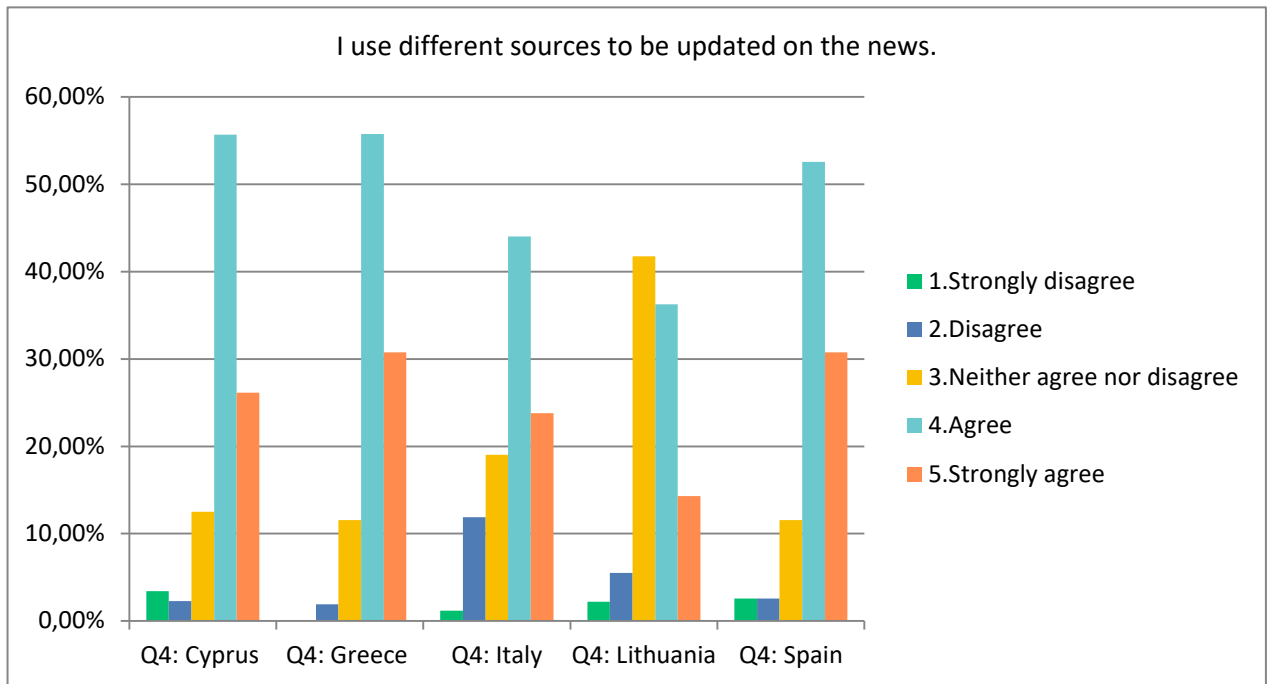
Majority of the respondents across the participating countries - except Lithuania - agree or strongly agree that they use different sources to be updated on the news. These findings are also consistent with the cross-checking reporting earlier - with participants across participating countries establishing at least some consistency on the information they consume. The only slightly deviating - from the previous findings country - is Lithuania who does not appear to cross check at the same degree as their counterparts.

Table 27

I take action when I encounter disinformation, such as reporting the news/source.
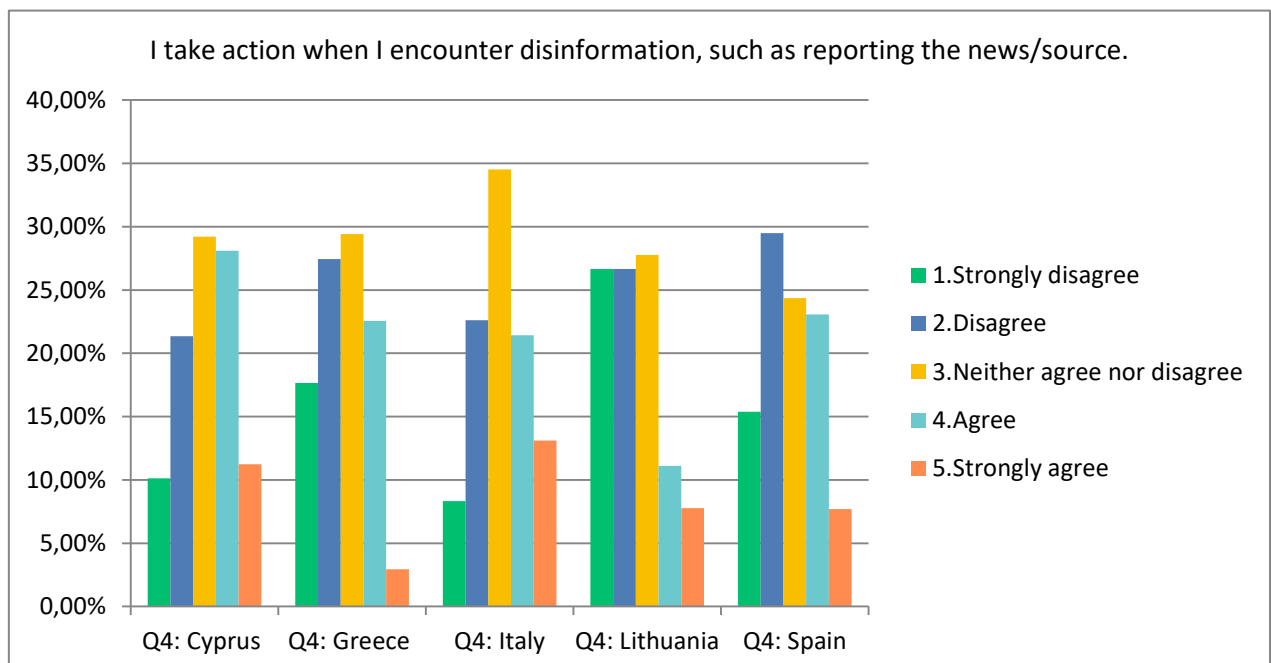
The findings on whether respondents take action when encountering disinformation are somewhat mixed. Cypriot respondents appear to be the most active in reporting such incidents - with more than a quarter of them taking action when encountering disinformation. Overall, respondents are less eager to report and actively tackle disinformation. This might be due to a passive stance that characterizes the respondents or a general lack of knowledge as to their rights and options when encountering such phenomena.

Table 28

Areas harmed by intentional disinformation
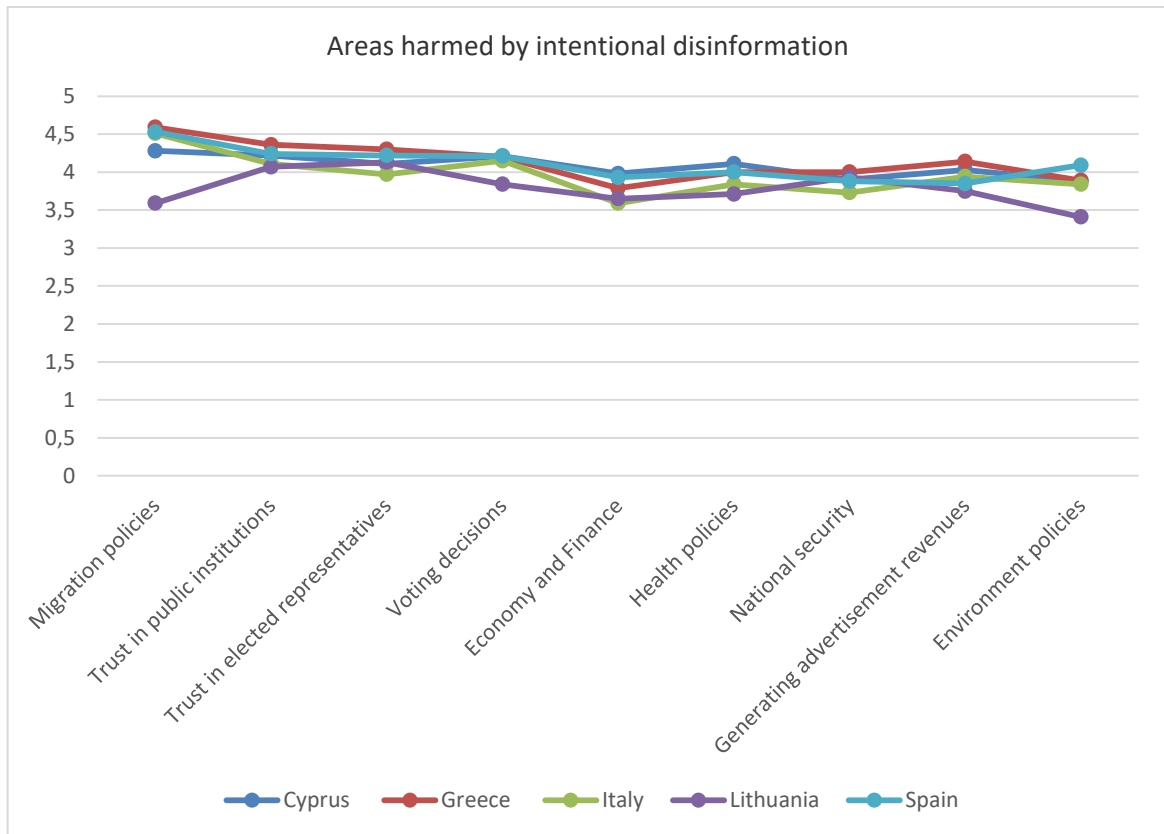
Intentional disinformation appears to be generally harmful across a number of different areas. Southern European respondents - namely Spain, Italy, Greece and Cyprus - report disinformation being the most impactful on migration policies. Indeed, migration policy among these countries are is a highly salient and politicised issue. Furthermore, respondents across participating countries report that disinformation highly negatively affects I. Trust in Public Institutions, II. Trust in Elected Representative and III. Voting Decisions.

Coronavirus Information and Disinformation

Table 29

Which media have you visited during the pandemic to get information on COVID-19?
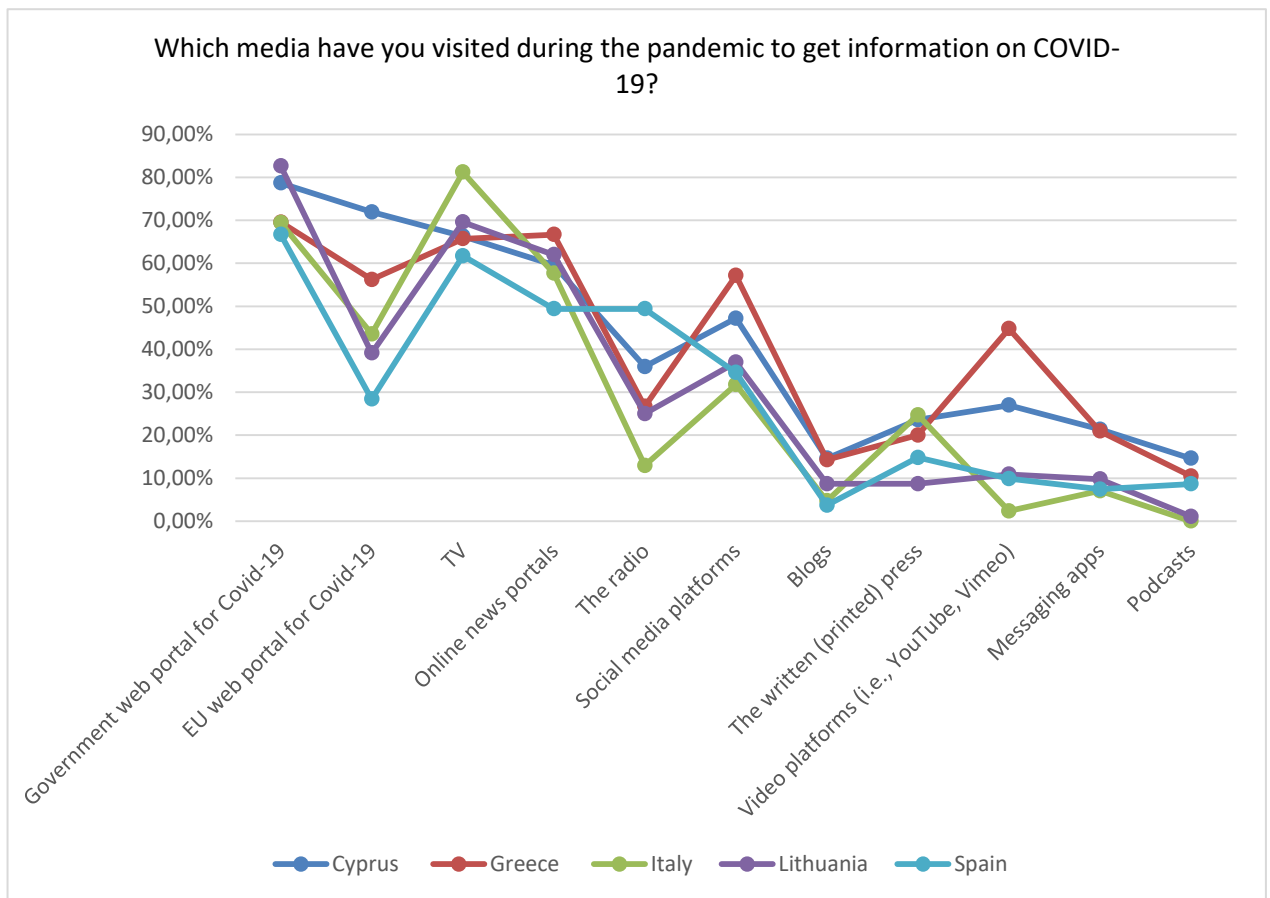
Different trends are observed as to the type of media respondents received their information from during COVID-19 pandemic. In general, the governmental web portal for COVID-19, the TV and Online News Portals appear to be dominant media for COVID-19 information. Significant differences are observed on the use of the EU Web Portal for COVID-19 whereas Cyprus appears to be utilizing that source of information the most. Blogs, the Written Press, Messaging Apps and Podcasts are the least dominant media. It appears that respondents seemed mostly official-governmental sources for information or guidance in terms of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic

Table 30

Have you seen or shared any fake news - disinformation in the past year about COVID-19?
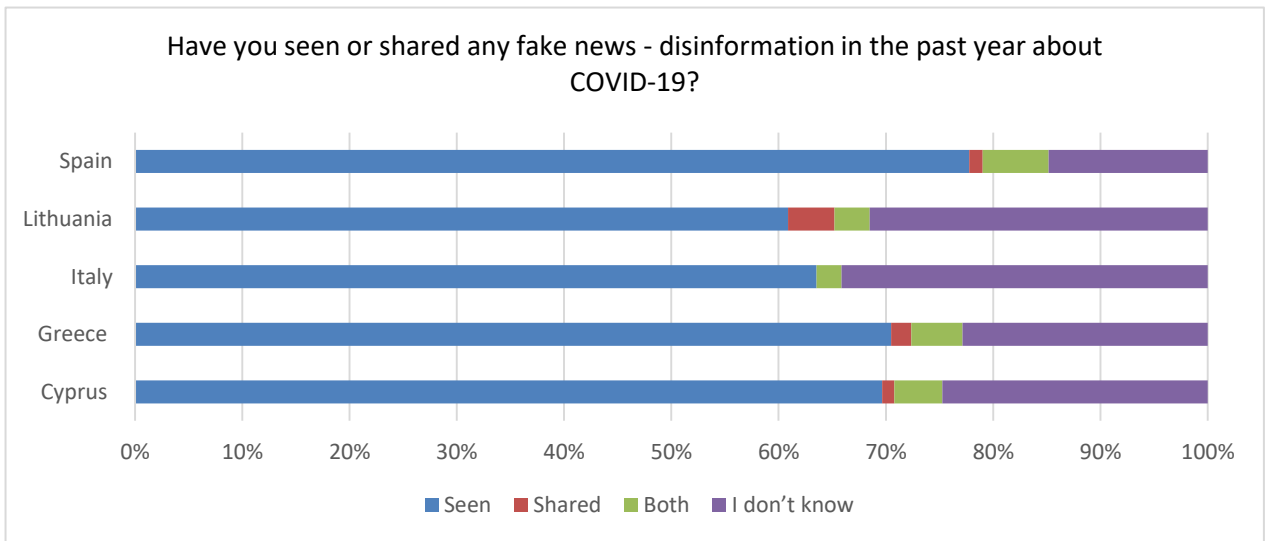
Majority of the respondents across the participating countries have encountered fake news or disinformation regarding COVID-19 in the past year - whereas only a very small number of the respondents report sharing such fake information. These findings indicate that fake news and disinformation were of high prevalence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, a considerable number of the respondents report being unsure on any potential encounters with fake news or disinformation.

Table 31

During the past month, have you seen or shared any stories with other people (online or offline) about COVID-19 that you thought might have beenfor distorted?
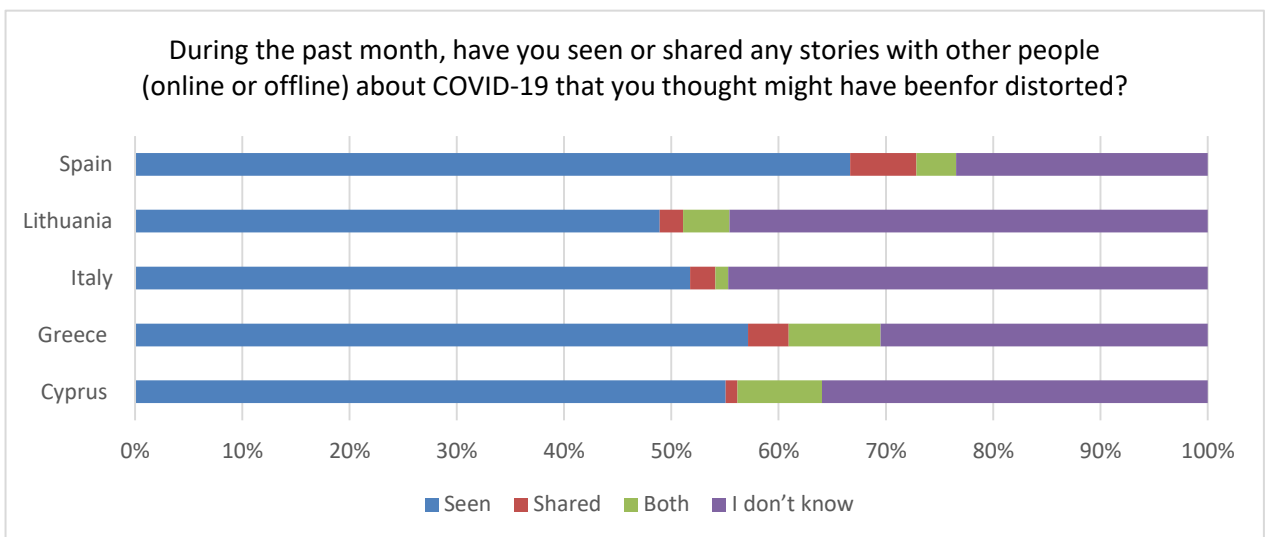
A large portion of the respondents in each partner country has encountered fake or distorted news during the past month. These findings are of no surprise considering the general perception of the persistence spread of disinformation online and offline. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that a similarly significant portion of the respondents in each participating country were unsure about whether they came across such fake or distorted news. This is despite the fact that respondents have been previously capable of pointing out the set of criteria indicating disinformation.

This uncertainty might be explained by the fact that respondents across partner countries are not utilizing fact-checking tools and techniques when navigating information. It could also be explained by the fact that news on COVID-19 were spread on a lower frequency at the time respondents participated in the online survey.

Table 32

How often did you share news on social media during the last month?
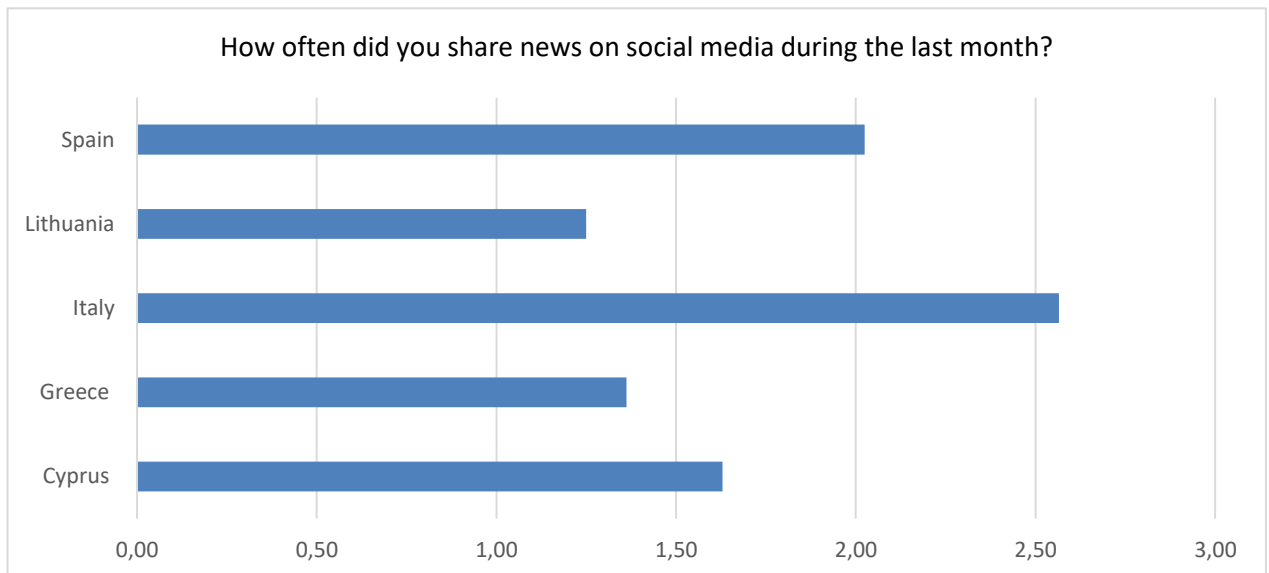
Sharing news on social media is not a common practice for most of the participating countries. The Italian respondents appear to be the most active in sharing news on social media. These findings remain in line with the previous findings which have indicated that the Italian respondents are more eager to engage in sharing online.

Table 33
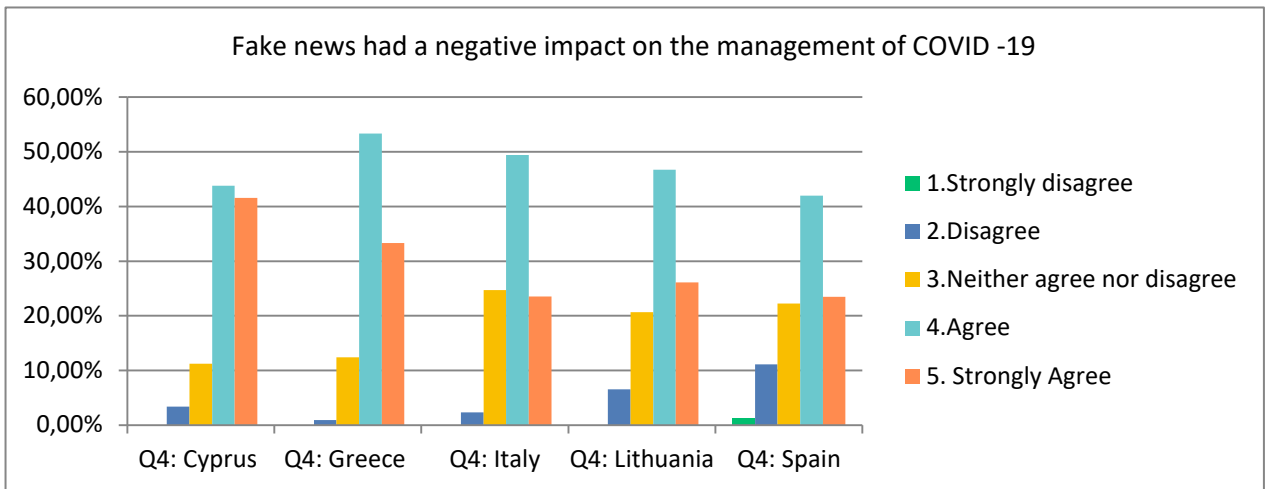
It is believed across the participating countries that the dissemination of fake news and disinformation has negatively affected the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, disinformation persisted to flourish during the pandemic and the spread of conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 was common practice.

Table 34
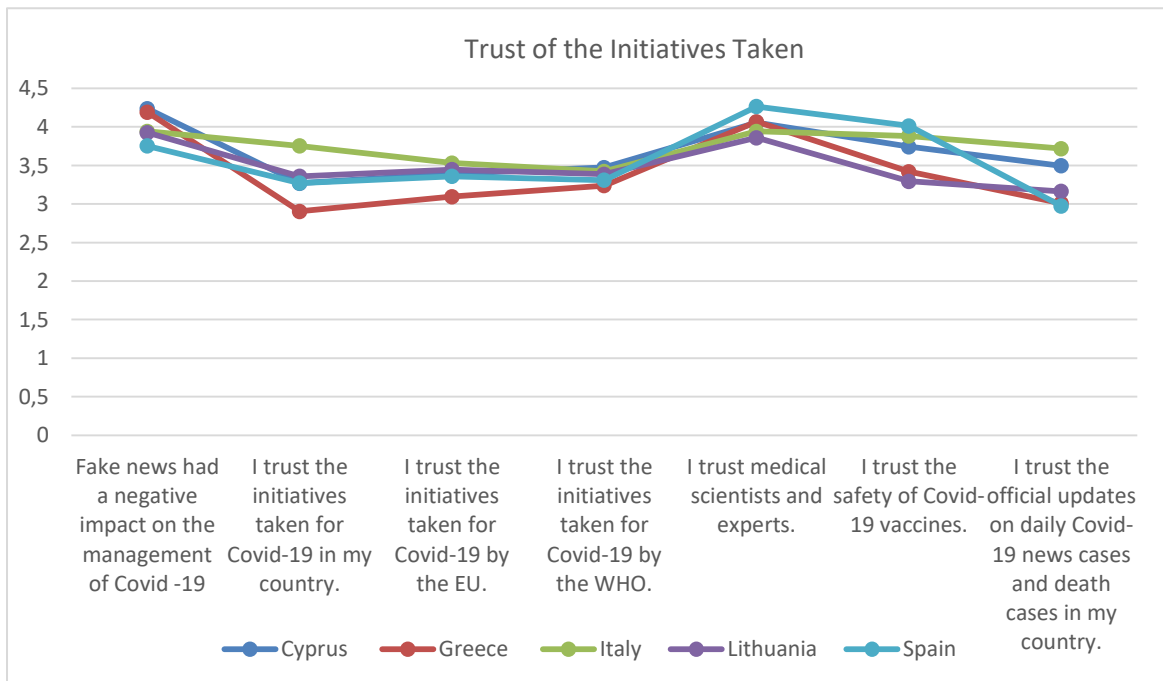
When it comes to the trust towards the initiatives that have been taken for the management of the COVID-19 pandemic majority of the respondents across the participating countries mostly appear to trust scientists and experts on the field as well as the safety of the COVID-19 vaccines. Trust to the scientific community is of high significance and it could potentially indicate that respondents maintained a critical and realistic outlook on the management of the pandemic. Trust towards national initiatives for the management of COVID-19 are also relatively high among the participating countries - with Greece being the least trusting of the national initiatives.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Transnational Report combines and compares the online survey results across all five (5) partner countries (IT, CY, GR, LT, ES) for the project MEDIAWISE. The topics analysed and discussed are I. Media Consumption, II. Trust in the Media, III. Use of Social Networks, IV. Disinformation and V. Coronavirus Information and Disinformation among partner countries are identified. What is observed throughout the Transnational Report is that partner countries have more in common than points of divergence.

The findings across partner countries suggest that an increasing number of people consume information and news through either I. Online News Portals, II. Social Media Platforms and III. Messaging Apps. This is a natural progression within an era of continuous digitalization. Inversely, traditional media such as the I. Written Press are utilized on a lower frequency. Trust in the media among the respondents across partner countries is of moderate intensity. Interestingly, the most trusted media are I. the Radio and II. the Written Press whilst I. Social Media Platforms and II. Messaging Apps are the least trustworthy media. Across, partner countries the media that is most widely used on a day-to-day basis is also the least trusted. Whether that is because social media platforms and messaging apps are indeed less trustworthy or that high use naturally leads to a higher exposure to disinformation and fake news is a question that could be further evaluated. The general impression across the participating countries is that equally national and international media is politicised - having wide-ranging implications on democratic processes and trust of the public.

Nonetheless, fortunately respondents appear to maintain a critical outlook when it comes to their consumption of media - with a high percentage of them reporting cross-checking their news. This is further substantiated at a later stage of the survey with respondents across partner countries maintaining that they use a number of sources to establish factuality of information. At the same time, respondents are capable of distinguishing between disinformation, fake news and propaganda even though these terms are often used interchangeably.

Overall respondents report that they are often exposed to disinformation whilst using online media. Nonetheless, their confidence in identifying that disinformation when coming across it diminishes. Similarly, their confidence on their family and social network's ability to identify disinformation online also diminishes - this time at a much higher rate. Ultimately, it appears that respondents accept as a generic fact that disinformation exists and they are most likely exposed to it.

Nonetheless, when it comes to identifying it on their day-to-day use, they appear to be far less confident. This could be explained by the fact that respondents do not appear to incorporate fact checking tools in their consumption of the media and are seemingly largely unaware of any fact-checking techniques.

Undeniably respondents find that fake news is a big problem today with far reaching consequences across different areas of public concern. It was mutually reported across participating countries that disinformation negatively impacts I. Voting Decisions, II. Trust in Elected Representatives and III. Trust in Public Institutions. Furthermore, all Southern European partners reported that fake news negatively impact migration policy. This is to imply that issues of high salience are often subject to politicisation which ultimately result in disinformation.

The online surveys endeavoured to assess the degree of disinformation and fake news circulation during the COVID-19. Quite unsurprisingly, it was found that fake news was equally prevalent during the time of this health crisis. A large number of the respondents report exposure to disinformation during these times which ultimately negatively impacted the overall management of the pandemic. Fortunately, consumption of scientific and expert knowledge prevailed with respondents seeking their information through accredited resources. What is worth mentioning, and questioning, is that a significant portion of the respondents across the participating countries were uncertain about whether they have encountered disinformation on COVID-19. This is to once again suggest that even though respondents can point out to the criteria suggesting that a piece of information is fake or distorted, this is only on a superficial level. Skills and competencies on better detecting fake news and disinformation need to be further developed so that ultimately respondents navigate online and offline news more critically and confidently.

Despite the limitations of this Transitional Report, we find that fake news and disinformation is a matter of concern which has the ability to impact important aspects of our social and political life. The existence of such disinformation is undeniable at a time where online media is rather increasingly used - replacing traditional media. Evidently the disengagement with such media is not an option for most of the respondents who continuously utilize them on a day-to-day basis even though they are aware of their implications. What is striking is that even though respondents are aware of the occurrence of such practices they do not appear to employ fact-checking mechanisms or tools to validate their information and news. Once empowered to identify and counter disinformation media consumption can become productive and beneficial.