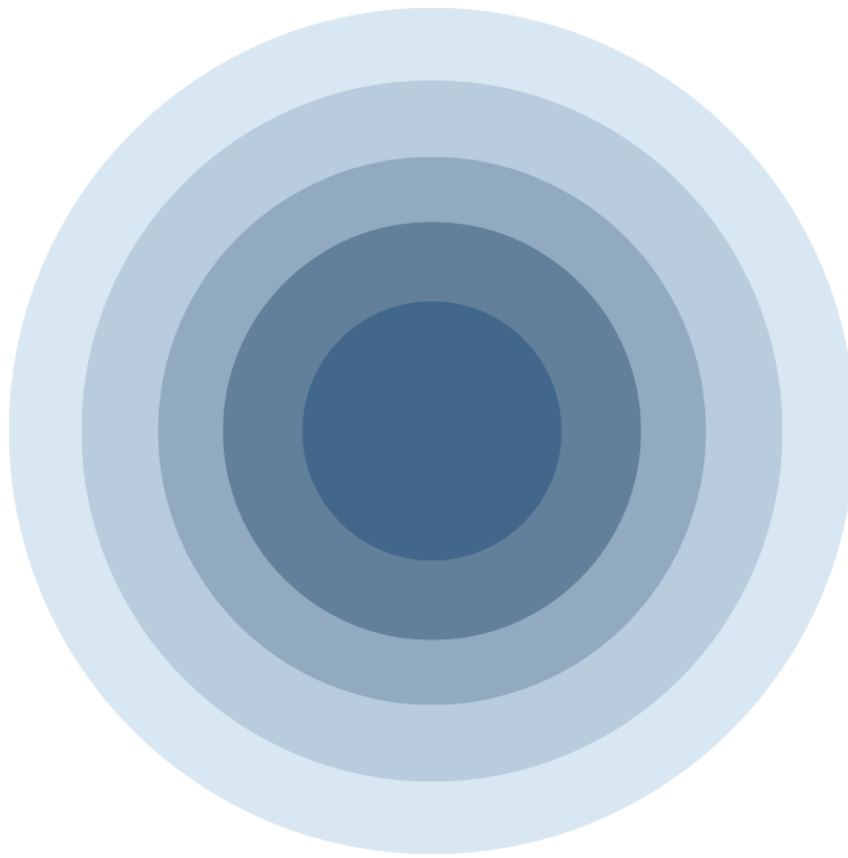


CITIZEN'S PERCEPTION OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

INFLUENCE OF THE LEVEL OF PRESS FREEDOM



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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the relationship between press freedom and public perceptions of European integration across EU member states using a mixed-methods approach. Combining quantitative analysis of the Press Freedom Index and Eurobarometer surveys with qualitative insights from interviews with policymakers and journalists' associations, the study reveals a significant correlation between high press freedom and positive attitudes towards the EU. Countries with robust press freedom, such as Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, show strong public support for the EU and high democratic satisfaction. Contrarily, nations with limited press freedom, like Hungary and Greece, experience lower democratic satisfaction and greater susceptibility to misinformation, negatively impacting public opinion towards the EU. Through Habermas' concept of the public sphere, the research underscores the crucial role of a free press in fostering informed public discourse, enhancing democratic engagement, and supporting European integration. The findings suggest that press freedom is causally linked to positive EU perceptions, contributing valuable insights to political communication and European studies. The study calls for safeguarding and enhancing press freedom across the EU to ensure an informed and engaged citizenry, essential for the health and stability of European democracy.

Key words: Press Freedom, European Integration, Public Perception, Democratic Satisfaction

RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse examine la relation entre la liberté de la presse et les perceptions publiques de l'intégration européenne dans les États membres de l'UE en utilisant une approche mixte. En combinant l'analyse quantitative de l'Indice de la liberté de la presse et des enquêtes Eurobaromètre avec des perspectives qualitatives issues d'entretiens avec des décideurs politiques et des associations de journalistes, l'étude révèle une corrélation significative entre une grande liberté de la presse et des attitudes positives envers l'UE. Les pays dotés d'une liberté de la presse robuste, tels que le Danemark, la Suède et la Finlande, montrent un fort soutien public à l'UE et une grande satisfaction démocratique. À l'inverse, les nations à la liberté de la presse limitée, comme la Hongrie et la Grèce, connaissent une satisfaction démocratique inférieure et une plus grande susceptibilité à la désinformation, impactant négativement l'opinion publique envers l'UE. À travers le concept de sphère publique de Habermas, la recherche souligne le rôle crucial d'une presse libre dans la promotion d'un discours public informé, l'amélioration de l'engagement démocratique et le soutien à l'intégration européenne. Les résultats suggèrent que la liberté de la presse est liée causalement à des perceptions positives de l'UE, apportant des informations précieuses à la communication politique et aux études européennes. L'étude appelle à protéger et renforcer la liberté de la presse dans toute l'UE pour assurer une citoyenneté informée et engagée, essentielle pour la santé et la stabilité de la démocratie européenne.

Mots-clés: Liberté de la Presse, Intégration Européenne, Perception Publique, Satisfaction Démocratique

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AEJ - Association of European Journalists

ALJP - Luxembourg Association of Professional
Journalists

CSO - Civil Society Organisation

DG - Directorate-General

EC - European Commission

ECB - European Central Bank

ECJ - European Court of Justice

EEC - European Economic Community

EP - European Parliament

EPP - European People's Party

EU - European Union

EUROSTAT - Statistical Office of the European
Union

FAPE - Federación de Asociaciones de
Periodistas de España

HND - Croatian Journalists' Association

ICT - Information and Communication
Technology

ID - Identity and Democracy

MÚOSZ - Hungarian Journalists' Association

NGO - Non-Governmental Organisation

NVJ - Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation
and Development

PF - Press Freedom

R&D - Research and Development

RSF - Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans
Frontières)

SNJ - Syndicat National des Journalistes (France)

TU - Swedish Media Publishers' Association

UGT - Union General de Trabajadores (Spain)

UN - United Nations

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific
and Cultural Organisation

PART I: INTRODUCTION – The barometer of democratic health

European integration represents a significant transformation in the socio-political landscape of Europe. Initiated after World War II, this process aims to unify European countries politically, economically, and socially to ensure peace and stability across the continent (Pollack, 2007). Theories such as neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism have been instrumental in elucidating the complexities and dynamics of policymaking and state roles within the Union, highlighting how European integration has evolved into a nuanced and multi-layered process (Peterson, 2001).

Amidst this intricate integration landscape, the role of **press freedom** is increasingly recognized as a vital element influencing public perceptions. Press freedom, defined as the absence of interference from governmental and other controlling bodies, ensures the uninhibited dissemination of information and opinions, crucial for fostering informed public discourse (Holtz-Bacha, 2023). This freedom not only serves as a **barometer of democratic health** but also plays a crucial role in how citizens engage with and perceive the European integration process.

In an attempt to blend these two concepts, the question that initially inspired this research was whether there is a relationship between the level of press freedom in each EU member state and citizens' perceptions regarding the European integration process. Building on this, the primary research question of this thesis is: **How do the varying levels of press freedom across European Union member states influence citizens' perceptions and understanding of the European integration process, and to what extent does this relationship suggest causation rather than mere correlation?**

The role of the media in shaping perceptions of European integration cannot be overstated; it is a crucial platform for the dissemination of information and ideas related to the European project (Holtz-Bacha, 2023). Nisbet & Stoycheff (2011) identify a strong correlation between the level of press freedom in a country and its citizens' interest in politics, integration processes, and trust in the political system, suggesting that a **robust press freedom contributes to a more informed and engaged society**. Their study underscores the importance of press freedom in emerging democracies, highlighting that citizens who rely on newspapers, support the governing regime, or have a positive evaluation of media performance generally perceive more press freedom relative to other citizens embedded in the same national media system (Nisbet & Stoycheff, 2011, p. 726).

This finding aligns with the broader theoretical framework posited in this thesis, which suggests that higher levels of press freedom correlate with more positive perceptions of European integration. The relationship between press freedom and citizen engagement is critical, as it indicates that an open media system not only enhances citizens' knowledge and interest in political processes but also fosters greater trust and support for political systems.

Accordingly, the main hypothesis of this thesis states that **higher levels of press freedom correlate with more positive perceptions of European integration, impacting not only the depth of citizen engagement but also their understanding and support for the integration process**. This relationship is anticipated to be causal, as some of the interviews conducted during the investigation have shown that there is an indirect, and in some cases, direct effect¹, indicating that press freedom directly affects the perception and engagement levels of citizens with respect to European integration. However, another purpose of this study is to determine if there is a causal correlation or simply a coincidental relationship.

"A free press functions as a reliable information resource to citizens. It provides open access to facts and debate regarding social, political, and economic issues"

(Schudson, 2003 in Nisbet & Stoycheff, 2011, 722).

Further extending this discussion, it becomes essential to relate the core research question to the broader concept of '**Citizen Perception**'. Citizen perception refers to how individuals interpret and understand the realities surrounding them, specifically in this context, the European integration process (Stoeckel et al., 2023). Understanding citizen perception helps elucidate the degree to which individuals feel informed and misinformed about the powers and structures of the EU. This understanding directly feeds into the broader concept of democratic participation, which involves the active engagement of citizens in the political processes and decisions that affect their lives and communities (Stoeckel et al., 2023). As the EU navigates through its democratic deficits and integration dilemmas, understanding the interplay between **press freedom**, **citizen perception**, and **democratic participation** becomes crucial.

This interplay is particularly significant as we approach the European elections from June 6 to 9, 2024. These elections could mark a pivotal moment in EU politics, potentially shifting the power balance towards more right-wing, Eurosceptic forces (Quaritsch, Jacques Delors Centre, 2024). Historically, the European

¹ Interviews available in the Annexes (Page 64).

Parliament has been a progressive force in EU policymaking, advocating for comprehensive European solutions. However, the 2024 elections might alter this dynamic, with a shift in power potentially resulting in more conservative, less integrationist policies (Quaritsch, 2024). This potential shift underscores the importance of citizen perception and its influence on voter behaviour and democratic participation.

Moreover, the upcoming elections are critical as they follow a legislative period marked by **“missed opportunities”** for **“significant reforms”** (Jacques Delors Centre, 2024). These include efforts to strengthen the European electoral process and protect it from disinformation and foreign interference. The failure to implement these reforms could undermine the integrity of the election, affecting citizen trust and engagement (Jacques Delors Centre, 2024). This scenario highlights the necessity of understanding citizen perception, as misinformation can skew public understanding and influence electoral outcomes, further complicating the EU's efforts to address its democratic deficits.

Additionally, the outcome of the 2024 elections will shape EU policies for the next five years. With the possibility of a more right-wing Parliament, policies on issues such as climate change, migration, and economic regulation could see significant changes. The centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and far-right groups like Identity and Democracy (ID) are projected to gain seats, potentially forming a coalition that could dominate the Parliament (Jacques Delors Centre, 2024). This potential shift makes it crucial to understand how citizen perception of these issues influences their voting behaviour and overall democratic participation.

As we approach this critical juncture, it is evident that ensuring that citizens are well-informed and engaged in the political process is vital for the health of EU democracy. The 2024 European elections will not only determine the direction of EU policies but also serve as a litmus test for the EU's ability to address its democratic challenges and strengthen its political legitimacy (Jacques Delors Centre, 2024).

In exploring the relationship between press freedom and public perceptions of European integration, it is crucial to consider the **historical context** of the European Union's evolution. Since its inception with the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the EU has undergone significant transformations, including major treaties such as Maastricht in 1992 and facing challenges such as Brexit (Zhang, 2024). These milestones not only shaped the political landscape but also influenced public perceptions and media landscapes in member states (Zhang, 2024). Understanding this historical trajectory allows us to frame the main research question within a dynamic context where press freedom and citizen perception have interacted with varying degrees of intensity and consequence over decades.

"Their integration into these institutions has bolstered regional stability and underscored the importance of adherence to democratic values and the rule of law"
(Lamoreaux, 2014, 78).

The **theoretical framework** that guides this research draws heavily on concepts from political communication and European studies. Central to our analysis is the notion of the **public sphere** as theorized by Habermas, which considers the media as a key platform for the democratic discussion of public affairs and a space where societal consensus can be built (Habermas, 1974). This framework is particularly pertinent in examining how variations in media freedom across the EU influence the way European integration is perceived and discussed by citizens. It provides a lens through which we can assess whether the media acts as a facilitator of integration, through open and informed debate, or as a barrier, where restrictions on press freedom might hinder democratic engagement and the accurate understanding of the EU's role and functions (Habermas, 1974; Kellner, 2024).

Expanding on **Habermas' theory**, the public sphere is conceptualized as a unique realm of our social life where something approaching public opinion can be formed, accessible to all citizens (Habermas, 1974). This sphere materializes in every conversation where private individuals assemble to form a public body, discussing matters of general interest freely, without the constraints of state bureaucracy or private transactions. Additionally, Habermas (1974) emphasizes the transformative role of media—newspapers, magazines, radio, and television—as the primary means of communication within the public sphere. These media act not just as tools for spreading information but as platforms that facilitate critical discussions and contribute to the shaping of public opinion.

The importance of this conceptual framework lies in its ability to explain the dynamics between state and society, especially how public opinion in democratic societies mediates these relationships. Habermas (1974) argues that the state, while an executor of the political public sphere, does not constitute its entirety. Instead, it stands in a responsive relationship to the public sphere, which exercises a form of control and influence over governmental actions through the mechanisms of public discourse and legal frameworks. This interaction underscores the role of the media in fostering a public sphere where free discourse can lead to informed public opinions, thereby enhancing democratic governance.

"By 'the public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body." (Habermas, 1974, 49)

These perspectives are crucial for understanding how press freedom impacts the perception of European integration. The **media's role as a mediator** between the state and the public becomes a critical factor in either facilitating or obstructing the democratic process, depending on the level of media freedom within each EU member state. By leveraging the theoretical insights provided by Habermas (1964), this study seeks to explore the depth of these interactions and their implications for European integration and public perception.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives with the historical and empirical analysis of press freedom and citizen perception in the EU, the study aims to uncover deeper insights into how European integration is communicated and perceived across different governance and media environments. This approach not only enriches our understanding of the interplay between media and politics in a supranational context but also enhances our grasp of the broader implications for democratic participation and policymaking within the European Union.

This thesis will utilise a comprehensive **mixed-methods approach** to explore the relationships between press freedom and perceptions of European integration, which will be detailed in the forthcoming methodological section. Anticipating future academic and practical applications, this research aims to challenge and extend existing theoretical frameworks within European studies and political communication. By incorporating empirical country case studies and conducting comparative analyses across EU member states, this study seeks to provide a more robust understanding of how media freedom influences public discourse and policy perception at the supranational level. Furthermore, this work will engage with potential counterarguments and alternative explanations, such as the economic and regional political factors that might also shape public perceptions.

Methodology and theoretical framework

To effectively explore the intricate relationship between press freedom and citizen perceptions of European integration, this thesis adopts a **mixed-methods approach**, drawing on the conceptual principle of the "Onion Skin" as articulated by Roland Barthes (1984).



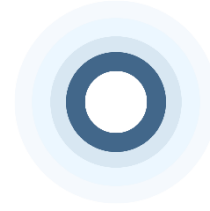
Quantitative Layer (1)



Qualitative Layer (2)



Comparative Layer (3)



Conclusive Layer (4)

This metaphorical framework suggests a multilayered analysis, each layer peeling back to reveal deeper insights into the influence of press freedom on public opinion within the European Union. This approach aligns with Barthes' emphasis on uncovering layers of meaning and context, allowing for a comprehensive examination of how media freedom impacts civic engagement and political discourse.

Quantitative Analysis

The first layer of this methodology involves a quantitative analysis of press freedom across all EU member states. Data for this component will be sourced from the annual reports published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), which provides the **Press Freedom Index** (RSF, 2024). This index is a benchmark tool that ranks countries based on various criteria, including media independence, environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency, and the quality of the infrastructure that supports the production of news and information (RSF, 2024).

Statistical methods, such as correlation and regression analysis, will be employed to identify patterns and relationships between the levels of press freedom and public attitudes towards European integration, as measured by **Eurobarometer surveys** (European Commission, 2023). This will allow for an initial broad understanding of the landscape of press freedom and its potential impacts on public perception.

To enhance the organization of the methodology and facilitate a deeper understanding of the study, the EU member states have been systematically grouped according to their levels of press freedom:

Group N°	Country Description	PF Score Range	Member States
Group 1	High Press Freedom	91.89 - 86.44	Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands, Finland, Estonia
Group 2	Moderate Press Freedom	85.9 - 76.01	Portugal, Ireland, Germany, Luxembourg, Latvia, Lithuania, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Slovakia, Spain
Group 3	Low Press Freedom	74.69 - 65.32	Austria, Slovenia, Italy, Poland, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria
Group 4	Very Low Press Freedom	63.14 - 60.96	Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, Greece

Table 1. EU Countries structure / organisation in groups (Own creation). Data from 2024 (RSF)

This classification aims to align with the intricate layers of analysis proposed by the "Onion Skin" principle articulated by Roland Barthes (1984). The table includes four groups, with the "High Press Freedom" , "Moderate Press Freedom" , "Low Press Freedom" , and "Very Low Press Freedom" , providing a comprehensive overview of press freedom across EU member states. The division and organisation of the countries has been done considering the PF score range to which they belong. Group 1 consists of countries that range from 91.89 to 86.44, Group 2 includes countries ranging from 85.9 to 76.01, Group 3 ranges from 74.69 to 65.32, and Group 4 comprises countries ranging from 63.14 to 60.96.

Qualitative Analysis

The second layer consists of qualitative analysis, which delves deeper into the societal contexts and individual narratives that quantitative data alone cannot fully explain. This will involve content analysis of EU countries, focusing on structured **interviews with policymakers** and **journalist's associations** to gather diverse perspectives on the role of media in shaping public opinion about European integration. This qualitative data will provide nuanced insights into the dynamics of media discourse and its influence on public perceptions and attitudes.

Country	Trade Union and/or Policymaker	Annex
Austria	Austrian Press Council	1
Belgium	Association of European Journalists in Belgium (AEJ Belgium)	2
Bulgaria	Bulgarian Association of Travel Writers and Journalists	3
Croatia	Croatian Journalists' Association (HND)	4
Cyprus	Union of Cyprus Journalists	5
Czech Republic	Transitions Czech Republic	6
Denmark	Foreign Press Association	7

Estonia	Estonian Association of Journalists	8
Finland	Union of Journalists in Finland	9
France	Syndicat National des Journalistes (SNJ)	10
Germany	German Press Council	11
Greece	Journalists' Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers	12
Hungary	MÚOSZ	13
Ireland	Centre for Independent Journalism	14
Italy	Federazione Nazionale Della Stampa Italiana	15
Latvia	Baltic Centre for Media Excellence	16
	The Latvian Association of Journalists	17
Lithuania	Lithuanian Journalism Centre	18
Luxembourg	ALJP	19
Malta	The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation	20
The Netherlands	Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten (NVJ)	21
Poland	Society of Journalists (Warsaw)	22
Portugal	Sindicato dos Jornalistas	23
Romania	RR. Radio Romania	24
Slovakia	World between the Lines media initiative	25
	Journalism department at Comenius University in Slovakia	26
	Print and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, executive body of the Association fo Protection of Journalistic Ethics	27
Slovenia	Slovene Association of Journalists	28
Spain	Agrupación de Periodistas de UGT	29
	Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España (FAPE)	30
Sweden	Tidningsutgivarna (TU), Swedish Media Publishers' Association	31
Table 2. Trade Union and/or Policymakers Interviewed (Own creation)		

As evidenced in Table 2, various associations and organisations advocating for press freedom have participated. To ensure equitable representation of these countries, representatives from all 27 European Union member states can be found. In some cases, such as Latvia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Spain, multiple associations or organizations are representing the country due to analysis difficulties.

To ensure that the interviews conducted with these organisations and associations contribute important and relevant data to this thesis, the **comparative approach** is central. This approach allows for a nuanced examination of the influence of press freedom on public perceptions of European integration across different EU member states. By contrasting countries with varying levels of media freedom, as indicated by their rankings on the Press Freedom Index (RSF), this method explores how media landscapes shape public opinion and engagement with EU policies. This approach not only highlights discrepancies and

commonalities across the EU but also enhances the understanding of national media's role in democratic participation.

Integrating both **quantitative and qualitative methods**, the study employs a mix of data sources to construct a comprehensive analysis. Quantitative data derived from the Press Freedom Index and Eurobarometer surveys provide a **macro-level view of trends across the continent**, while qualitative methods like interviews offer micro-level insights into individual and community attitudes.

Methodology: Visual support
<u>Theoretical and Methodological Framework</u> a) Mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative and qualitative research <u>First Layer: Quantitative Analysis</u> a) Data Source: Annual reports by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Eurobarometer data - o Tool: Press Freedom Index - o Tool: "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 and the "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 b) Methods: Correlation and regression analysis - o Analyse patterns between press freedom levels and public attitudes towards European integration <u>Second Layer: Qualitative Analysis</u> a) Methods: Interviews and data analysis b) Focus: Media portrayal and public discourse on European integration in EU countries c) Participants: Journalists' associations, advocacy officers, and policymakers <u>Third Layer: Comparative Approach</u> a) Contrast media freedom and public perception across various EU member states b) Identify discrepancies and commonalities in how media landscapes influence public opinion c) Triangulation of data from Press Freedom Index, Eurobarometer surveys, and qualitative feedback d) Comprehensive view combining macro-level trends and micro-level insights <u>Fourth Layer: Conclusion</u> a) The role of press freedom b) Implications for democratic processes and policy-making within the EU
Table 3. Methodology (Own creation)

Conclusively, the research is based on a comparative and integrated methodological framework to delve into the dynamics of press freedom and public opinion within the EU. The findings aim to contribute to the discourse on media influence and democratic processes in the EU, highlighting the indispensable nature of press freedom in underpinning a robust public sphere and informed citizenry, essential for the health of any democratic system and particularly pivotal in the context of European integration.

PART II: MIX-METHOD ANALYSIS



First Layer: Quantitative examination of press freedom across EU member states

The initial step, as detailed in the introduction, includes an examination of yearly reports issued by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), which provide the Press Freedom Index (RSF, 2024). The distribution and organisation of countries is available in Table 1 (Page 7). Additionally, utilising statistical techniques like correlation and regression analysis, we will explore correlations and patterns between levels of press freedom and public sentiments toward European integration, as gauged by Eurobarometer surveys (European Commission, 2023).

The Eurobarometers pertinent to this investigation include the "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 and the "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522. The fieldwork for the first survey (528) was conducted from April to May 2023, with publication in December 2023. It was commissioned by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, and coordinated by the Directorate-General for Communication (European Commission, 2023). Specifically, data will be extracted from Section 3, focusing on Attitudes towards the EU, and Section 4, concentrating on attitudes towards electoral issues and foreign interference (European Commission, 2023).

Furthermore, the "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 was conducted in March 2023. This survey report provides insights into Section 1, covering the state of democracy, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in EU Member States, perceptions about key features of democracy, and serious threats to democracy (European Commission, 2023). Additionally, Section 3 explores perceptions regarding disinformation and fake news, including perceived exposure to such phenomena.

Level of press freedom (RSF) in EU Member States and group distribution

Country Group	PF Score Range	Member States	RSF Global Index	RSF Global Score
Group 1: High Press Freedom	91.89 - 86.44	Denmark	2/180	89.6
		Sweden	3/180	88.32
		Netherlands	4/180	87.73
		Finland	5/180	86.55
		Estonia	6/180	86.44
Group 2: Moderate Press Freedom	85.9 - 76.01	Portugal	7/180	85.9
		Ireland	8/180	85.59
		Germany	10/180	83.84

		Luxembourg	11/180	83.8
		Latvia	12/180	82.9
		Lithuania	13/180	81.73
		Belgium	16/180	81.49
		Czech Republic	17/180	80.14
		France	21/180	78.65
		Slovakia	29/180	76.03
		Spain	30/180	76.01
Group 3: Low Press Freedom	74.69 - 65.32	Austria	32/180	74.69
		Slovenia	42/180	72.6
		Italy	46/180	69.8
		Poland	47/180	69.17
		Croatia	48/180	68.79
		Romania	49/180	68.45
		Bulgaria	59/180	65.32
Group 4: Very Low Press Freedom	63.14 - 60.96	Cyprus	65/180	63.14
		Hungary	67/180	62.98
		Malta	73/180	60.96
		Greece	88/180	57.15

Table 4. Press Freedom Index, Data from 2024 (Own creation)

Table 4 provides a structured presentation of press freedom data for all EU countries, categorised into four groups based on their press freedom rankings. Following the presentation of press freedom data, the next step involves a thorough examination of each group. This analysis will cover attitudes towards the EU, assessment of satisfaction with democracy's functioning in EU Member States, evaluation of electoral issues and perceptions of foreign interference, and exploration of perceptions concerning disinformation, press freedom, and fake news.

Geographical distribution of the countries analysed:

- Group 1: High Press Freedom
- Group 2: Moderate Press Freedom
- Group 3: Low Press Freedom
- Group 4: Very Low Press Freedom



Figure 1. Geographical distribution of the countries analysed (Own creation with the support of the interviewees). This table was made in May 2024 and the data entered is from the time of creation.

Group 1: High Press Freedom (91.89 – 86.44) – Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands, Finland, and Estonia

Geographical distribution of the countries analysed:

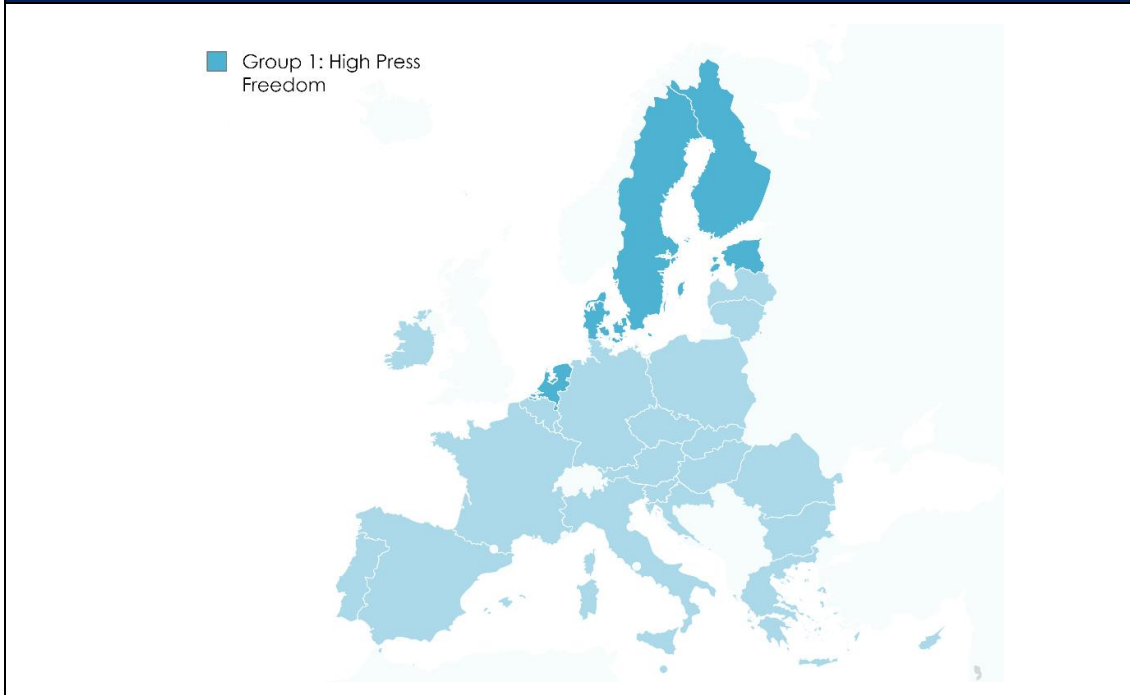


Figure 2. Group 1: High Press Freedom (91.89 – 86.44) – Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands, Finland, and Estonia (Own creation with the support of the interviewees). This table was made in May 2024 and the data entered is from the time of creation.

Country Group	PF Score Range	Member States	RSF Global Index	RSF Global Score
Group 1: High Press Freedom	91.89 - 86.44	Denmark	2/180	89.6
		Sweden	3/180	88.32
		Netherlands	4/180	87.73
		Finland	5/180	86.55
		Estonia	6/180	86.44

Table 5. Press Freedom Index, Data from 2024 (Own creation)

COMPARATIVE TABLE GROUP 1

1. Attitudes towards the EU. Positive attitude towards EU (% by country) - "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)
In Denmark, 60% totally agree, 23% tend to agree, 7% tend to disagree, 7% totally disagree, and 3% don't know.
In Sweden, 60% totally agree, 24% tend to agree, 6% tend to disagree, 3% totally disagree, and 2% don't know.
In the Netherlands, 68% totally agree, 15% tend to agree, 5% tend to disagree, 9% totally disagree, and 3% don't know.
In Finland, 61% totally agree, 28% tend to agree, 7% tend to disagree, 4% totally disagree, and 0% don't know.
In Estonia, 70% totally agree, 22% tend to agree, 3% tend to disagree, 4% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
2. Assessment of satisfaction with democracy's functioning in EU Member States (% by country) - "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)

In <u>Denmark</u> , 27% are very satisfied, while 53% are somewhat satisfied.
In <u>Sweden</u> , 14% are very satisfied, while 53% are somewhat satisfied.
In <u>The Netherlands</u> , 13% are very satisfied, while 46% are somewhat satisfied.
In <u>Finland</u> , 16% are very satisfied, while 57% are somewhat satisfied.
In <u>Estonia</u> , 22% are very satisfied, while 44% are somewhat satisfied.
3. Evaluation of electoral issues and perceptions of foreign interference.
3.1. Percentage of people concerned about people basing their voting decision on misinformation due to the level of Press Freedom (answered as very worried) (% by country) - "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)
In <u>Denmark</u> , 28% are very worried.
In <u>Sweden</u> , 24% are very worried.
In <u>the Netherlands</u> , 48% are very worried.
In <u>Finland</u> , 23% are very worried.
In <u>Estonia</u> , 26% are very worried.
3.2. Percentage of people concerned about the manipulation of the result of an election due to level of press freedom (answered as very worried) (% by country) - "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)
In <u>Denmark</u> , 12% are very worried.
In <u>Sweden</u> , 7% are very worried.
In <u>the Netherlands</u> , 16% are very worried.
In <u>Finland</u> , 43% are very worried.
In <u>Estonia</u> , 21% are very worried.
4. Exploration of perceptions concerning disinformation, press freedom, and fake news, including individuals' perceived exposure to these phenomena.
4.1. Citizens in (COUNTRY) can access accurate information from multiple media sources about topics at stake (% by country) - "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)
In <u>Denmark</u> , 33% strongly agree, while 46% tend to agree.
In <u>Sweden</u> , 30% strongly agree, while 48% tend to agree.
In <u>the Netherlands</u> , 27% strongly agree, while 47% tend to agree.
In <u>Finland</u> , 29% strongly agree, while 51% tend to agree.
In <u>Estonia</u> , 28% strongly agree, while 49% tend to agree.
4.2. Citizens in your country can express their political opinion without fearing negative consequences (including journalists) (% by country) - "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)
In <u>Denmark</u> , 42% strongly agree, while 39% tend to agree.
In <u>Sweden</u> , 31% strongly agree, while 41% tend to agree.
In <u>the Netherlands</u> , 31% strongly agree, while 39% tend to agree.
In <u>Finland</u> , 34% strongly agree, while 42% tend to agree.
In <u>Estonia</u> , 23% strongly agree, while 43% tend to agree.
Table 6. Comparative Table Group 1 (Own Creation)

This analysis focuses on the EU member states with the **highest levels of press freedom**: Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, and Estonia. These countries exhibit press freedom scores ranging from 86.44 to 89.6, placing them at the top of the RSF Global Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). By examining these countries, we can discern the impact of high press freedom on public attitudes towards the European Union, satisfaction with democracy, and concerns about misinformation and electoral integrity.

In these countries, **public attitudes towards the European Union are positive**. For instance, in Denmark, 60% of citizens totally agree, while an additional 23% tend to agree. Sweden mirrors this sentiment with 60% totally agreeing and 24% tending to agree. The Netherlands shows an even higher total agreement at 68%, with 15% tending to agree. Finland also exhibits strong support with 61% totally agreeing and 28% tending to agree, while Estonia leads with 70% total agreement and 22% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). These figures suggest a strong correlation between high press freedom and positive attitudes towards the EU. This correlation suggests that in environments where the press is free, citizens are more likely to receive accurate and comprehensive information about EU activities and policies, fostering greater support and understanding. This correlation will be confirmed in the third layer of this analysis.

Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in these countries also reflects the positive impact of press freedom. In Denmark, 27% of the population are very satisfied with democracy, and 53% are somewhat satisfied. Sweden has a lower proportion of very satisfied citizens at 14%, but a similar 53% are somewhat satisfied. The Netherlands reports 13% very satisfied and 46% somewhat satisfied, while Finland has 16% very satisfied and 57% somewhat satisfied. Estonia shows 22% very satisfied and 44% somewhat satisfied (European Commission, 2023). This correlation suggests that high satisfaction rates indicate that robust press freedom contributes to transparent and accountable governance, essential elements for a well-functioning democracy. This correlation will be confirmed in the third layer of this analysis.

However, **concerns about misinformation and electoral manipulation** persist even in these high-press-freedom countries. In Denmark, 28% of citizens are very worried about misinformation affecting voting decisions, while in Sweden, the figure is 24%. The Netherlands shows a higher level of concern at 48%, and Finland and Estonia have 23% and 26% very worried, respectively (European Commission, 2023). Regarding manipulation of election results, 12% in Denmark, 7% in Sweden, 16% in the Netherlands, 43% in Finland, and 21% in Estonia are very worried (European Commission, 2023).

These concerns highlight ongoing challenges despite high levels of press freedom, suggesting that no system is entirely immune to the threats posed by misinformation and external interference (European Commission, 2023).

Perceptions of the availability of accurate information from multiple media sources are generally positive in these countries. In Denmark, 33% strongly agree that citizens can access accurate information, with 46% tending to agree. Sweden reports 30% strongly agreeing and 48% tending to agree, while the Netherlands has 27% strongly agreeing and 47% tending to agree. Finland shows 29% strongly agreeing and 51% tending to agree, and Estonia reports 28% strongly agreeing and 49% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). This indicates a correlation between high press freedom and easy access to reliable information, bolstering public trust in the media and ensuring that citizens are well-informed. This correlation will be confirmed in the third layer of this analysis.

When it comes to **expressing political opinions without fearing negative consequences**, Denmark leads with 42% strongly agreeing and 39% tending to agree. Sweden and the Netherlands both report 31% strongly agreeing, with 41% and 39% tending to agree, respectively. Finland shows 34% strongly agreeing and 42% tending to agree, while Estonia has 23% strongly agreeing and 43% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). These figures suggest a robust environment for free expression, an essential component of democratic health supported by strong press freedom.

In conclusion, the analysis of the high press freedom group suggests a strong association between press freedom and positive public perceptions of the European Union, high satisfaction with democracy, and robust access to accurate information.

While concerns about misinformation and electoral interference persist, the overall democratic health and public trust in media remain high in these countries. These findings (group 1) underscore the importance of maintaining high levels of press freedom to support informed citizen engagement and a healthy democratic process within the EU (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Group 2: Moderate Press Freedom (85.9 - 76.01) – Portugal, Ireland, Germany, Luxembourg, Latvia, Lithuania, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Slovakia, and Spain

Geographical distribution of the countries analysed:

■ Group 2: Moderate Press Freedom

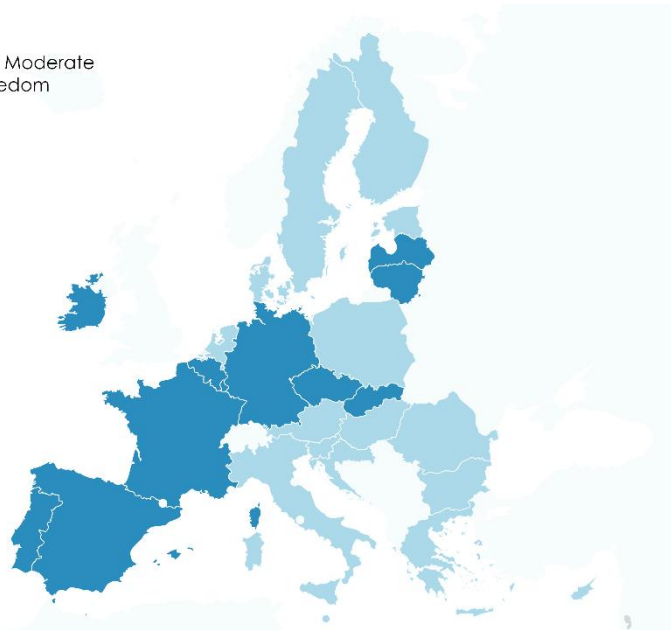


Figure 3. Group 2: Moderate Press Freedom (85.9 - 76.01) – Portugal, Ireland, Germany, Luxembourg, Latvia, Lithuania, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Slovakia, Spain (Own creation with the support of the interviewees). This table was made in May 2024 and the data entered is from the time of creation.

Country Group	PF Score Range	Member States	RSF Global Index	RSF Global Score
Group 2: Moderate Press Freedom	85.9 - 76.01	Portugal	7/180	85.9
		Ireland	8/180	85.59
		Germany	10/180	83.84
		Luxembourg	11/180	83.8
		Latvia	12/180	82.9
		Lithuania	13/180	81.73
		Belgium	16/180	81.49
		Czech Republic	17/180	80.14
		France	21/180	78.65
		Slovakia	29/180	76.03
		Spain	30/180	76.01

Table 7. Press Freedom Index, Data from 2024 (Own creation)

COMPARATIVE TABLE GROUP 2

1. Attitudes towards the EU. Positive attitude towards EU (% by country) - "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)
In <u>Portugal</u> , 76% totally agree, 12% tend to agree, 4% tend to disagree, 5% totally disagree, and 2% don't know.
In <u>Ireland</u> , 74% totally agree, 11% tend to agree, 4% tend to disagree, 9% totally disagree, and 2% don't know.
In <u>Germany</u> , 69% totally agree, 21% tend to agree, 6% tend to disagree, 3% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
In <u>Luxembourg</u> , 71% totally agree, 15% tend to agree, 8% tend to disagree, 6% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
In <u>Latvia</u> , 54% totally agree, 29% tend to agree, 8% tend to disagree, 6% totally disagree, and 3% don't know.
In <u>Lithuania</u> , 68% totally agree, 26% tend to agree, 3% tend to disagree, 2% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
In <u>Belgium</u> , 51% totally agree, 35% tend to agree, 8% tend to disagree, 5% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
In the <u>Czech Republic</u> , 48% totally agree, 32% tend to agree, 10% tend to disagree, 9% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
In <u>France</u> , 43% totally agree, 37% tend to agree, 10% tend to disagree, 9% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
In <u>Slovakia</u> , 57% totally agree, 28% tend to agree, 9% tend to disagree, 6% totally disagree, and 0% don't know.
In <u>Spain</u> , 75% totally agree, 18% tend to agree, 4% tend to disagree, 3% totally disagree, and 0% don't know.
2. Assessment of satisfaction with democracy's functioning in EU Member States (% by country) - "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)
In <u>Portugal</u> , 9% are very satisfied, 43% are somewhat satisfied, 34% are not very satisfied, 13% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
In <u>Ireland</u> , 14% are very satisfied, 42% are somewhat satisfied, 23% are not very satisfied, 19% are not at all satisfied, and 3% don't know.
In <u>Germany</u> , 17% are very satisfied, 45% are somewhat satisfied, 25% are not very satisfied, 11% are not at all satisfied, and 2% don't know.
In <u>Luxembourg</u> , 13% are very satisfied, 62% are somewhat satisfied, 18% are not very satisfied, 5% are not at all satisfied, and 3% don't know.
In <u>Latvia</u> , 6% are very satisfied, 36% are somewhat satisfied, 39% are not very satisfied, 17% are not at all satisfied, and 3% don't know.
In <u>Lithuania</u> , 13% are very satisfied, 44% are somewhat satisfied, 28% are not very satisfied, 14% are not at all satisfied, and 2% don't know.
In <u>Belgium</u> , 6% are very satisfied, 41% are somewhat satisfied, 32% are not very satisfied, 18% are not at all satisfied, and 3% don't know.
In the <u>Czech Republic</u> , 5% are very satisfied, 34% are somewhat satisfied, 36% are not very satisfied, 23% are not at all satisfied, and 2% don't know.
In <u>France</u> , 5% are very satisfied, 31% are somewhat satisfied, 33% are not very satisfied, 30% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
In <u>Slovakia</u> , 4% are very satisfied, 26% are somewhat satisfied, 33% are not very satisfied, 36% are not at all satisfied, and 2% don't know.
In <u>Spain</u> , 13% are very satisfied, 34% are somewhat satisfied, 31% are not very satisfied, 21% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
3. Evaluation of electoral issues and perceptions of foreign interference.
3.1. Percentage of people concerned about people basing their voting decision on misinformation due to the level of Press Freedom (answered as very worried) (% by country) – "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)
In <u>Portugal</u> , 45% are very worried.
In <u>Ireland</u> , 44% are very worried.

In <u>Germany</u> , 35% are very worried.
In <u>Luxembourg</u> , 41% are very worried.
In <u>Latvia</u> , 45% are very worried.
In <u>Lithuania</u> , 47% are very worried.
In <u>Belgium</u> , 40% are very worried.
In the <u>Czech Republic</u> , 60% are very worried.
In <u>France</u> , 56% are very worried.
In <u>Slovakia</u> , 35% are very worried.
In <u>Spain</u> , 68% are very worried.
3.2. Percentage of people concerned about the manipulation of the result of an election due to level of press freedom (answered as very worried) (% by country) – “Citizenship and democracy” Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)
In <u>Portugal</u> , 46% are very worried.
In <u>Ireland</u> , 44% are very worried.
In <u>Germany</u> , 23% are very worried.
In <u>Luxembourg</u> , 39% are very worried.
In <u>Latvia</u> , 50% are very worried.
In <u>Lithuania</u> , 46% are very worried.
In <u>Belgium</u> , 38% are very worried.
In the <u>Czech Republic</u> , 54% are very worried.
In <u>France</u> , 50% are very worried.
In <u>Slovakia</u> , 24% are very worried.
In <u>Spain</u> , 69% are very worried.
4. Exploration of perceptions concerning disinformation, press freedom, and fake news, including individuals’ perceived exposure to these phenomena.
Citizens in (COUNTRY) can access accurate information from multiple media sources about topics at stake (% by country) – “Democracy” Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)
In <u>Portugal</u> , 34% strongly agree, 48% tend to agree, 13% tend to disagree, 2% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.
In <u>Ireland</u> , 20% strongly agree, 47% tend to agree, 17% tend to disagree, 13% strongly disagree, and 4% don't know.
In <u>Germany</u> , 27% strongly agree, 46% tend to agree, 17% tend to disagree, 6% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.
In <u>Luxembourg</u> , 19% strongly agree, 56% tend to agree, 17% tend to disagree, 6% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know. 7% tend to disagree, 6% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In <u>Latvia</u> , 22% strongly agree, 47% tend to agree, 20% tend to disagree, 10% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In <u>Lithuania</u> , 27% strongly agree, 44% tend to agree, 19% tend to disagree, and 7% strongly disagree.
In <u>Belgium</u> , 16% strongly agree, 48% tend to agree, 22% tend to disagree, 9% strongly disagree, and 5% don't know.
In the <u>Czech Republic</u> , 24% strongly agree, 38% tend to agree, 23% tend to disagree, 12% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.
In <u>France</u> , 18% strongly agree, 50% tend to agree, 19% tend to disagree, 10% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.
In <u>Slovakia</u> , 20% strongly agree, 40% tend to agree, 24% tend to disagree, 12% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.
In <u>Spain</u> , 33% strongly agree, 43% tend to agree, 15% tend to disagree, 6% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.

Citizens in your country can express their political opinion without fearing negative consequences (including journalists) (% by country) - "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)
In <u>Portugal</u> , 42% strongly agree, 39% tend to agree, 14% tend to disagree, 3% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In <u>Ireland</u> , 25% strongly agree, 39% tend to agree, 22% tend to disagree, 13% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In <u>Germany</u> , 30% strongly agree, 40% tend to agree, 18% tend to disagree, 10% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In <u>Luxembourg</u> , 39% strongly agree, 42% tend to agree, 11% tend to disagree, 6% strongly disagree, and 2% D.K.
In <u>Latvia</u> , 17% strongly agree, 40% tend to agree, 26% tend to disagree, 14% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.
In <u>Lithuania</u> , 26% strongly agree, 38% tend to agree, 24% tend to disagree, 10% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In <u>Belgium</u> , 21% strongly agree, 45% tend to agree, 19% tend to disagree, 10% strongly disagree, and 4% D.K.
In the <u>Czech Republic</u> , 27% strongly agree, 37% tend to agree, 23% tend to disagree, 11% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In <u>France</u> , 19% strongly agree, 41% tend to agree, 24% tend to disagree, 14% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.
In <u>Slovakia</u> , 20% strongly agree, 35% tend to agree, 27% tend to disagree, 14% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.
In <u>Spain</u> , 29% strongly agree, 40% tend to agree, 20% tend to disagree, 8% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.
Table 8. Comparative Table Group 2 (Own Creation)

This analysis examines EU member states with **moderate levels of press freedom**: Portugal, Ireland, Germany, Luxembourg, Latvia, Lithuania, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Slovakia, and Spain. These countries have press freedom scores ranging from 76.01 to 85.9, placing them within the mid-range of the RSF Global Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). The focus is to understand how moderate press freedom impacts public attitudes towards the EU, satisfaction with democracy, and concerns about misinformation and electoral integrity.

Public attitudes towards the European Union in this group show considerable variation but generally positive trends. Portugal leads with 76% of citizens totally agreeing with the EU and 12% tending to agree, followed closely by Spain, with 75% totally agreeing and 18% tending to agree. Ireland also shows strong support at 74% totally agreeing and 11% tending to agree. Germany and Luxembourg present similar figures with 69% and 71% totally agreeing, respectively (European Commission, 2023). Latvia, Lithuania, and Belgium show moderate levels of agreement, with Latvia having 54% totally agreeing and 29% tending to agree, Lithuania with 68% and 26%, and Belgium with 51% and 35% (European Commission, 2023). The Czech Republic, France, and Slovakia present lower figures but still maintain a majority of positive attitudes towards the EU (European Commission, 2023). These results indicate that even with moderate press freedom, citizens tend to have a favourable view of the EU, suggesting that press freedom

facilitates access to balanced information about EU benefits and policies, thus fostering supportive attitudes (European Commission, 2023). This correlation will be confirmed in the third layer of this analysis.

Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy varies significantly across these countries. Luxembourg exhibits the highest satisfaction with 13% very satisfied and 62% somewhat satisfied. Germany follows with 17% very satisfied and 45% somewhat satisfied. However, countries like Portugal (9% very satisfied and 43% somewhat satisfied) and Ireland (14% very satisfied and 42% somewhat satisfied) show more moderate satisfaction levels. Notably, countries like Latvia, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, and Slovakia display lower satisfaction, with a significant proportion of citizens expressing dissatisfaction with how democracy functions (European Commission, 2023). This suggests that while moderate press freedom supports democratic engagement, other factors may be influencing satisfaction levels, such as economic conditions, political stability, and government performance (European Commission, 2023). This correlation will be confirmed in the third layer of this analysis.

Concerns about misinformation influencing voting decisions are prevalent in these countries. Spain tops the list with 68% of citizens very worried, followed by the Czech Republic at 60%, France at 56%, and Latvia at 45% (European Commission, 2023). Even in countries with relatively high satisfaction with democracy, such as Luxembourg and Germany, a significant proportion of citizens are very worried about misinformation (European Commission, 2023). This indicates that moderate press freedom may not be sufficient to fully mitigate concerns about misinformation, highlighting the need for robust mechanisms to combat fake news and enhance media literacy (European Commission, 2023).

Similarly, **concerns about electoral manipulation due to press freedom levels** are notable. Spain again shows the highest worry at 69%, with the Czech Republic and France also exhibiting high levels of concern (European Commission, 2023). These figures suggest that even with moderate press freedom, citizens remain vigilant about the integrity of their electoral processes, underscoring the importance of transparency and accountability in media and government operations.

Access to accurate information from multiple media sources is generally positive but varies across these countries. Portugal and Spain show strong agreement, with 34% and 33% of citizens strongly agreeing, respectively (European Commission, 2023). However, countries like Latvia and Lithuania exhibit lower levels of strong agreement, reflecting challenges in media environments despite moderate press freedom (European Commission, 2023). This disparity highlights the nuanced impact of press freedom on

information accessibility and the need for continuous efforts to improve media plurality and independence (European Commission, 2023).

Regarding the freedom to express political opinions without fearing negative consequences, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Germany show relatively high levels of strong agreement (European Commission, 2023). Contrarily, Latvia, France, and Slovakia display lower levels, indicating that even with moderate press freedom, there are concerns about potential repercussions for expressing political views (European Commission, 2023). This suggests that moderate press freedom must be bolstered by strong legal protections and societal norms that safeguard free expression (European Commission, 2023).

In conclusion, the analysis of the moderate press freedom group reveals a complex relationship between press freedom and public perceptions. While moderate press freedom (group 2) supports positive attitudes towards the EU and reasonable satisfaction with democracy, significant concerns about misinformation and electoral integrity persist. Access to accurate information and the ability to express political opinions freely vary, highlighting the ongoing challenges in these environments (European Commission, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Group 3: Low Press Freedom (74.69 - 65.32) - Austria, Slovenia, Italy, Poland, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria

Geographical distribution of the countries analysed:

■ Group 3: Low Press Freedom

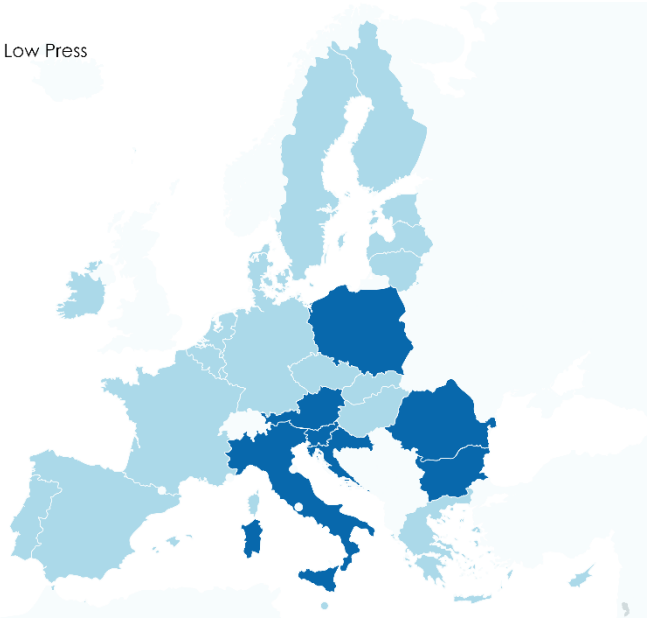


Figure 4. Group 3: Low Press Freedom (74.69 - 65.32) - Austria, Slovenia, Italy, Poland, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria (Own creation with the support of the interviewees). This table was made in May 2024 and the data entered is from the time of creation.

Country Group	PF Score Range	Member States	RSF Global Index	RSF Global Score
Group 3: Low Press Freedom	74.69 - 65.32	Austria	32/180	74.69
		Slovenia	42/180	72.6
		Italy	46/180	69.8
		Poland	47/180	69.17
		Croatia	48/180	68.79
		Romania	49/180	68.45
		Bulgaria	59/180	65.32

Table 9. Press Freedom Index, Data from 2024 (Own creation)

COMPARATIVE TABLE GROUP 3

1. Attitudes towards the EU. Positive attitude towards EU (% by country) - "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)

In Austria, 72% totally agree, 15% tend to agree, 7% tend to disagree, 6% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.

In Slovenia, 77% totally agree, 17% tend to agree, 4% tend to disagree, 2% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.

In Italy, 70% totally agree, 17% tend to agree, 7% tend to disagree, 6% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.

In Poland, 67% totally agree, 24% tend to agree, 4% tend to disagree, 5% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.

In Croatia, 42% totally agree, 39% tend to agree, 10% tend to disagree, 8% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.

In Romania, 56% totally agree, 28% tend to agree, 6% tend to disagree, 9% totally disagree, and 1% don't know

In Bulgaria, 59% totally agree, 24% tend to agree, 7% tend to disagree, 9% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.

2. Assessment of satisfaction with democracy's functioning in EU Member States (% by country) - "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)
In Austria, 10% are very satisfied, 40% are somewhat satisfied, 30% are not very satisfied, 18% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
In Slovenia, 4% are very satisfied, 36% are somewhat satisfied, 40% are not very satisfied, 19% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
In Italy, 6% are very satisfied, 41% are somewhat satisfied, 37% are not very satisfied, 14% are not at all satisfied, and 2% don't know.
In Poland, 8% are very satisfied, 26% are somewhat satisfied, 35% are not very satisfied, 26% are not at all satisfied, and 5% don't know.
In Croatia, 3% are very satisfied, 26% are somewhat satisfied, 43% are not very satisfied, 26% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
In Romania, 7% are very satisfied, 31% are somewhat satisfied, 33% are not very satisfied, 28% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
In Bulgaria, 3% are very satisfied, 23% are somewhat satisfied, 41% are not very satisfied, 32% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
3. Evaluation of electoral issues and perceptions of foreign interference.
3.1. Percentage of people concerned about people basing their voting decision on misinformation due to the level of Press Freedom (answered as very worried) (% by country) - "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)
In Austria, 44% are very worried.
In Slovenia, 37% are very worried.
In Italy, 47% are very worried.
In Poland, 51% are very worried.
In Croatia, 40% are very worried.
In Romania, 44% are very worried.
In Bulgaria, 50% are very worried.
3.2. Percentage of people concerned about the manipulation of the result of an election due to level of press freedom (answered as very worried) (% by country) - "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)
In Austria, 42% are very worried.
In Slovenia, 28% are very worried.
In Italy, 42% are very worried.
In Poland, 53% are very worried.
In Croatia, 37% are very worried.
In Romania, 52% are very worried.
In Bulgaria, 55% are very worried.
4. Exploration of perceptions concerning disinformation, press freedom, and fake news, including individuals' perceived exposure to these phenomena.
4.1. Citizens in (COUNTRY) can access accurate information from multiple media sources about topics at stake (% by country) - "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)
In Austria, 26% strongly agree, 46% tend to agree, 18% tend to disagree, 8% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.

In Slovenia, 7% strongly agree, 46% tend to agree, 31% tend to disagree, 14% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In Italy, 25% strongly agree, 49% tend to agree, 16% tend to disagree, 6% strongly disagree, and 4% don't know.
In Poland, 23% strongly agree, 47% tend to agree, 17% tend to disagree, 8% strongly disagree, and 4% don't know.
In Croatia, 17% strongly agree, 44% tend to agree, 27% tend to disagree, 10% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In Romania, 38% strongly agree, 39% tend to agree, 15% tend to disagree, 5% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.
In Bulgaria, 34% strongly agree, 33% tend to agree, 20% tend to disagree, 12% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
4.2. Citizens in your country can express their political opinion without fearing negative consequences (including journalists) (% by country) - "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)
In Austria, 29% strongly agree, 40% tend to agree, 20% tend to disagree, 10% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In Slovenia, 10% strongly agree, 47% tend to agree, 31% tend to disagree, 11% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In Italy, 31% strongly agree, 46% tend to agree, 14% tend to disagree, 6% strongly disagree, and 3% don't know.
In Poland, 17% strongly agree, 37% tend to agree, 28% tend to disagree, 13% strongly disagree, and 5% don't know.
In Croatia, 17% strongly agree, 38% tend to agree, 30% tend to disagree, 14% strongly disagree, and 1% don't know.
In Romania, 45% strongly agree, 35% tend to agree, 15% tend to disagree, 4% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
In Bulgaria, 38% strongly agree, 31% tend to agree, 20% tend to disagree, 9% strongly disagree, and 2% don't know.
Table 10. Comparative Table Group 3 (Own Creation)

This analysis examines the relationship between **low press freedom** and various citizen perceptions in Austria, Slovenia, Italy, Poland, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Using data from the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index and Eurobarometer surveys, the investigation covers attitudes towards the European Union (EU), satisfaction with democratic processes, concerns about electoral issues, and perceptions of disinformation and press freedom.

Countries with low press freedom exhibit **varying attitudes towards the EU**. In Austria, 72% of citizens totally agree with the statement, "Being a citizen of the EU is a good thing," with an additional 15% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). Slovenia shows even stronger support, with 77% totally agreeing and 17% tending to agree. Italy and Poland also reflect substantial support, with 70% and 67% totally agreeing, respectively (European Commission, 2023). However, Croatia displays a more divided sentiment, with 42% totally agreeing and 39% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). Romania and Bulgaria report 56% and 59% total agreement, respectively, indicating moderate support (European Commission, 2023). These variations suggest that while there is generally positive sentiment towards the EU, lower press freedom might contribute to less uniformity in attitudes due to restricted media environments affecting information dissemination (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy varies significantly across these countries. In Austria, only 10% of the population is very satisfied with how democracy functions, and 40% are somewhat satisfied, while a considerable 30% are not very satisfied and 18% are not at all satisfied (European Commission, 2023). Slovenia exhibits even lower satisfaction, with just 4% very satisfied and 36% somewhat satisfied, while 40% are not very satisfied and 19% are not at all satisfied (European Commission, 2023). Italy and Poland show similar dissatisfaction trends, with 6% and 8% very satisfied, respectively, but higher percentages not very satisfied or not at all satisfied (European Commission, 2023). In Croatia, only 3% are very satisfied, and a significant 43% are not very satisfied, highlighting deep dissatisfaction (European Commission, 2023). Romania and Bulgaria also show low satisfaction, with 7% and 3% very satisfied, respectively (European Commission, 2023). These low satisfaction rates may be influenced by restricted press freedom, which could hinder transparent and accountable governance (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Concerns about misinformation influencing voting decisions are notably high in these countries. In Austria, 44% of citizens are very worried about misinformation affecting electoral outcomes (European Commission, 2023). Slovenia, Italy, and Croatia show substantial concerns as well, with 37%, 47%, and 40% respectively (European Commission, 2023). Poland and Bulgaria display even higher levels of concern, at 51% and 50% respectively (European Commission, 2023). These figures indicate a significant worry about the impact of misinformation, likely exacerbated by lower press freedom which can facilitate the spread of false information (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

When examining **concerns about the manipulation of election results**, Poland and Bulgaria exhibit the highest levels of worry, with 53% and 55% of their populations very worried about this issue (European Commission, 2023). Austria and Italy show similar concerns, with 42% of citizens very worried (European Commission, 2023). Romania also has high concern levels at 52% (European Commission, 2023). In contrast, Slovenia and Croatia have lower but still significant concern levels, at 28% and 37% respectively (European Commission, 2023). These concerns highlight the potential vulnerabilities in electoral integrity associated with lower press freedom, where media control or manipulation can impact public trust (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Perceptions of access to accurate information from multiple media sources vary across these countries. In Austria, 26% strongly agree that citizens can access accurate information, with 46% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). Slovenia, however, shows low confidence, with only 7% strongly agreeing

and 31% tending to disagree (European Commission, 2023). Italy, Poland, and Croatia have moderate confidence levels, with Italy at 25% strongly agreeing and 49% tending to agree, and Poland and Croatia showing similar trends (European Commission, 2023). Romania and Bulgaria exhibit higher confidence, with 38% and 34% strongly agreeing respectively (European Commission, 2023). These differences reflect the varying degrees of media pluralism and reliability within these countries, influenced by their levels of press freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

The **ability to express political opinions without fearing negative consequences** is perceived differently across these countries. In Austria, 29% strongly agree with this statement, supported by another 40% who tend to agree (European Commission, 2023). Slovenia shows lower confidence, with only 10% strongly agreeing and 31% tending to disagree (European Commission, 2023). Italy and Poland display moderate confidence, with Italy at 31% strongly agreeing and 46% tending to agree, while Poland has 17% strongly agreeing and 37% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria exhibit varied levels of confidence, with Romania showing the highest at 45% strongly agreeing (European Commission, 2023). These perceptions are likely affected by the overall environment of press freedom, which can either support or hinder free expression (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

In conclusion, the analysis of the low press freedom group reveals a complex relationship between press freedom and citizens' perceptions of the EU, democracy, and information access. While there is generally positive sentiment towards the EU, satisfaction with democratic processes is significantly lower, and concerns about misinformation and election manipulation are high. These findings (group 3) suggest that lower levels of press freedom may contribute to less favourable perceptions of democratic functioning and higher levels of concern about electoral integrity and misinformation, impacting citizens' engagement and trust in the democratic process (European Commission, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Group 4: Very Low Press Freedom (63.14 - 60.96) – Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, Greece

Geographical distribution of the countries analysed:

■ Group 4: Very Low Press Freedom

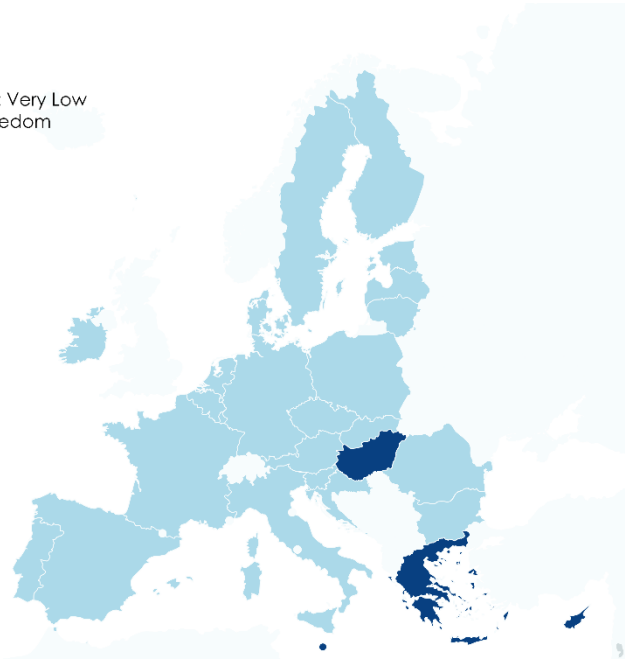


Figure 5. Group 4: Very Low Press Freedom (63.14 - 60.96) – Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, Greece (Own creation with the support of the interviewees). This table was made in May 2024 and the data entered is from the time of creation.

Country Group	PF Score Range	Member States	RSF Global Index	RSF Global Score
Group 4: Very Low Press Freedom	63.14 - 60.96	Cyprus	65/180	63.14
		Hungary	67/180	62.98
		Malta	73/180	60.96
		Greece	88/180	57.15

Table 11. Press Freedom Index, Data from 2024 (Own creation)

COMPARATIVE TABLE GROUP 4

Attitudes towards the EU. Positive attitude towards EU (% by country) - "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)

In Cyprus, 55% totally agree, 27% tend to agree, 8% tend to disagree, 10% totally disagree, and 0% don't know.

In Hungary, 71% totally agree, 19% tend to agree, 6% tend to disagree, 3% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.

In Malta, 71% totally agree, 16% tend to agree, 5% tend to disagree, 6% totally disagree, and 2% don't know.

In Greece, 59% totally agree, 25% tend to agree, 9% tend to disagree, 7% totally disagree, and 0% don't know.

2. Assessment of satisfaction with democracy's functioning in EU Member States (% by country) - "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)

In Cyprus, 3% are very satisfied, 29% are somewhat satisfied, 40% are not very satisfied, 27% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
In Hungary, 8% are very satisfied, 21% are somewhat satisfied, 21% are not very satisfied, 49% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
In Malta, 11% are very satisfied, 23% are somewhat satisfied, 36% are not very satisfied, 29% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
In Greece, 6% are very satisfied, 23% are somewhat satisfied, 28% are not very satisfied, 43% are not at all satisfied, and 1% don't know.
3. Evaluation of electoral issues and perceptions of foreign interference.
3.1. Percentage of people concerned about people basing their voting decision on misinformation due to the level of Press Freedom (answered as very worried) (% by country) - "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)
In Cyprus, 44% are very worried.
In Hungary, 57% are very worried.
In Malta, 51% are very worried.
In Greece, 54% are very worried.
3.2. Percentage of people concerned about the manipulation of the result of an election due to level of press freedom (answered as very worried) (% by country) - "Citizenship and democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 528 (EC, 2023)
In Cyprus, 31% are very worried.
In Hungary, 57% are very worried.
In Malta, 45% are very worried.
In Greece, 31% are very worried.
4. Exploration of perceptions concerning disinformation, press freedom, and fake news, including individuals' perceived exposure to these phenomena.
4.1. Citizens in (COUNTRY) can access accurate information from multiple media sources about topics at stake (% by country) - "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)
In Cyprus, 39% totally agree, 34% tend to agree, 17% tend to disagree, 9% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
In Hungary, 13% totally agree, 30% tend to agree, 29% tend to disagree, 27% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
In Malta, 18% totally agree, 39% tend to agree, 25% tend to disagree, 15% totally disagree, and 4% don't know.
In Greece, 43% totally agree, 28% tend to agree, 17% tend to disagree, 12% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
4.2. Citizens in your country can express their political opinion without fearing negative consequences (including journalists) (% by country) - "Democracy" Flash Eurobarometer 522 (EC, 2023)
In Cyprus, 47% totally agree, 27% tend to agree, 19% tend to disagree, 7% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
In Hungary, 14% totally agree, 23% tend to agree, 34% tend to disagree, 27% totally disagree, and 3% don't know.
In Malta, 26% totally agree, 25% tend to agree, 28% tend to disagree, 19% totally disagree, and 2% don't know.
In Greece, 48% totally agree, 27% tend to agree, 16% tend to disagree, 9% totally disagree, and 1% don't know.
Table 12. Comparative Table Group 4 (Own Creation)

This analysis examines the relationship between **very low press freedom** and various citizen perceptions in Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, and Greece. Using data from the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index and Eurobarometer surveys, the investigation covers attitudes towards the European

Union (EU), satisfaction with democratic processes, concerns about electoral issues, and perceptions of disinformation and press freedom.

Countries with very low press freedom, such as Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, and Greece, display **varied attitudes towards the EU**. In Cyprus, 55% of citizens totally agree with the statement, "Being a citizen of the EU is a good thing," with an additional 27% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). Hungary and Malta both show strong support for the EU, with 71% of citizens in each country totally agreeing with the statement, supplemented by 19% and 16% tending to agree, respectively (European Commission, 2023). Greece also exhibits a positive attitude, with 59% totally agreeing and 25% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). These figures suggest that, despite very low press freedom, citizens in these countries generally maintain positive views towards the EU, possibly influenced by factors beyond media freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). This correlation will be confirmed in the third layer of this analysis.

Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in these countries is notably low. In Cyprus, only 3% of the population is very satisfied with the functioning of democracy, and 29% are somewhat satisfied, while a significant 40% are not very satisfied and 27% are not at all satisfied (European Commission, 2023). Hungary presents a similarly troubling picture, with 8% very satisfied and a large portion (49%) not at all satisfied (European Commission, 2023). Malta shows slightly higher satisfaction levels with 11% very satisfied and 23% somewhat satisfied, but dissatisfaction remains high (European Commission, 2023). Greece has 6% very satisfied, but a substantial 43% are not at all satisfied (European Commission, 2023). These low satisfaction rates may be attributed to the restricted press freedom, which can limit transparency and accountability in governance (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Concerns about misinformation influencing voting decisions are significantly high in these countries. In Cyprus, 44% of citizens are very worried about misinformation affecting electoral outcomes (European Commission, 2023). Hungary shows the highest level of concern at 57%, reflecting deep-seated anxieties about the integrity of electoral information (European Commission, 2023). Malta and Greece also exhibit high concern levels, with 51% and 54% respectively very worried about misinformation (European Commission, 2023). These figures indicate a pervasive worry about the impact of misinformation, likely exacerbated by the very low press freedom which can hinder the flow of accurate information (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

When examining **concerns about the manipulation of election results**, Hungary again shows the highest level of worry, with 57% of its population very worried about this issue (European Commission, 2023). Cyprus and Greece each have 31% of citizens very worried, reflecting significant concern (European Commission, 2023). Malta exhibits moderate concern with 45% very worried about election result manipulation (European Commission, 2023). These concerns highlight the potential vulnerabilities in electoral integrity associated with very low press freedom, where media manipulation can significantly impact public trust (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Perceptions of access to accurate information from multiple media sources vary across these countries. In Cyprus, 39% strongly agree that citizens can access accurate information, with an additional 34% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). Greece shows the highest confidence, with 43% strongly agreeing and 28% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). However, Hungary shows low confidence, with only 13% strongly agreeing and a significant 27% totally disagreeing (European Commission, 2023). Malta presents moderate confidence levels with 18% strongly agreeing and 39% tending to agree, though there is still a notable percentage of disagreement (European Commission, 2023). These differences reflect the varying degrees of media reliability and pluralism within these countries, influenced by their very low press freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

The **ability to express political opinions without fearing negative consequences** is perceived differently across these countries. In Cyprus, 47% strongly agree with this statement, supported by another 27% who tend to agree (European Commission, 2023). Greece also shows high confidence with 48% strongly agreeing and 27% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). In contrast, Hungary and Malta display lower confidence, with Hungary at 14% strongly agreeing and 23% tending to agree, and Malta at 26% strongly agreeing and 25% tending to agree (European Commission, 2023). These perceptions are likely influenced by the overall environment of press freedom, which can either support or hinder free expression (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

In conclusion, the analysis of the very low press freedom group reveals a complex relationship between press freedom and citizens' perceptions of the EU, democracy, and information access. While there is generally positive sentiment towards the EU, satisfaction with democratic processes is significantly lower, and concerns about misinformation and election manipulation are high. These findings (group 4) suggest that very low levels of press freedom may contribute to less favourable perceptions of democratic functioning and higher levels of concern about electoral integrity and misinformation, impacting citizens'

engagement and trust in the democratic process (European Commission, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2024).



The **quantitative examination of press freedom across EU member states**, based on yearly reports from Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Eurobarometer surveys, reveals significant insights into the relationship between press freedom and public perceptions of European integration, democracy, and information integrity.

1. Attitudes Towards the European Union (EU):

Across all groups, there is a clear correlation between levels of press freedom and positive attitudes towards the EU. In countries with high press freedom, such as Denmark, Sweden, and Estonia, there is overwhelming support for the EU, with a majority of citizens expressing positive attitudes (European Commission, 2023). This trend continues in countries with moderate and low press freedom. Even in countries with very low press freedom like Hungary and Malta, substantial support for the EU persists, suggesting that other factors, possibly economic benefits, or cultural ties, also play a significant role (European Commission, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

2. Satisfaction with Democratic Functioning:

Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy varies widely with levels of press freedom. High press freedom countries report higher satisfaction levels with democracy, as seen in Denmark and Finland, where transparency and accountability are likely bolstered by a free press (European Commission, 2023). Contrarily, in countries with low and very low press freedom, such as Hungary and Greece, dissatisfaction is notably higher, reflecting potential issues with governance transparency and accountability (European Commission, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2024). This pattern underscores the importance of a free press in supporting democratic satisfaction and the functioning of democratic institutions.

3. Concerns About Misinformation and Electoral Integrity:

Concerns about misinformation influencing voting decisions and the manipulation of election results are pervasive across all groups but are more pronounced in countries with lower press freedom. High press freedom countries, despite generally better media environments, still exhibit significant concerns, indicating that no country is entirely immune to these threats (European Commission, 2023). However, this factor is higher in countries with very low press freedom, such as Hungary and Bulgaria, where media

control or manipulation is more likely to undermine public trust in electoral processes (European Commission, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2024). These findings show the critical role of press freedom in mitigating misinformation and ensuring electoral integrity.

4. Access to Accurate Information:

The perception of access to accurate information from multiple media sources is strongly linked to press freedom levels. In high press freedom countries, citizens generally agree that they can access reliable information, which supports informed public discourse (European Commission, 2023). In contrast, countries with low and very low press freedom report lower confidence in media accuracy, reflecting challenges in media reliability and pluralism (European Commission, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

5. Freedom of Expression:

The ability to express political opinions without fearing negative consequences varies significantly with press freedom. High press freedom countries show higher levels of confidence in free expression, an essential component of democratic health (European Commission, 2023). Contrarily, in countries with very low press freedom, such as Hungary and Malta, there is considerable fear of repercussions for expressing political views (European Commission, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2024). This indicates that press freedom is crucial not only for disseminating information but also for protecting free expression and fostering an open public discourse.

In conclusion, the first layer of the analysis suggests that high levels of press freedom are associated with more positive attitudes towards the EU, higher satisfaction with democratic processes, and greater confidence in the accuracy of information and freedom of expression. Contrarily, lower levels of press freedom correlate with increased concerns about misinformation, electoral manipulation, and lower democratic satisfaction. However, this correlation will be confirmed in the third layer of this analysis, but they highlight the necessity of promoting and protecting press freedom within the EU to support informed citizen engagement, trust in democratic institutions, and overall democratic health (European Commission, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2024).



Second layer: Qualitative examination of media portrayal and public discourse on European integration in EU countries

Following the initial quantitative analysis, which provided a broad understanding of the relationship between press freedom and public perceptions of European integration, this section delves into a **qualitative examination**. The aim is to uncover the societal contexts and individual narratives that quantitative data alone cannot fully elucidate. Focusing on the perspectives of national media associations and organisations, this qualitative analysis seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of how European integration is portrayed and perceived in various EU member states.

The second layer includes a content analysis of EU countries, examining how European integration is portrayed and discussed. Interviews have been conducted with policymakers and journalist associations to gather diverse viewpoints on the media's role in shaping public opinion on European integration.

This qualitative data will offer detailed insights into the dynamics of media discourse and its impact on public perceptions and attitudes.

Country Group	Country	Trade Union and/or Policymaker	Annex
Low Press Freedom	Austria	Austrian Press Council	1
Moderate Press Freedom	Belgium	Association of European Journalists in Belgium (AEJ Belgium)	2
Low Press Freedom	Bulgaria	Bulgarian Association of Travel Writers and Journalists	3
Low Press Freedom	Croatia	Croatian Journalists' Association (HND)	4
Very Low Press Freedom	Cyprus	Union of Cyprus Journalists	5
Moderate Press Freedom	Czech Republic	Transitions Czech Republic	6
High Press Freedom	Denmark	Foreign Press Association	7
High Press Freedom	Estonia	Estonian Association of Journalists	8
High Press Freedom	Finland	Union of Journalists in Finland	9
Moderate Press Freedom	France	Syndicat National des Journalistes (SNJ)	10
Moderate Press Freedom	Germany	German Press Council	11
Very Low Press Freedom	Greece	Journalists' Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers	12
Very Low Press Freedom	Hungary	MÚOSZ	13
		Centre for Independent Journalism	14

Moderate Press Freedom	Ireland	National Union of Journalist Ireland (NUJ Ireland)	15
Low Press Freedom	Italy	Federazione Nazionale Della Stampa Italiana	16
Moderate Press Freedom	Latvia	Baltic Centre for Media Excellence	17
		The Latvian Association of Journalists	18
Moderate Press Freedom	Lithuania	Lithuanian Journalism Centre	19
Moderate Press Freedom	Luxembourg	ALJP	20
Very Low Press Freedom	Malta	The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation	21
High Press Freedom	The Netherlands	Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten (NVJ)	22
Low Press Freedom	Poland	Society of Journalists (Warsaw)	23
Moderate Press Freedom	Portugal	Sindicato dos Jornalistas	24
Low Press Freedom	Romania	RR. Radio Romania	25
Moderate Press Freedom	Slovakia	World between the Lines media initiative	26
		Journalism department at Comenius University in Slovakia	27
		Print and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, executive body of the Association fo Protection of Journalistic Ethics	28
Low Press Freedom	Slovenia	Slovene Association of Journalists	29
Moderate Press Freedom	Spain	Agrupación de Periodistas de UGT	30
		Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España (FAPE)	31
High Press Freedom	Sweden	Tidningsutgivarna (TU), Swedish Media Publishers' Association	32

Table 13. Trade Union and/or Policymakers Interviewed Organised in Groups (Own creation)

As evidenced in Table 13, the associations and organisations advocating for press freedom have been organised in different groups to ensure equitable representation of these countries.

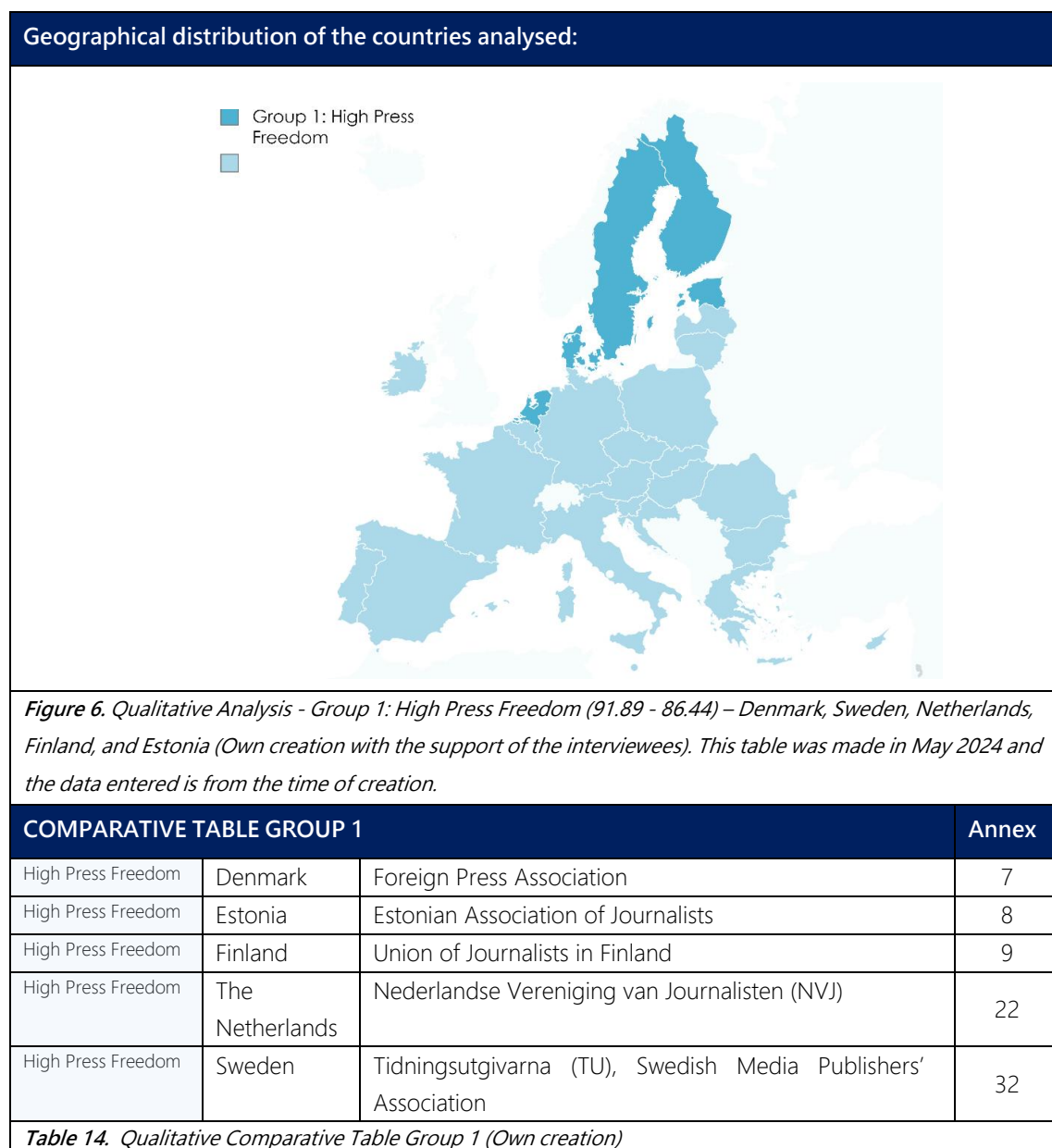
The methodology adopted for this qualitative analysis involves **structured interviews** with representatives from journalists' associations across different EU member states. Structured interviews are particularly suitable for this study as they allow for a guided and flexible exploration of participants' insights and experiences (Dearnley, 2005). This approach enables the collection of detailed data that can capture the complexities of the relationship between press freedom and public perception and engagement (Dearnley, 2005).

To prepare for these interviews, a “comprehensive interview guide” was developed, encompassing questions that probe the impact of press freedom on public understanding and attitudes toward EU integration. The questions are designed to elicit detailed responses that reflect the nuanced realities faced by journalists in different media environments.

The interview includes a mix of **closed and open-ended questions**. The closed questions provide a framework for quantifying perceptions and experiences, while the open-ended questions allow for in-depth qualitative insights (Dearnley, 2005). The interviews are available in the annexes (Page 64).

Group 1: Qualitative Analysis - High Press Freedom (91.89 - 86.44) –

Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands, Finland, and Estonia



This analysis synthesises the responses from various journalists' associations from countries with high levels of press freedom, including Denmark, Estonia, Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden. The associations are the Foreign Press Association, the Estonian Association of Journalists, the Union of Journalists in Finland, the Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten (NVJ), and Tidningsutgivarna (Swedish Media Publishers' Association). Their insights provide a nuanced understanding of how press freedom impacts public perception and engagement with the EU.

The associations from these countries generally acknowledge the significant role of press freedom in shaping public understanding and attitudes towards European integration. Here's the breakdown:

- Moderately: 80% (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Netherlands)
- Very Significantly: 20% (Sweden)

This alignment suggests that in countries with high levels of press freedom, the media can more effectively disseminate information about the EU, enhancing public understanding. Specifically, the Swedish association underscores a "very significant" impact, reflecting the critical role of a free press in informing the public accurately about EU policies and initiatives.

A recurring theme among the associations is the impact of press freedom on either reducing or promoting misconceptions about the EU. The associations' responses are as follows:

- Somewhat Enhanced Understanding: 100% (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Netherlands, Sweden)

This suggests that in environments where the press is free to report without significant constraints, there is a better chance of combating misinformation and providing the public with a clearer picture of EU activities.

When discussing the primary consequences of press constraints, the associations generally report a shift in public opinion against EU policies or no notable changes. The responses are as follows:

- Shift in Public Opinion Against EU Policies: 20% (Denmark)
- No Notable Changes: 60% (Estonia, Finland, Sweden)
- Decreased Engagement Due to Lack of Information: 20% (Netherlands)

This is particularly evident in the Danish response, which notes that increased press constraints have led to a shift in public opinion against EU policies, indicating that when the press is restricted, public scepticism towards the EU can increase. Contrarily, the Estonian, Finnish, and Swedish associations note no notable

changes, implying that in highly free press environments, any potential constraints might not be severe enough to cause significant shifts in public opinion or engagement.

Causation versus Correlation

A critical aspect of the analysis is whether the varying levels of press freedom suggest a causal relationship rather than mere correlation with citizens' perceptions of European integration. The responses are as follows:

- Yes: 60% (Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden)
- Maybe: 20% (Estonia)
- No Answer: 20% (Finland)

Most associations, including those from Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden, agree that there is a relationship suggesting causation. The Danish association explicitly states that the varying levels of press freedom influence citizens' perceptions, implying a direct link between media freedom and public opinion on the EU. The Estonian association offers a more cautious perspective, indicating that while there might be a causative relationship, it heavily depends on other conditions affecting press freedom and citizens' views on the EU.

In conclusion, the responses from the journalists' associations in countries with high levels of press freedom suggest that a free press plays a significant role in shaping public understanding and attitudes towards European integration. The data indicates that press freedom tends to enhance accurate public knowledge of the EU and reduces misconceptions, although the extent of this impact can vary. While 60% of the associations acknowledge a causative relationship between press freedom and public perceptions of the EU, they also recognise the influence of other conditions and factors.

Group 2: Qualitative Analysis - Moderate Press Freedom (85.9 - 76.01) – Portugal, Ireland, Germany, Luxembourg, Latvia, Lithuania, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Slovakia, Spain

Geographical distribution of the countries analysed:

■ Group 2: Moderate Press Freedom

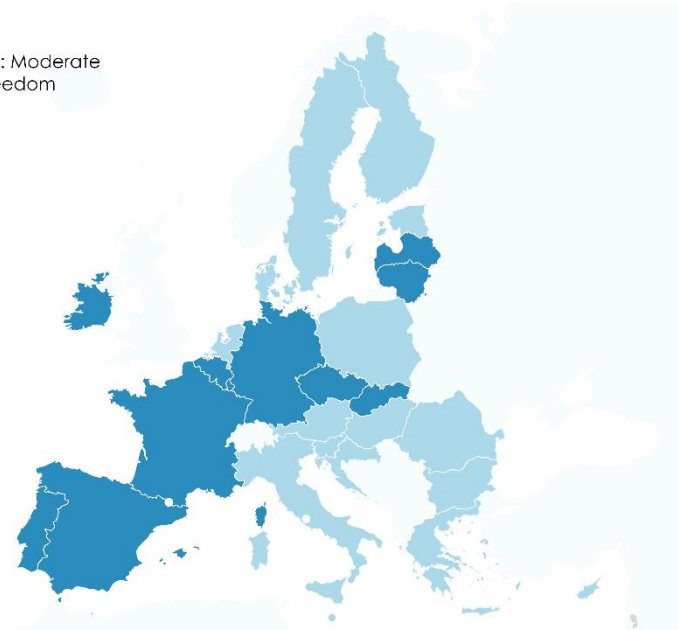


Figure 7. Qualitative Analysis - Group 2: Moderate Press Freedom (85.9 - 76.01) – Portugal, Ireland, Germany, Luxembourg, Latvia, Lithuania, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Slovakia, Spain (Own creation with the support of the interviewees). This table was made in May 2024 and the data entered is from the time of creation.

COMPARATIVE TABLE GROUP 2

Annex

Moderate Press Freedom	Belgium	Association of European Journalists in Belgium (AEJ Belgium)	2
Moderate Press Freedom	Czech Republic	Transitions Czech Republic	6
Moderate Press Freedom	France	Syndicat National des Journalistes (SNJ)	10
Moderate Press Freedom	Germany	German Press Council	11
Moderate Press Freedom	Ireland	National Union of Journalist Ireland (NUJ Ireland)	15
Moderate Press Freedom	Latvia	Baltic Centre for Media Excellence	17
		The Latvian Association of Journalists	18

Moderate Press Freedom	Lithuania	Lithuanian Journalism Centre	19
Moderate Press Freedom	Luxembourg	ALJP	20
Moderate Press Freedom	Portugal	Sindicato dos Jornalistas	24
Moderate Press Freedom	Slovakia	World between the Lines media initiative	26
		Journalism department at Comenius University in Slovakia	27
		Print and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, executive body of the Association fo Protection of Journalistic Ethics	28
Moderate Press Freedom	Spain	Agrupación de Periodistas de UGT	30
		Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España (FAPE)	31

Table 15. Qualitative Comparative Table Group 2 (Own creation)

This analysis synthesises the responses from various journalists' associations from countries with **moderate levels of press freedom**, including Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain. The associations interviewed include the Association of European Journalists in Belgium, Agrupación de Periodistas de UGT Spain, Sindicato dos Jornalistas – Portugal, ALJP Luxembourg, German Press Council, Syndicat national des journalistes (France), Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España, The Latvian Association of Journalists, Print and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, Journalism Department at Comenius University in Slovakia, World between the Lines media initiative, Transitions Czech Republic, Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, National Union of Journalists Ireland (NUJ Ireland), and the Lithuanian Journalism Centre (Interviews Annexes, p.64).

The associations from these countries generally acknowledge the significant role of press freedom in shaping public understanding and attitudes towards European integration. Here's the breakdown:

- Very Significantly: 33% (Association of European Journalists in Belgium, World between the Lines media initiative, Journalism Department at Comenius University in Slovakia, Print and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, Transitions Czech Republic, Baltic Centre for Media Excellence)
- Moderately: 47% (Agrupación de Periodistas de UGT Spain, Sindicato dos Jornalistas – Portugal, ALJP Luxembourg, German Press Council, Syndicat national des journalistes, National Union of Journalists Ireland, Lithuanian Journalism Centre)
- Slightly: 20% (Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España, The Latvian Association of Journalists)
- Not at All: 0%

This alignment suggests that in countries with moderate levels of press freedom, the media still plays a significant role in disseminating information about the EU, thereby influencing public understanding. Specifically, 33% of the associations believe that press freedom impacts public understanding "very significantly," indicating a strong link between media freedom and accurate public knowledge.

A recurring theme among the associations is the impact of press freedom on either reducing or promoting misconceptions about the EU. The associations' responses are as follows:

- Greatly Enhanced Understanding: 7% (Association of European Journalists in Belgium)
- Somewhat Enhanced Understanding: 73% (Agrupación de Periodistas de UGT Spain, Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España, Sindicato dos Jornalistas – Portugal, Print and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, Transitions Czech Republic, ALJP Luxembourg, Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, German Press Council, Syndicat National des Journalistes, National Union of Journalists Ireland, Lithuanian Journalism Centre)
- No Impact: 7% (The Latvian Association of Journalists)
- Promoted Misconceptions: 13% (World between the Lines media initiative, Journalism Department at Comenius University in Slovakia)

This suggests that in environments with moderate press freedom, the majority of the media somewhat enhances public understanding of the EU, although there are still significant instances where press freedom constraints can lead to misconceptions.

When discussing the primary consequences of press constraints, the associations generally report increased engagement due to misinformation or decreased engagement due to a lack of information. The responses are as follows:

- Increased Engagement Due to Misinformation: 33% (Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España, World between the Lines media initiative, Journalism Department at Comenius University in Slovakia, Print and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, Syndicat national des journalistes)
- Decreased Engagement Due to Lack of Information: 40% (Agrupación de Periodistas de UGT Spain, Association of European Journalists in Belgium, ALJP Luxembourg, The Latvian Association of Journalists, German Press Council, National Union of Journalists Ireland)
- Shift in Public Opinion Against EU Policies: 7% (Baltic Centre for Media Excellence)
- No Notable Changes: 20% (Sindicato dos Jornalistas – Portugal, Transitions Czech Republic, Lithuanian Journalism Centre)

This data indicates that misinformation can significantly drive public engagement, although not necessarily in a positive direction, while lack of information tends to reduce engagement.

Causation versus Correlation

A critical aspect of the analysis is whether the varying levels of press freedom suggest a causal relationship rather than mere correlation with citizens' perceptions of European integration. The responses are as follows:

- Yes: 80% (Agrupación de Periodistas de UGT Spain, Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España, Sindicato dos Jornalistas – Portugal, Association of European Journalists in Belgium, World between the Lines media initiative, Journalism Department at Comenius University in Slovakia, Print and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, Transitions Czech Republic, ALJP Luxembourg, Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, The Latvian Association of Journalists, German Press Council, National Union of Journalists Ireland, Lithuanian Journalism Centre)
- No: 0%
- Others: 7% (Syndicat national des journalistes - Europe does not do enough to protect journalists. Impunity to cyberspying and state threats are not sufficiently denounced.)

Most associations (80%) agree that there is a relationship suggesting causation, highlighting a strong link between press freedom and public perception of the EU. However, some concerns about the EU's role in protecting journalists also emerge, indicating the need for broader systemic changes to support press freedom.

In conclusion, the responses from the journalists' associations in countries with moderate levels of press freedom suggest that while the media plays a significant role in shaping public understanding and attitudes towards European integration, the impact can vary.

The data indicates that press freedom somewhat enhances accurate public knowledge of the EU and reduces misconceptions, although the extent of this impact can differ.

With 80% of the associations acknowledging a causative relationship between press freedom and public perceptions of the EU, the analysis underscores the importance of maintaining and improving press freedom to foster an informed and engaged citizenry within the European Union (Interviews Annexes, p.64). Additionally, addressing broader systemic issues affecting press freedom is crucial to ensure a well-functioning democratic society.

Group 3: Qualitative Analysis - Low Press Freedom (74.69 - 65.32) - Austria, Slovenia, Italy, Poland, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria

Geographical distribution of the countries analysed:

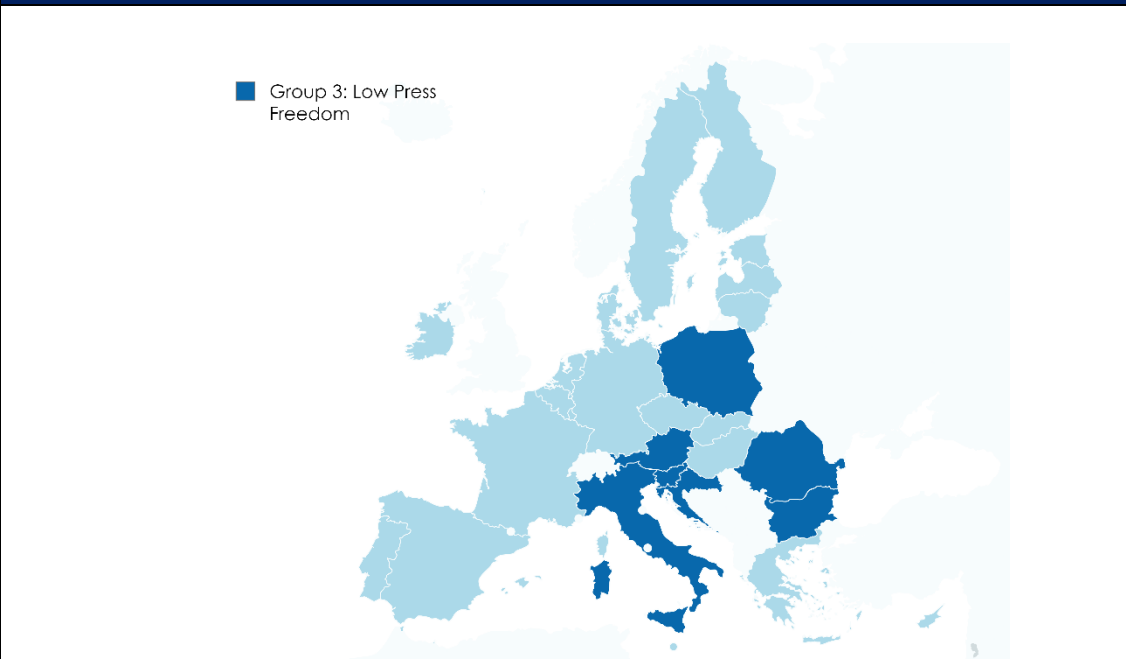


Figure 8. Qualitative Analysis - Group 3: Low Press Freedom (74.69 - 65.32) - Austria, Slovenia, Italy, Poland, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria (Own creation with the support of the interviewees). This table was made in May 2024 and the data entered is from the time of creation.

COMPARATIVE TABLE GROUP 3			Annex
Low Press Freedom	Austria	Austrian Press Council	1
Low Press Freedom	Bulgaria	Bulgarian Association of Travel Writers and Journalists	3
Low Press Freedom	Croatia	Croatian Journalists' Association (HND)	4
Low Press Freedom	Italy	Federazione Nazionale Della Stampa Italiana	16
Low Press Freedom	Poland	Society of Journalists (Warsaw)	23
Low Press Freedom	Romania	RR. Radio Romania	25
Low Press Freedom	Slovenia	Slovene Association of Journalists	29

Table 16. Qualitative Comparative Table Group 3 (Own creation)

This analysis synthesises the responses from various journalists' associations from countries with **low levels of press freedom**, including Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia. The associations surveyed include the Austrian Press Council, Bulgarian Association of Travel Writers and Journalists, Croatian Journalists' Association (HND), Federazione Nazionale della Stampa Italiana (FNSI), Society of Journalists (Poland), RR. Radio Romania, and the Slovene Association of Journalists. Their insights provide a nuanced understanding of how press freedom impacts public perception and engagement with the EU in these countries.

The associations from these countries generally acknowledge the significant role of press freedom in shaping public understanding and attitudes towards European integration. Here's the breakdown:

- Very Significantly: 71% (RR. Radio Romania, Croatian Journalists' Association (HND), Federazione Nazionale della Stampa Italiana (FNSI), Society of Journalists – Poland), Austrian Press Council
- Moderately: 0%
- Slightly: 29% (Bulgarian Association of Travel Writers and Journalists, Slovene Association of Journalists)
- Not at All: 0%

This alignment suggests that in countries with moderate levels of press freedom, the media still plays a significant role in disseminating information about the EU, thereby influencing public understanding. Specifically, 71% of the associations believe that press freedom impacts public understanding "very significantly," indicating a strong link between media freedom and accurate public knowledge.

A recurring theme among the associations is the impact of press freedom on either reducing or promoting misconceptions about the EU. The associations' responses are as follows:

- Greatly Enhanced Understanding: 14% (RR. Radio Romania)
- Somewhat Enhanced Understanding: 14% (Federazione Nazionale della Stampa Italiana - FNSI)
- No Impact: 0%
- Promoted Misconceptions: 71% (Bulgarian Association of Travel Writers and Journalists, Slovene Association of Journalists, Croatian Journalists' Association (HND), Society of Journalists – Poland, Austrian Press Council)

This suggests that in environments with moderate press freedom, while some media efforts enhance public understanding, there are significant instances where press freedom constraints lead to misconceptions.

When discussing the primary consequences of press constraints, the associations generally report a mix of decreased engagement due to lack of information and a shift in public opinion against EU policies. The responses are as follows:

- Increased Engagement Due to Misinformation: 0%
- Decreased Engagement Due to Lack of Information: 14% (Croatian Journalists' Association (HND))

- Shift in Public Opinion Against EU Policies: 71% (RR. Radio Romania, Slovene Association of Journalists, Federazione Nazionale della Stampa Italiana (FNSI), Society of Journalists – Poland, Austrian Press Council)
- No Notable Changes: 0%
- Others: 14% (Bulgarian Association of Travel Writers and Journalists - they can't give an answer)

This data indicates that a lack of information and misinformation can significantly drive public opinion, often against EU policies.

Causation versus Correlation

A critical aspect of the analysis is whether the varying levels of press freedom suggest a causal relationship rather than mere correlation with citizens' perceptions of European integration. The responses are as follows:

- Yes: 100% (Bulgarian Association of Travel Writers and Journalists, RR. Radio Romania, Slovene Association of Journalists, Croatian Journalists' Association (HND), Federazione Nazionale della Stampa Italiana (FNSI), Society of Journalists – Poland, Austrian Press Council)
- No: 0%
- Others: 0%

All associations (100%) agree that there is a relationship suggesting causation, highlighting a strong link between press freedom and public perception of the EU.

In conclusion, the responses from the journalists' associations in countries with moderate levels of press freedom suggest that while the media plays a significant role in shaping public understanding and attitudes towards European integration, the impact can vary. The data indicates that press freedom can enhance public knowledge of the EU and reduce misconceptions, although significant instances of misinformation also occur.

With all the associations acknowledging a causative relationship between press freedom and public perceptions of the EU, the analysis underscores the importance of maintaining and improving press freedom to foster an informed and engaged citizenry within the European Union.

Group 4: Qualitative Analysis - Very Low Press Freedom (63.14 - 60.96) –

Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, Greece

Geographical distribution of the countries analysed:

■ Group 4: Very Low Press Freedom

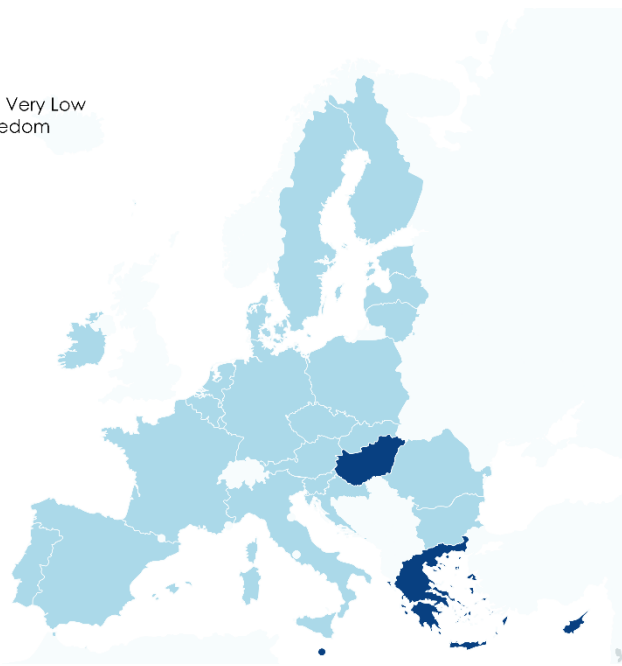


Figure 9. Qualitative Analysis - Group 4: Very Low Press Freedom (63.14 - 60.96) – Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, Greece (Own creation with the support of the interviewees). This table was made in May 2024 and the data entered is from the time of creation.

COMPARATIVE TABLE GROUP 4			Annex
Very Low Press Freedom	Cyprus	Union of Cyprus Journalists	5
Very Low Press Freedom	Greece	Journalists' Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers	12
Very Low Press Freedom	Hungary	MÚOSZ	13
		Centre for Independent Journalism	14
Very Low Press Freedom	Malta	The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation	21

Table 17. Qualitative Comparative Table Group 4 (Own creation)

This analysis synthesises the responses from various journalists' associations from countries with **very low levels of press freedom**, including Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, and Malta. The associations surveyed include the Union of Cyprus Journalists, Journalists' Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers (ESHEA), MÚOSZ (Hungary), Centre for Independent Journalism (Hungary), and The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation

(Malta). Their insights provide a nuanced understanding of how press freedom impacts public perception and engagement with the EU in these countries.

The associations from these countries generally acknowledge the significant role of press freedom in shaping public understanding and attitudes towards European integration. Here's the breakdown:

- Very Significantly: 80% (Journalists' Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers - ESHEA, The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation, MÚOSZ Hungary, Centre for Independent Journalism - Hungary)
- Moderately: 20% (Union of Cyprus Journalists)
- Slightly: 0%
- Not at All: 0%

This alignment suggests that even in countries with very low levels of press freedom, the media significantly influences public understanding of the EU. Specifically, 80% of the associations believe that press freedom impacts public understanding "very significantly", indicating a strong link between media freedom and public knowledge.

A recurring theme among the associations is the impact of press freedom on either reducing or promoting misconceptions about the EU. The associations' responses are as follows:

- Greatly Enhanced Understanding: 40% (Journalists' Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers - ESHEA, Centre for Independent Journalism - Hungary)
- Somewhat Enhanced Understanding: 40% (The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation, Union of Cyprus Journalists)
- No Impact: 0%
- Promoted Misconceptions: 20% (MÚOSZ Hungary)

This suggests that in environments with very low press freedom, while some media efforts enhance public understanding, there are significant instances where press freedom constraints lead to misconceptions.

When discussing the primary consequences of press constraints, the associations generally report a mix of increased engagement due to misinformation and decreased engagement due to a lack of information. The responses are as follows:

- Increased Engagement Due to Misinformation: 20% (MÚOSZ Hungary)
- Decreased Engagement Due to Lack of Information: 20% (Centre for Independent Journalism - Hungary)
- Shift in Public Opinion Against EU Policies: 20% (The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation)

- o No Notable Changes: 40% (Journalists' Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers - ESHEA, Union of Cyprus Journalists)

This data indicates that misinformation can drive public engagement significantly, although not necessarily in a positive direction, while lack of information tends to reduce engagement.

Causation versus Correlation

A critical aspect of the analysis is whether the varying levels of press freedom suggest a causal relationship rather than mere correlation with citizens' perceptions of European integration. The responses are as follows:

- o Yes: 80% (Journalists' Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers - ESHEA, MÚOSZ Hungary, Union of Cyprus Journalists, Centre for Independent Journalism - Hungary)
- o No: 0%
- o Others: 20% (The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation - "We don't know")

Most associations (80%) agree that there is a relationship suggesting causation, highlighting a strong link between press freedom and public perception of the EU. However, some uncertainty exists, as reflected by The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation's response.

In conclusion, the responses from the journalists' associations in countries with very low levels of press freedom suggest that while the media significantly influences public understanding and attitudes towards European integration, the impact can vary. The data indicates that press freedom can enhance public knowledge of the EU and reduce misconceptions, although significant instances of misinformation also occur. With 80% of the associations acknowledging a causative relationship between press freedom and public perceptions of the EU, the analysis underscores the importance of improving press freedom to foster an informed and engaged citizenry within the European Union. Additionally, addressing broader systemic issues affecting press freedom is crucial to ensure a well-functioning democratic society.



The **qualitative analysis of press freedom across different European countries** reveals significant insights into how media environments influence public understanding and attitudes towards European integration.

This analysis synthesises the data collected from journalists' associations in four groups of countries, each classified by their level of press freedom: high, moderate, low, and very low. The findings show a clear correlation between the level of press freedom and the quality of public discourse regarding the EU.

In countries with **high press freedom**, such as Denmark, Estonia, Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden, the media plays a crucial role in enhancing public understanding of the EU. The 84,4% of the surveyed associations reported that the varying level of press freedom across European Union member states influences citizens' perceptions of the European integration process. This suggests that a free press effectively disseminates accurate information, leading to a well-informed public.

QUESTION: Would you agree that the varying level of press freedom across European Union member states influences citizens' perceptions of the European integration process?

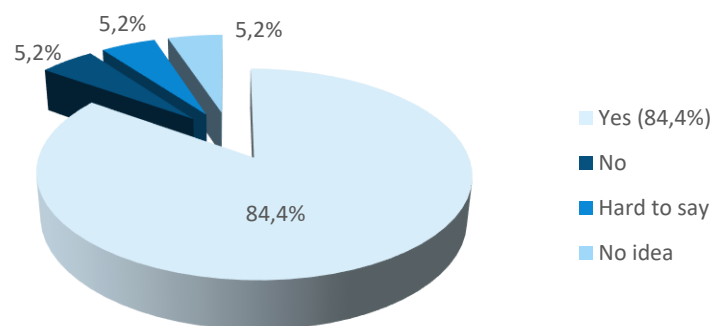


Figure 10. Question about varying level of press freedom across European Union member states (Own Creation)

Similarly, in countries with **moderate press freedom**, including Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, and others, the media still significantly influences public understanding. While 33% of associations see a very significant impact, the majority report a moderate enhancement of public knowledge. Despite some instances of misinformation, the overall effect of press freedom in these countries supports informed public discourse about the EU.

1. Misconceptions and Misinformation

The impact of press freedom on reducing or promoting misconceptions about the EU varies significantly across groups. In countries with low press freedom, such as Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia, a substantial 71% of associations indicate that press constraints promote misconceptions.

This suggests that limited media freedom often results in misinformation, which skews public perception and understanding of EU policies.

QUESTION: To what extent has the freedom of media coverage influenced public misconceptions or accurate understandings of the European Union's policies and initiatives in your country?

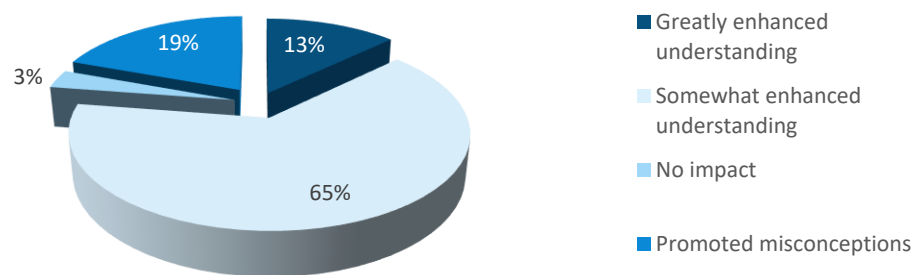


Figure 11. Question about media coverage influence (Own Creation)

In environments with very low press freedom, including Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, and Malta, the media still significantly influences public understanding. However, constraints on press freedom lead to notable instances of promoted misconceptions, as indicated by 20% of the associations. This demonstrates that severe restrictions on media freedom can result in a poorly informed public, susceptible to misinformation.

2. Public Opinion

Press freedom also affects public opinion towards the EU. In countries with **high press freedom**, the associations report minimal negative impacts on public opinion due to press constraints. However, in countries with moderate press freedom, 33% of associations observe increased engagement due to misinformation, while 40% note decreased engagement due to lack of information. This indicates that moderate press freedom can still result in significant public misinformation, affecting engagement levels.

QUESTION: Does your union believe that the level of press freedom in your country significantly shapes public understanding and attitudes towards European Integration?

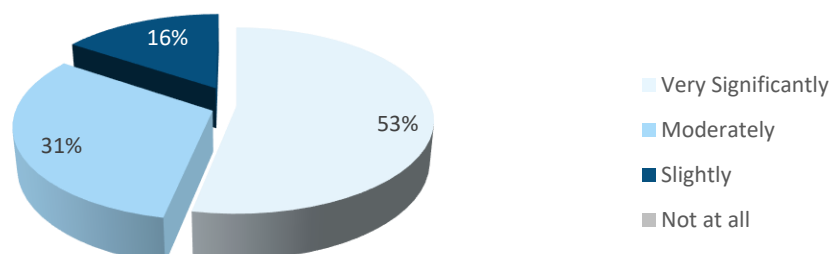


Figure 12. Question about public understanding and attitudes (Own Creation)

In **low press freedom countries**, 71% of associations report a shift in public opinion against EU policies due to press constraints. This underscores the detrimental impact of limited media freedom on public sentiment towards the EU. In very low press freedom environments, while some associations report enhanced understanding, 20% note increased engagement driven by misinformation, highlighting the complex interplay between press freedom and public engagement.

3. Causation versus Correlation

Across all groups, there is a strong consensus on the causal relationship between press freedom and public perceptions of the EU. In countries with **high press freedom**, a significant majority of associations (60%) affirm this causative link, indicating that a free and independent press plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion about the EU. In countries with moderate press freedom, the consensus is even more pronounced, with 80% of associations recognizing the influence of press freedom on public perceptions.

QUESTION: Would you agree that the varying level of press freedom across European Union member states suggests a relationship of causation rather than mere correlation?

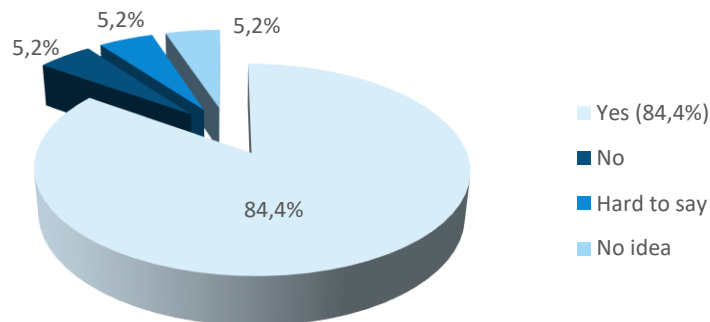


Figure 13. Question about causation and correlation (Own Creation)

The pattern becomes even more striking in countries with low and very low press freedom. In low press freedom countries, 100% of associations acknowledge the causal impact of press freedom on public opinion, suggesting that where press freedom is severely restricted, the effects on public perception are universally recognized as significant. Similarly, in very low press freedom countries, 80% of associations affirm this causative link, highlighting the critical role that even minimal press freedoms can play in informing public opinion.

In conclusion, the analysis across these four groups reveals that **higher levels of press freedom generally lead to a better-informed public, with fewer misconceptions about the EU**. This suggests that when people have access to diverse and independent sources of information, they are more likely to develop

accurate and nuanced views about EU policies and initiatives. Contrarily, constraints on press freedom often result in widespread misinformation, decreased public engagement, and negative shifts in public opinion towards the EU. The data underscores the importance of safeguarding press freedom to ensure an informed and engaged public, which is essential for the functioning of a healthy democracy and the promotion of positive international relations.

PART III: COMPARATIVE APPROACH

The **third and final layer** of this thesis adopts a comparative approach through the triangulation of data from the Press Freedom Index, Eurobarometer surveys, and qualitative feedback collected from structured interviews with policymakers and journalists' associations. This method aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between press freedom and public perception of European integration.

1

The **Press Freedom Index** (RSF), an indicator of the state of media freedom in various countries, serves as a foundational dataset in this analysis. By examining the scores and rankings of different EU member states, we can ascertain the levels of press freedom and identify patterns that may influence public attitudes towards the EU.

2

Complementing this, the **Eurobarometer surveys** (European Commission, 2023) provide valuable quantitative data on public opinion across the European Union. These surveys capture a wide array of metrics, including trust in EU institutions, attitudes towards European integration, and perceived benefits of EU membership.

3

Furthermore, the qualitative feedback from **structured interviews** (Interviews Annexes, p.64) with policymakers and journalists' associations offers nuanced perspectives that quantitative data alone cannot reveal. These insights delve deeper into the societal contexts and individual narratives, providing a richer understanding of the dynamics at play.

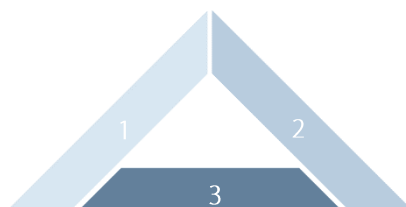


Figure 10. Triangulation of data (Own Creation)

This triangulation of data sources will enable a comprehensive analysis, revealing how varying levels of press freedom impact public perception of the EU. By integrating these diverse datasets, this section aims

to present a "holistic view", identifying both correlations and causations, and drawing well-rounded conclusions about the role of media in shaping European public opinion.

Ultimately, this comparative approach not only enhances our understanding of the intricate relationship between press freedom and public perception of the EU but also underscores the importance of a free and independent press in fostering informed and engaged citizenry.



Third Layer: Triangulation of data from Press Freedom Index, Eurobarometer surveys, and qualitative feedback.

High Press Freedom Countries

In countries with high press freedom, such as Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, and Estonia, a strong correlation between press freedom and positive public attitudes towards the EU is evident. Quantitative data from the Eurobarometer surveys show high levels of agreement with EU membership, with total agreement rates exceeding 60% in all these countries (European Commission, 2023). This is complemented by high satisfaction with democracy, as over 70% of citizens report being satisfied with the functioning of democracy in their respective countries (European Commission, 2023).

Interviews with journalists' associations from these countries underscore the significant role of a free press in fostering an informed public. The associations from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden report that press freedom either "somewhat" (60%) or "very significantly" (80%) enhances public understanding of the EU (Interviews Annexes, p.64). This alignment between quantitative data and qualitative insights suggests a causal relationship where high press freedom facilitates access to accurate information, thereby fostering positive perceptions of the EU and higher democratic satisfaction.

Despite the generally positive outlook, concerns about misinformation and electoral manipulation persist even in these high-press-freedom environments. The Eurobarometer data reveals that a significant portion of the population remains worried about misinformation affecting voting decisions and election integrity (European Commission, 2023).

Moderate Press Freedom Countries

In countries with moderate levels of press freedom, including Portugal, Ireland, Germany, Luxembourg, Latvia, Lithuania, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Slovakia, and Spain, the data reveals a more varied

but generally positive public attitude towards the EU. Eurobarometer surveys indicate that while support for the EU remains strong, it is slightly less unanimous compared to high-press-freedom countries (European Commission, 2023).

Journalists' associations in these countries acknowledge the media's role in shaping public understanding of the EU, with 33% reporting a "very significant" impact and 47% indicating a "moderate" impact (Interviews Annexes, p.64). However, instances of misinformation are more prevalent, with 13% of associations noting that press constraints promote misconceptions about the EU (Interviews Annexes, p.64). This suggests that moderate press freedom can still support informed public discourse but is more vulnerable to the effects of misinformation.

Public satisfaction with democracy varies widely in this group, with significant dissatisfaction reported in countries like Latvia and Slovakia. This variability indicates that while press freedom contributes to democratic engagement, other factors such as economic conditions and political stability also play critical roles (European Commission, 2023).

Low Press Freedom Countries

In countries with low press freedom, such as Austria, Slovenia, Italy, Poland, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria, the relationship between press freedom and public perceptions becomes more complex. The Eurobarometer data shows substantial support for the EU, but there is a notable decline in satisfaction with democracy, with high levels of dissatisfaction reported across these countries (European Commission, 2023).

Journalists' associations from these countries highlight the impact of limited press freedom on public understanding of the EU. A significant 71% of associations report that press constraints promote misconceptions, leading to a poorly informed public (Interviews Annexes, p.64). Additionally, 71% of associations indicate that press constraints result in a shift in public opinion against EU policies (Interviews Annexes, p.64). This suggests that lower press freedom not only impairs information dissemination but also fosters negative sentiments towards the EU.

Concerns about misinformation and electoral manipulation are particularly pronounced in this group. Eurobarometer data indicates high levels of uncertainty regarding the integrity of electoral processes, exacerbated by restricted media environments that facilitate the spread of false information (European Commission, 2023).

Very Low Press Freedom Countries

In countries with very low press freedom, such as Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, and Greece, the data paints a troubling picture of public perceptions and democratic satisfaction. While support for the EU remains relatively strong, satisfaction with democracy is notably low, with significant dissatisfaction reported in Hungary and Greece (European Commission, 2023).

Journalists' associations from these countries report a significant impact of press freedom on public understanding of the EU, with 80% indicating that press freedom "very significantly" enhances public knowledge (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). However, the constraints on press freedom lead to notable instances of misinformation, as reported by 20% of the associations (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). This highlights the severe consequences of restricted press environments on public discourse and engagement.

The Eurobarometer data reflects high levels of concern about misinformation and electoral manipulation, with Hungary showing the highest levels of anxiety (European Commission, 2023). This underscores the critical role of press freedom in maintaining electoral integrity and public trust in democratic processes.

The triangulation of data from the Press Freedom Index, Eurobarometer surveys, and interviews reveals a multi-faceted relationship between press freedom and public perceptions of the EU. High levels of press freedom correlate with positive attitudes towards the EU, higher satisfaction with democracy, and greater access to accurate information. Contrarily, lower levels of press freedom are associated with higher dissatisfaction with democracy, increased concerns about misinformation, and negative shifts in public opinion towards the EU.

This analysis underscores the importance of maintaining and enhancing press freedom to foster an informed and engaged citizenry. The findings suggest that a free press is essential for supporting democratic processes, ensuring electoral integrity, and promoting positive perceptions of the EU. However, even in high-press-freedom environments, challenges such as misinformation persist, indicating the need for continuous efforts to safeguard media independence and enhance public media literacy.

In conclusion, the data confirms that press freedom plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding and engagement with the EU. Ensuring robust press freedom across all EU member states is vital for the health of European democracy and the promotion of informed, engaged, and supportive citizenry.

Discrepancies and commonalities in how media landscapes influence public opinion

The media landscape across EU member states reveals both **discrepancies** and **commonalities** in how press freedom influences public opinion. Data from the Press Freedom Index, Eurobarometer surveys, and interviews with journalists' associations provide a comprehensive view of these dynamics.

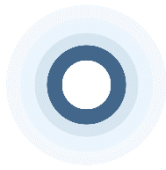
Across all groups, a clear pattern emerges where higher levels of press freedom correlate with more positive attitudes towards the EU and greater satisfaction with democracy. In high press freedom countries like Denmark and Sweden, citizens exhibit strong support for the EU, with 60% in Denmark and 60% in Sweden totally agreeing with EU membership (European Commission, 2023). Satisfaction with democracy is also high in these countries, with 80% in Denmark and 67% in Sweden reporting satisfaction (European Commission, 2023). These environments benefit from a well-informed public, as evidenced by journalists' associations reporting that press freedom significantly enhances public understanding of the EU, with associations in Sweden noting a "very significant" impact (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Another commonality is the persistent concern about misinformation and electoral manipulation, irrespective of the level of press freedom. Even in countries with robust press environments, a significant portion of the population remains worried about these issues. For example, in Denmark, 28% of citizens are very worried about misinformation affecting voting decisions, and 12% are very worried about election result manipulation (European Commission, 2023). This highlights that no system is entirely immune to the threats posed by misinformation.

Discrepancies are most apparent when comparing countries with different levels of press freedom. In moderate press freedom countries like Germany and Spain, while support for the EU remains generally positive, with 69% in Germany and 75% in Spain totally agreeing with EU membership (European Commission, 2023), the presence of misinformation is more pronounced. In Spain, 68% of citizens are very worried about misinformation influencing voting decisions (European Commission, 2023). Interviews with journalists' associations indicate that moderate press freedom supports informed public discourse but is more vulnerable to misinformation. In these countries, 47% of associations report that press freedom moderately enhances public understanding, while 13% note that press constraints promote misconceptions (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

In low and very low press freedom countries such as Hungary and Greece, the data shows a stark contrast. In Hungary, 71% totally agree with EU membership, yet only 8% are very satisfied with democracy, and 49% are not at all satisfied (European Commission, 2023). Concerns about misinformation are particularly high, with 57% very worried about misinformation and 57% very worried about electoral manipulation (European Commission, 2023). Journalists' associations in these countries report that press constraints significantly promote misconceptions, with 71% in low press freedom countries and 20% in very low press freedom countries indicating that press constraints lead to a shift in public opinion against EU policies (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

PART IV: CONCLUSION



Fourth Layer: Conclusions and implications for democratic processes and policymaking within the EU

This thesis has examined the influence of varying levels of press freedom on citizens' perceptions and understanding of the European integration process across European Union member states. The investigation was guided by the main hypothesis that higher levels of press freedom correlate with more positive perceptions of European integration, thereby impacting citizen engagement, understanding, and support for the integration process. Through a comprehensive triangulation of data from the Press Freedom Index, Eurobarometer surveys, and structured interviews with policymakers and journalists' associations, this study provides a robust analysis of these relationships and addresses the research question: **How do the varying levels of press freedom across European Union member states influence citizens' perceptions and understanding of the European integration process, and to what extent does this relationship suggest causation rather than mere correlation?**

Key Findings

- The mix-methods analysis reveals a clear positive correlation between high levels of press freedom and favourable attitudes towards the EU. In high press freedom countries such as Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, and Estonia, a significant majority of citizens exhibit strong support for the EU (European Commission, 2023). This is complemented by high levels of satisfaction with democratic processes in these countries (European Commission, 2023).
- Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy is higher in countries with high press freedom. For instance, Denmark and Finland report satisfaction rates exceeding 70% (European Commission, 2023). The study confirms that press freedom contributes to transparent and accountable governance, essential elements for a well-functioning democracy (Interviews Annexes, p.64).
- Concerns about misinformation and electoral integrity: Despite the level press freedom, concerns about misinformation and electoral manipulation persist across all levels of press freedom (Interviews Annexes, p.64). In high press freedom countries, significant portions of the population remain worried

about misinformation affecting voting decisions (European Commission, 2023). This indicates that while press freedom mitigates some risks, no system is entirely immune to the threats posed by misinformation.

- o Disparities in moderate and low press freedom countries: In moderate press freedom countries, such as Germany and Spain, public support for the EU remains positive but less unanimous compared to high press freedom countries. The presence of misinformation is more pronounced, leading to varied public opinions and engagement levels (European Commission, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2024).
- o In low and very low press freedom countries like Hungary and Greece, there is notable dissatisfaction with democracy and high levels of concern about misinformation and electoral integrity (European Commission, 2023). Journalists' associations report significant promotion of misconceptions due to press constraints, which negatively influence public opinion towards the EU (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).
- o Interviews with journalists' associations (Interviews Annexes, p.64) reveal that in high press freedom environments, the media significantly enhances public understanding of the EU. In these countries, a majority of associations report a direct and significant impact of press freedom on public knowledge and attitudes (Interviews Annexes, p.64). Contrarily, in low press freedom environments, the media often promotes misconceptions, leading to decreased engagement and negative public sentiment towards the EU (Interviews Annexes, p.64).

Addressing the Hypothesis: Conclusion

The main hypothesis stated that higher levels of press freedom correlate with more positive perceptions of European integration, impacting citizen engagement and understanding. The findings from this study support this hypothesis, demonstrating that higher press freedom levels are associated with positive EU perceptions and higher democratic satisfaction. Moreover, the qualitative data from interviews suggest a causative relationship. In countries with high press freedom, the media's role in enhancing public understanding and reducing misinformation is evident. Journalists' associations in these countries affirm that press freedom directly influences public perceptions of the EU.

Contrarily, in low press freedom countries, restricted media environments lead to misinformation and negative public opinion towards the EU. This indicates that press freedom is not just coincidentally related

to public perceptions but plays a critical role in shaping them. The consistent patterns observed across varying levels of press freedom reinforce the causative nature of this relationship.

In conclusion, this thesis confirms that **press freedom significantly influences citizens' perceptions and understanding of the European integration process**. Higher levels of press freedom correlate with positive perceptions of the EU. The evidence strongly suggests that this relationship is causal, as higher press freedom directly impacts the accuracy of information, public discourse, and overall democratic health.

These findings show and highlight the importance of maintaining and enhancing press freedom across EU member states to support informed citizen engagement and a healthy democratic process, ultimately fostering a more integrated and cohesive European Union.

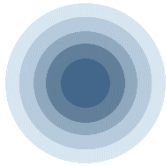
Three patterns of democratic implications

The analysis reveals three distinct patterns of democratic implications:

1. Enhanced democratic satisfaction in high press freedom countries:
In countries with high press freedom , such as Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, there is a clear pattern of enhanced democratic satisfaction. Citizens in these countries report high levels of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, with over 70% expressing positive sentiments (European Commission, 2023). This suggests that robust press freedom contributes to transparent and accountable governance, which is essential for a well-functioning democracy. The ability of the media to provide accurate and comprehensive information fosters public trust in democratic institutions and processes (Reporters Without Borders, 2024; Interviews Annexes).
2. Moderate impact and vulnerability to misinformation in moderate press freedom countries:
In countries with moderate press freedom , such as Germany and Spain, the pattern is one of moderate democratic satisfaction coupled with significant vulnerability to misinformation. While public support for the EU remains generally positive, concerns about misinformation influencing voting decisions are more pronounced, with 68% of citizens in Spain expressing high levels of worry (European Commission, 2023). This indicates that moderate press freedom environments, while still supporting informed public discourse, are more susceptible to the negative impacts of misinformation. This can lead to varied levels of public engagement and satisfaction with democratic processes (Reporters Without Borders, 2024; Interviews Annexes).
3. Negative democratic sentiments and high misinformation concerns in low press freedom countries:
In countries with low and very low press freedom , such as Hungary and Greece, there is a pronounced pattern of negative democratic sentiments and high concerns about misinformation and electoral integrity. In Hungary, only 8% of citizens are very satisfied with democracy, while 57% are very worried

about misinformation and electoral manipulation (European Commission, 2023). Journalists' associations in these countries report that press constraints lead to significant promotion of misconceptions and negative public opinion towards the EU (Reporters Without Borders, 2024: Interviews Annexes). This highlights the impact of restricted press freedom on democratic satisfaction and public trust in electoral processes.
Table 18. <i>Three patterns of democratic implications (Own creation)</i>

These patterns underscore the critical role of press freedom in shaping democratic health. High press freedom fosters greater democratic satisfaction and trust, moderate press freedom maintains a delicate balance but is vulnerable to misinformation, and low press freedom severely undermines democratic satisfaction and increases misinformation concerns. Ensuring robust press freedom is therefore essential for the health and stability of democracies within the European Union.



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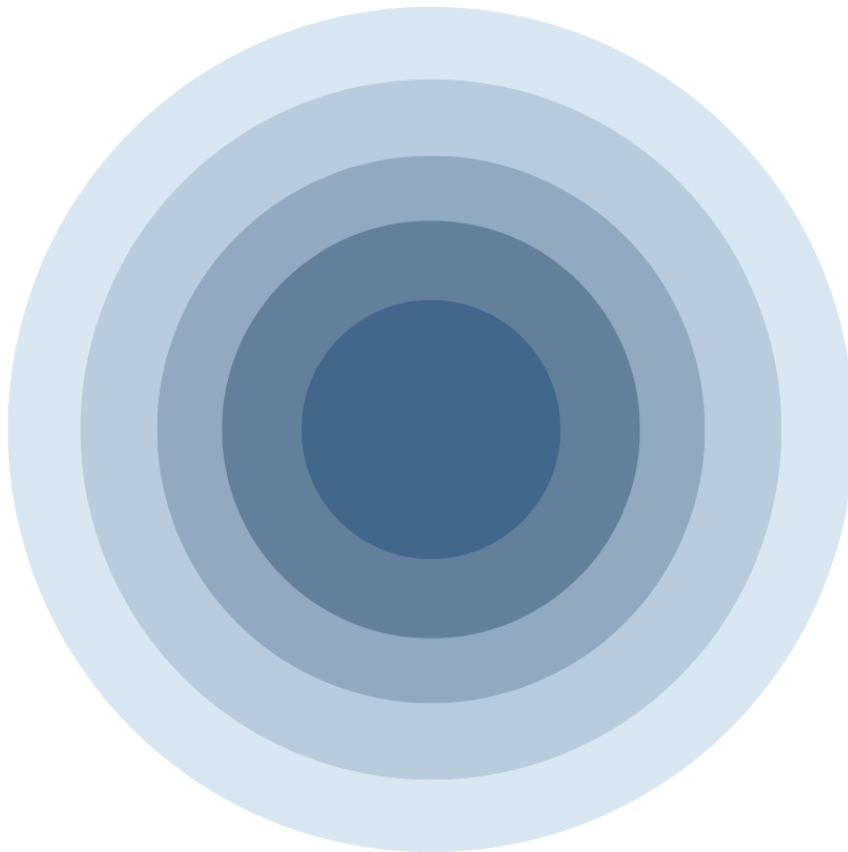
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ANNEXES

CITIZEN'S PERCEPTION OF THE EUROPEAN
INTEGRATION PROCESS

INFLUENCE OF THE LEVEL OF PRESS FREEDOM



ANNEXES - CITIZEN'S PERCEPTION OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

To facilitate review, I have assembled all the interviews in a **GDrive folder**, accessible via this [\[link\]](#). Additionally, I have added all the individual links for each interview conducted.

- I. Interview with Austria - Austrian Press Council
[\[link\]](#)
- II. Interview with Belgium - Association of European Journalists in Belgium (AEJ Belgium)
[\[link\]](#)
- III. Interview with Bulgaria - Bulgarian Association of Travel Writers and Journalists
[\[link\]](#)
- IV. Interview with Croatia - Croatian Journalists' Association (HND)
[\[link\]](#)
- V. Interview with Cyprus - Union of Cyprus Journalists
[\[link\]](#)
- VI. Interview with Czech Republic - Transitions Czech Republic
[\[link\]](#)
- VII. Interview with Denmark - Foreign Press Association
[\[link\]](#)
- VIII. Interview with Estonia - Estonian Association of Journalists
[\[link\]](#)
- IX. Interview with Finland - Union of Journalists in Finland
[\[link\]](#)
- X. Interview with France - Syndicat National des Journalistes (SNJ)
[\[link\]](#)
- XI. Interview with Germany - German Press Council
[\[link\]](#)
- XII. Interview with Greece - Journalists' Union of the Athens Daily Newspaper
[\[link\]](#)
- XIII. Interview with Hungary – MÚOSZ
[\[link\]](#)
- XIV. Interview with Ireland - Interview with Centre for Independent Journalism
[\[link\]](#)
- XV. Interview with Italy - Federazione Nazionale Della Stampa Italiana
[\[link\]](#)
- XVI. Interview with Latvia
 - a. Baltic Centre for Media Excellence
[\[link\]](#)
 - b. Interview with The Latvian Association of Journalists
[\[link\]](#)
- XVII. Interview with Lithuania - Lithuanian Journalism Centre
[\[link\]](#)
- XVIII. Interview with Luxembourg – ALJP
[\[link\]](#)
- XIX. Interview with Malta - The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation
[\[link\]](#)

ANNEXES - CITIZEN'S PERCEPTION OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

- XX. Interview with The Netherlands - Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten (NVJ)
[\[link\]](#)
- XXI. Interview with Poland - Society of Journalists (Warsaw)
[\[link\]](#)
- XXII. Interview with Portugal - Sindicato dos Jornalistas
[\[link\]](#)
- XXIII. Interview with Romania - RR. Radio Romania
[\[link\]](#)
- XXIV. Interview with Slovakia
- a. World between the Lines media initiative
[\[link\]](#)
 - b. Interview with Journalism department at Comenius University in Slovakia
[\[link\]](#)
 - c. Interview with Print and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, executive body of the Association for Protection of Journalistic Ethics
[\[link\]](#)
- XXV. Interview with Slovenia - Slovene Association of Journalists
[\[link\]](#)
- XXVI. Interview with Spain
- a. Agrupación de Periodistas de UGT
[\[link\]](#)
 - b. Interview with Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España (FAPE)
[\[link\]](#)
- XXVII. Interview with Sweden - Tidningsutgivarna (TU), Swedish Media Publishers' Association
[\[link\]](#)