

SUMMARY  
of  
REPORT

# How Public Are the Public Service Media?

A Survey of News and Current Affairs  
Programmes on BNT1 and Horizont  
in the Period from 19 October to 29 November 2020

*Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia  
and  
For a New Partnership in Journalism Foundation*

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## **TEAM:**

Maria Neykova (Project Leader)

Milena Iakimova

Ralitsa Kovacheva

Dimitar Vatsov

Valentin Valkanov

Simona Hristova

Buryan Aleksiev

Vanya Serafimova-Akgün (Administrative Manager)

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# 1. OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THE SURVEY

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The survey had two main objectives:

1. To establish whether there is disinformation in the Bulgarian public service media;
2. To establish to what extent they perform their public service function.

Media perform their public service function if they maintain a good balance both in reporting on issues (topics) of vital importance to the public and in presenting the points of view of the different stakeholders involved. That is why the general task of the survey was to identify **the exact balances in terms of topics and speakers** presented by BNT1 and Horizont, first, in their **news programmes**, and second, in **current affairs programmes**. Disbalances are treated as deficits in the performance of their public service function, therefore the survey offers recommendations on how to overcome them.

The other objective – checking for cases of disinformation – has two dimensions as well. For the sake of maximum objectivity, we use the term “disinformation” in the strictest sense: by “disinformation” we understand only information that is both **verifiably false or misleading** and **verifiably intentional**.<sup>1</sup> Such cases were not found on Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and Bulgarian National Radio (BNR). The problem with the distortion of the objectivity of information today is more complex, though. In the contemporary media environment, there are numerous cases of promotion of unverified claims or of selective presentation of facts, on the basis of which **false** generalizations and conclusions are made. Such conclusions are often based on

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<sup>1</sup> Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation. 12 March 2018. <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>.

conspiracy theories or on rumours, and often include hate speech. In many cases, they are unintentional or cannot be verified to be intentional. We call them “fake stories”: interpretations that are not based on facts or which selectively present some facts and make **verifiably false** conclusions or claims. This survey sought **to establish whether there are not only pure cases of disinformation in BNT and BNR but also fake stories.**

A sub-objective of the survey was to **trace and analyse the subsequent online dissemination of the cases of disinformation and/or fake stories** found on BNT and BNR.

The scope of the monitoring of BNT and BNR was preliminarily limited to their flagship channels – BNT1 and Horizont. In a second step, the scope of the survey was methodologically limited both in terms of time and of programmes monitored.

The monitoring covered a period of six weeks – **from 19 October to 29 November 2020.**

Monitored on a daily basis in this period were **the prime-time news programmes of the two media outlets** (Horizont’s *Vecheren osvedomitelen byuletin/Evening News Bulletin* at 6 pm and BNT1’s *Po sveta i u nas/Around the World and at Home* at 8 pm) as well as eight current affairs programmes (according to a typological sample: four each of BNT1 and Horizont, broadcast once a week):

1. *Referendum;*
2. *Panorama;*
3. *Denyat zapochva s Georgi Lyubenov/The Day Begins with Georgi Lyubenov (Saturday);*

4. *Denyat zapochva s Georgi Lyubenov/The Day Begins with Georgi Lyubenov (Sunday);*
5. *Sabota 150/Saturday 150;*
6. *Nedelya 150/Sunday 150;*
7. *Politicheski NEkorektno/Politically INcorrect (with Petar Volgin, Saturday);*
8. *Politicheski NEkorektno/Politically INcorrect (with Silvia Velikova, Sunday).*

## 2. ACTIVITIES

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### 2.1. RESEARCH

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Four expert interviews and systematic monitoring of the different news and current affairs programmes on BNT1 and Horizont, conducted by the project team in the period from 15 August to 15 October 2020. The following objectives were achieved:

1. Cases of fake stories were identified;
2. A typological sample of programmes subject to full monitoring was drawn;
3. Standardized code matrices were created for description of the news and current affairs programmes.

The main unit of the news programme matrix is “news item” (segment of a topic). The main unit of the current affairs programme matrix is “statement of speaker” (guest or journalist) on a given topic. Each unit in both matrices was encoded according to numerous indicators, among which the main ones are: 1. Subject area; 2. On-air time; 3. Genre; 4. Typological position of the protagonist. Each unit was subsequently described *in vivo* in order to identify the main theses promoted.

## 2.2. FULL MONITORING

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All broadcasts of the two prime-time news programmes and of the eight current affairs programmes in the period from **19 October to 29 November 2020** were encoded according to the two matrices.

As a result, **1,653 units of the news programmes** of Horizont and BNT1, and **424 units of the eight current affairs programmes** were identified.

This is the database subjected to quantitative analysis in Part 2 (News Programmes on BNR and BNT) and Part 3 (Current Affairs Programmes) of the Report. The method applied is **quantitative content analysis**, through which conclusions were made regarding the presence or absence of balance in the presentation of the different topics and types of speakers by the two public service media.

In addition, several cases of fake stories on BNT1 and Horizont were identified through qualitative content analysis, fact-checking and semantic analysis (of buzzwords such as “Sorosoid”, “*rubladzhiya*”, i.e. “ruble-paid fifth columnist”, etc.).

## 2.3. ANALYSIS OF THE DISSEMINATION OF FAKE STORIES FROM BNT AND BNR TO OTHER MEDIA ONLINE

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This part consists of a case study – of the news that the organizers of the anti-government protests were “convening a People’s Court”, aired on BNT1 on 8 September – whose dissemination in different online media was traced through the SENSIKA system.

SENSIKA is an automated media monitoring and analysis system which monitors and archives the online space in dozens of languages, in real time – including more than 3,500 Bulgarian-language websites and blogs (it archives even those that have been removed from the web). SENSIKA has algorithms for search by keyword – in essence, this is an automated corpus-linguistic method where the researcher defines the corpus of texts (through different filters: language, type of media, etc.) and specifies the keywords to search for in them.

A total of 183 online articles circulating this news were identified, and a frequency analysis of its dissemination was conducted. An additional content analysis was carried out to identify the speakers who circulated it, as well as the types of editorial strategies of the media that circulated and/or refuted it.



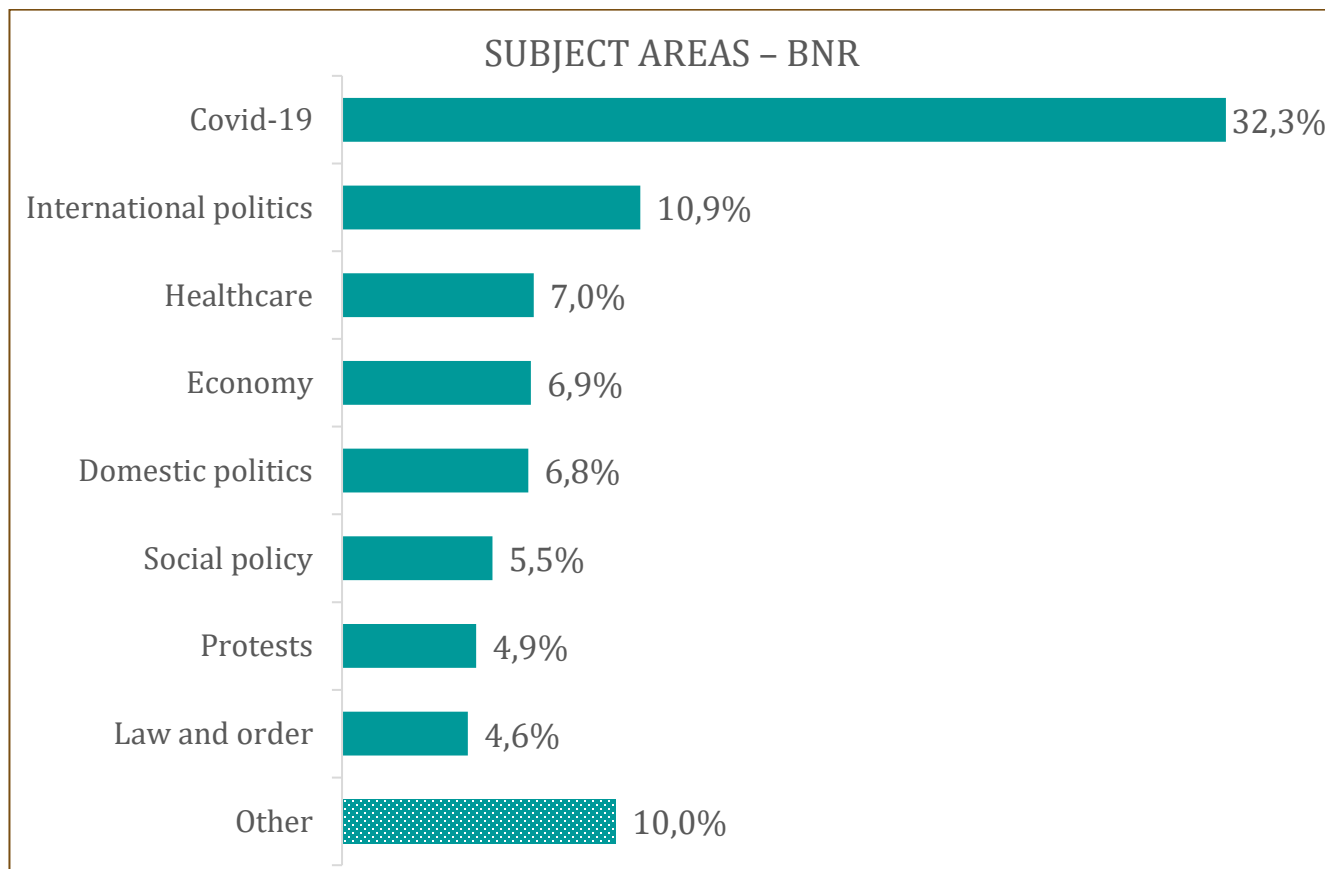
### 3. THE NEWS ON BNT AND BNR

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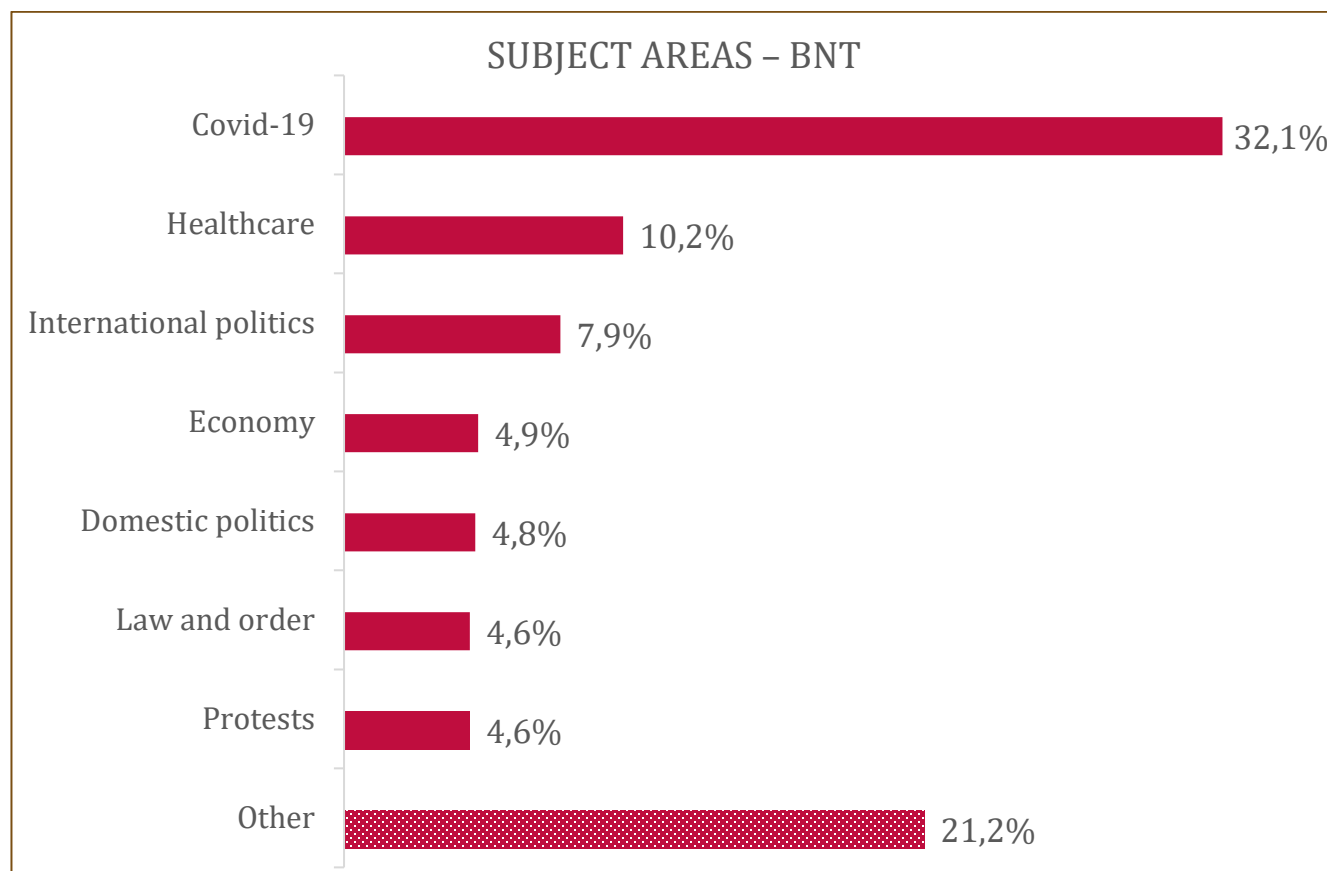
The most frequently used form of news presentation on BNR and BNT in the monitored period was the news report – 45.5% and 52% of all news items respectively.

The topics in the news followed the public’s interest and the top-ranking topic in the monitored period was “Covid-19”. Noteworthy in the case of BNR is the attention paid to “international politics” – ranked second and, moreover, not just because of pandemic-related news.

**Figure 4: Subject areas – BNR**



**Figure 5: Subject areas – BNT**



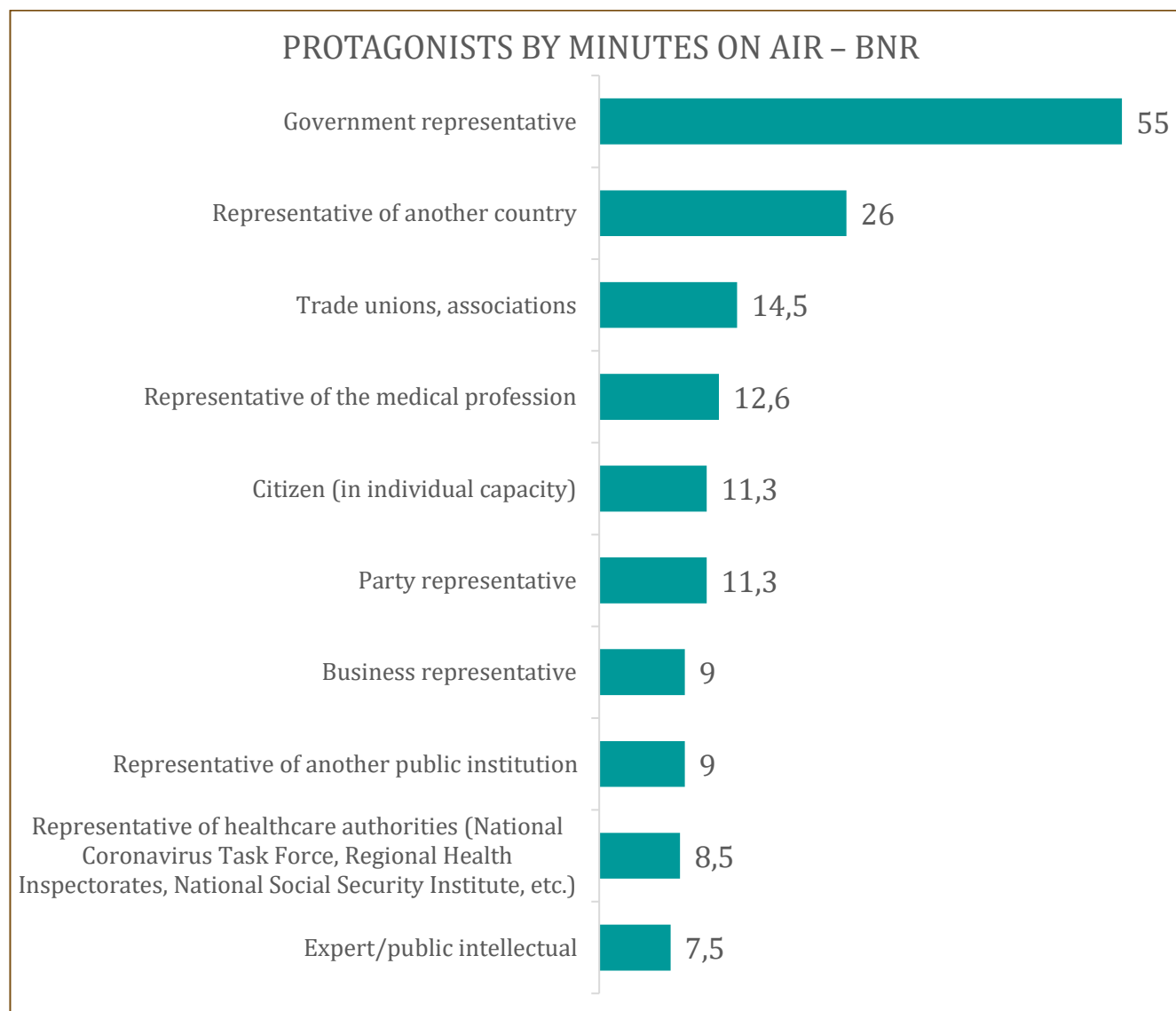
Bulgarian government representatives were the prevalent speakers in the news – in terms of on-air time, they took up a total of 55 minutes on BNR and 83 minutes on BNT. The prevalence of government speakers on BNT is obvious.

Citizens had a significant presence in the news. Their voices in the BNR news sounded for more than 11 minutes, and in the BNT news for 56 minutes. In a significant number of cases, however, those were often anonymous voices and persons without names.

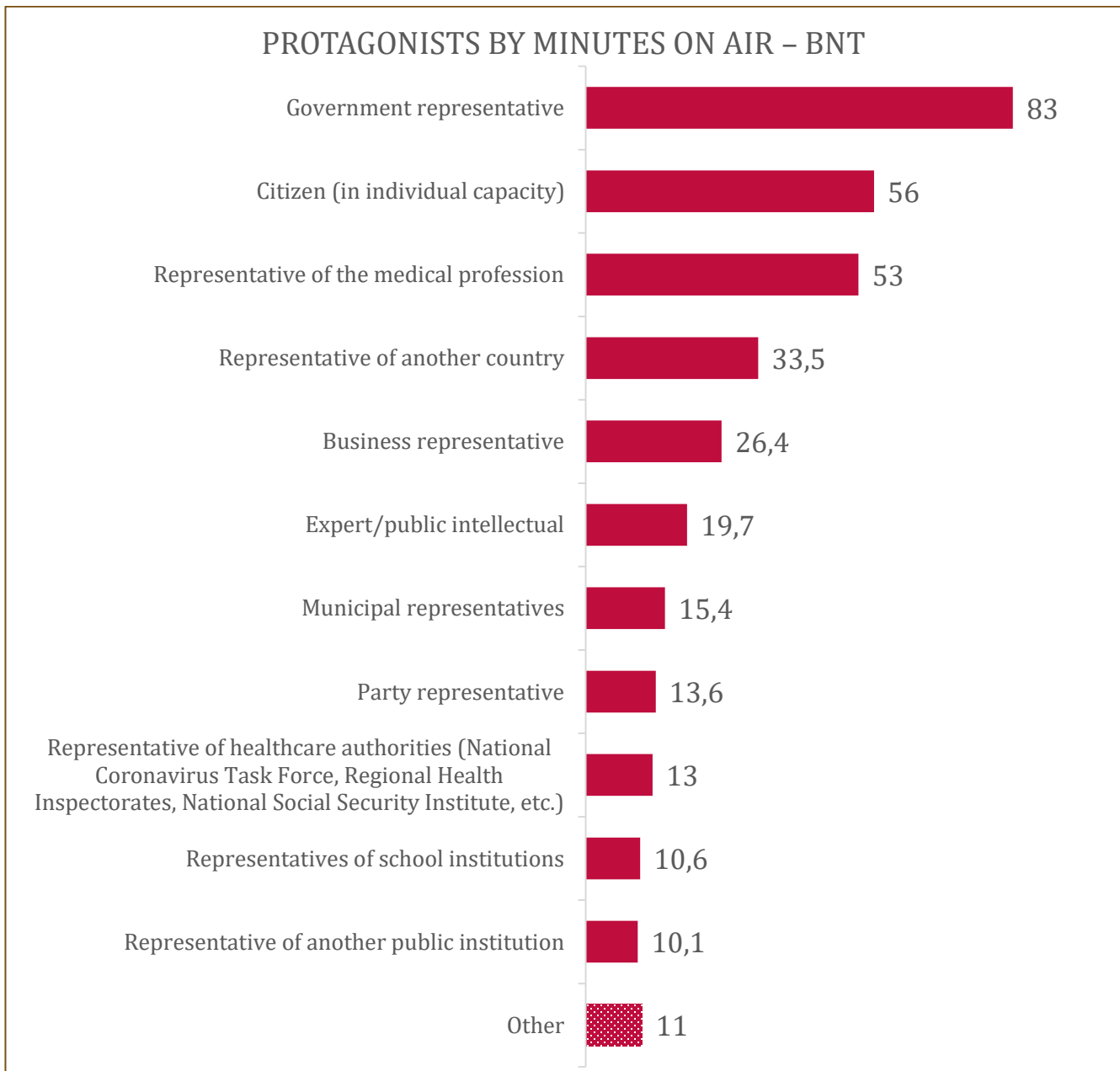
At the same time, citizens were present in the news of both media more as individuals or groups (patients, unemployed, clients, etc.) than as part of organized civil

society structures. That is, “ordinary people”, not citizens, were represented in the news. The practice of presenting citizens in the news without their names is problematic.

**Figure 8: Protagonists by on-air time – BNR**



**Figure 9: Protagonists by on-air time - BNT**



Institutional information was a significant news source for both media: 12.4% for BNT and 19.3% for BNR. It must be borne in mind that in a substantial number of cases where the source was a journalist, the original information also came from an institution.

## 4. CURRENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMMES

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The broadcasts of eight current affairs programmes were monitored for a period of six weeks (19 October – 29 November 2020). A total of forty-eight broadcasts were monitored – twenty-four each on BNT1 and Horizont (all eight current affairs programmes are broadcast once a week).

In the monitored six-week period, the current affairs programmes of BNT1 and Horizont included in the sample were adequate to the public interest, understood as pluralism of viewpoints, an agenda that is important to the widest possible circles of society, and level of professionalism in commenting on topics of public interest.

The monitoring did not find any cases of disinformation in the strict sense as defined by the European Commission<sup>2</sup> – either on the part of journalists or on the part of guests.

The predominant topic during the six monitored weeks was “Covid-19” – especially in the BNT1 programmes.

The second most widely discussed topics were in the area of “International politics” – an area in which BNT1 and Horizont differed significantly. Unlike BNT, BNR has a systematic editorial policy on coverage of international issues, mainly on the current affairs programme *Saturday 150*. On Horizont, international politics was the subject of 42.1% of all thematic units, or twice as many as those on BNT1.

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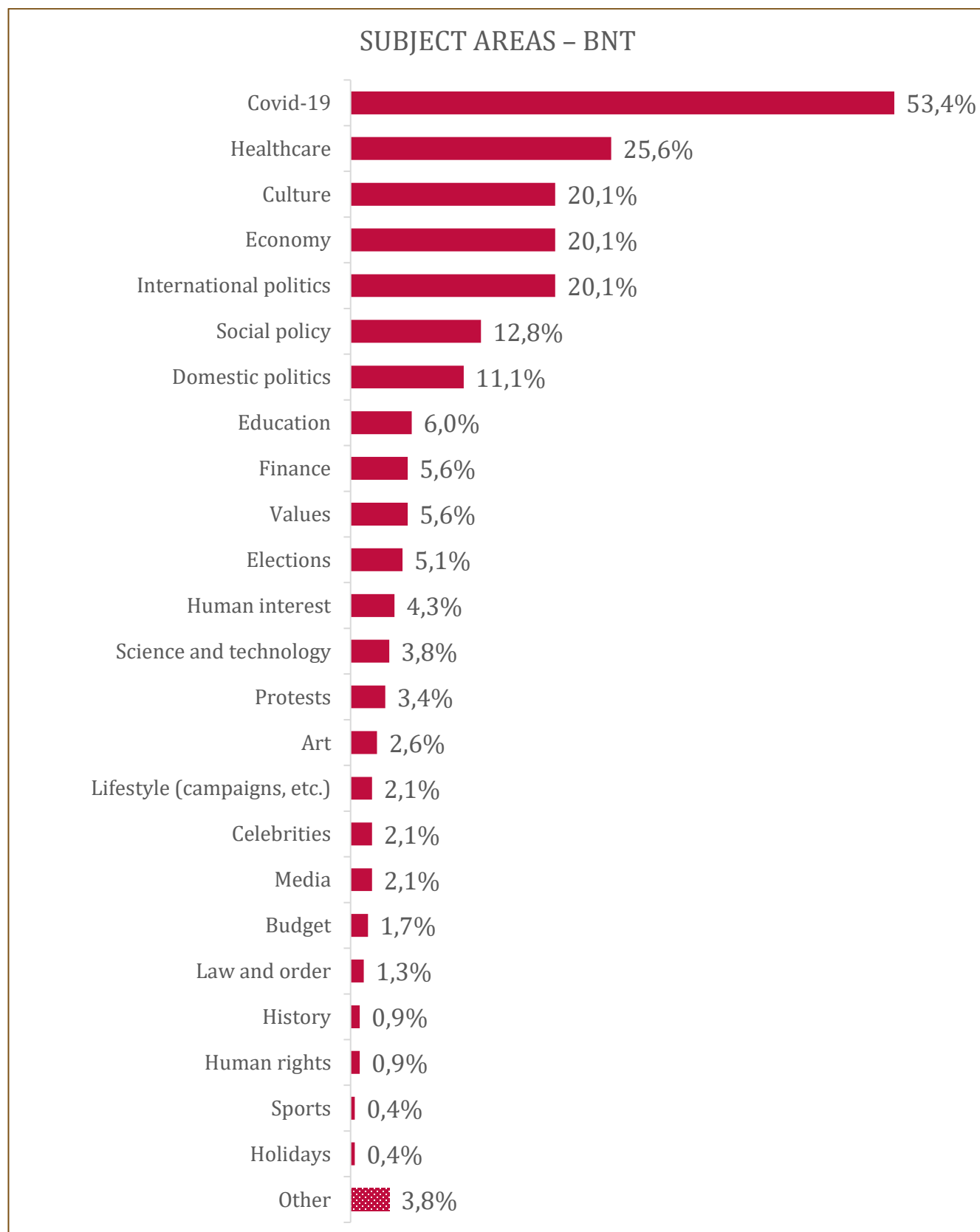
<sup>2</sup> “Disinformation is understood as verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm” (COM(2018) 236 final).

Next were topics in the subject areas of “Culture”, “Healthcare” and “Domestic politics”. However, it is difficult to judge to what extent culture and healthcare per se were of interest to the programmes as they were discussed mainly in the context of the pandemic and the measures against it.

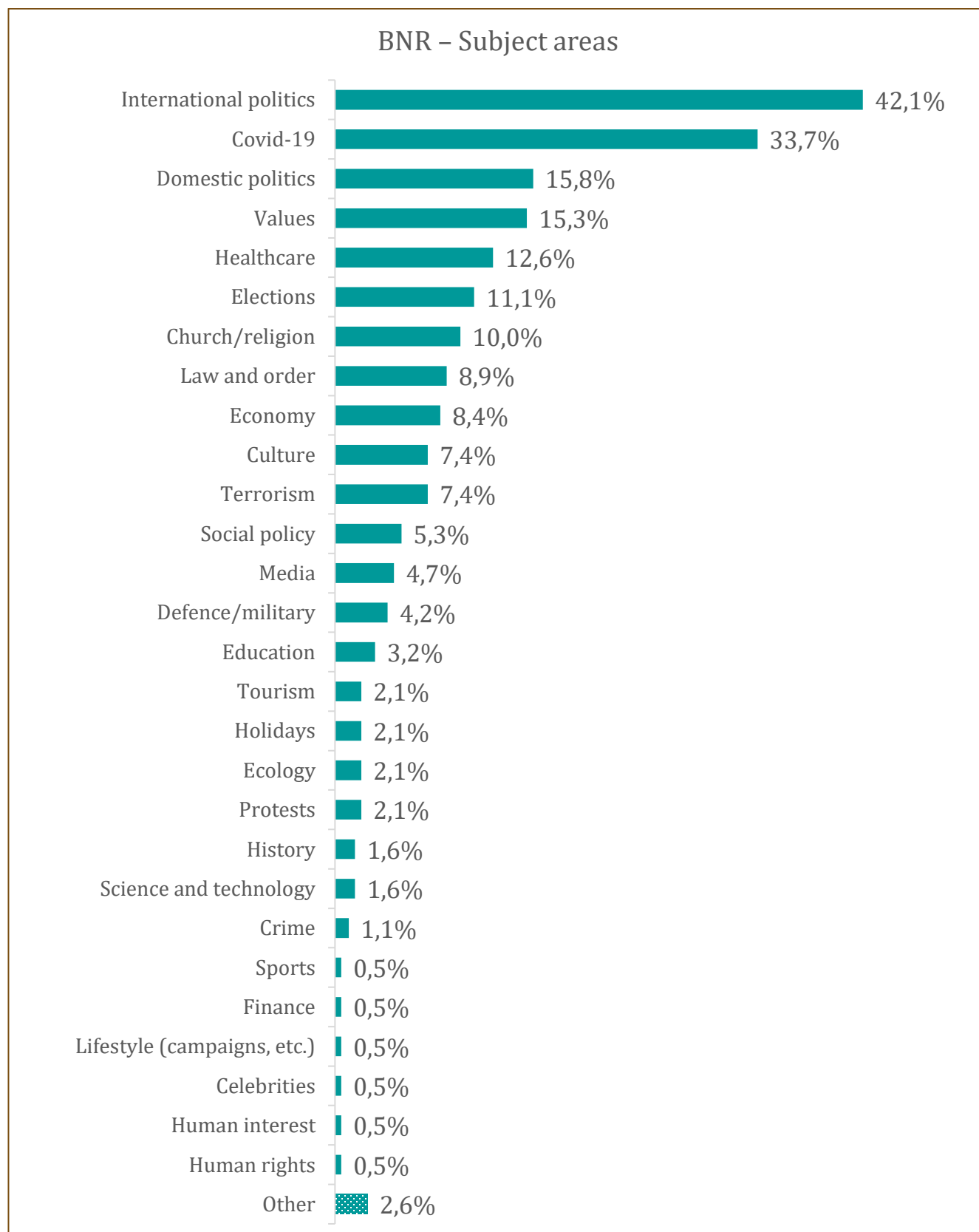
Especially noteworthy is the marginal place of topics in the areas of “Education” and “Social policy”, which were discussed only and solely in the context of the pandemic and the measures against it.

In most of the subject areas, the monitored current affairs programmes tended to be reactive, following the calendar of public institutions and the news agenda – the editorial policy of both BNT1 and Horizont rarely offered an alternative agenda to the public. **This reactive, not proactive, approach is a main deficit in the performance of their public service function, identified by the monitoring.**

**Figure 24: Subject areas – BNT**



**Figure 25: Subject areas – BNR**

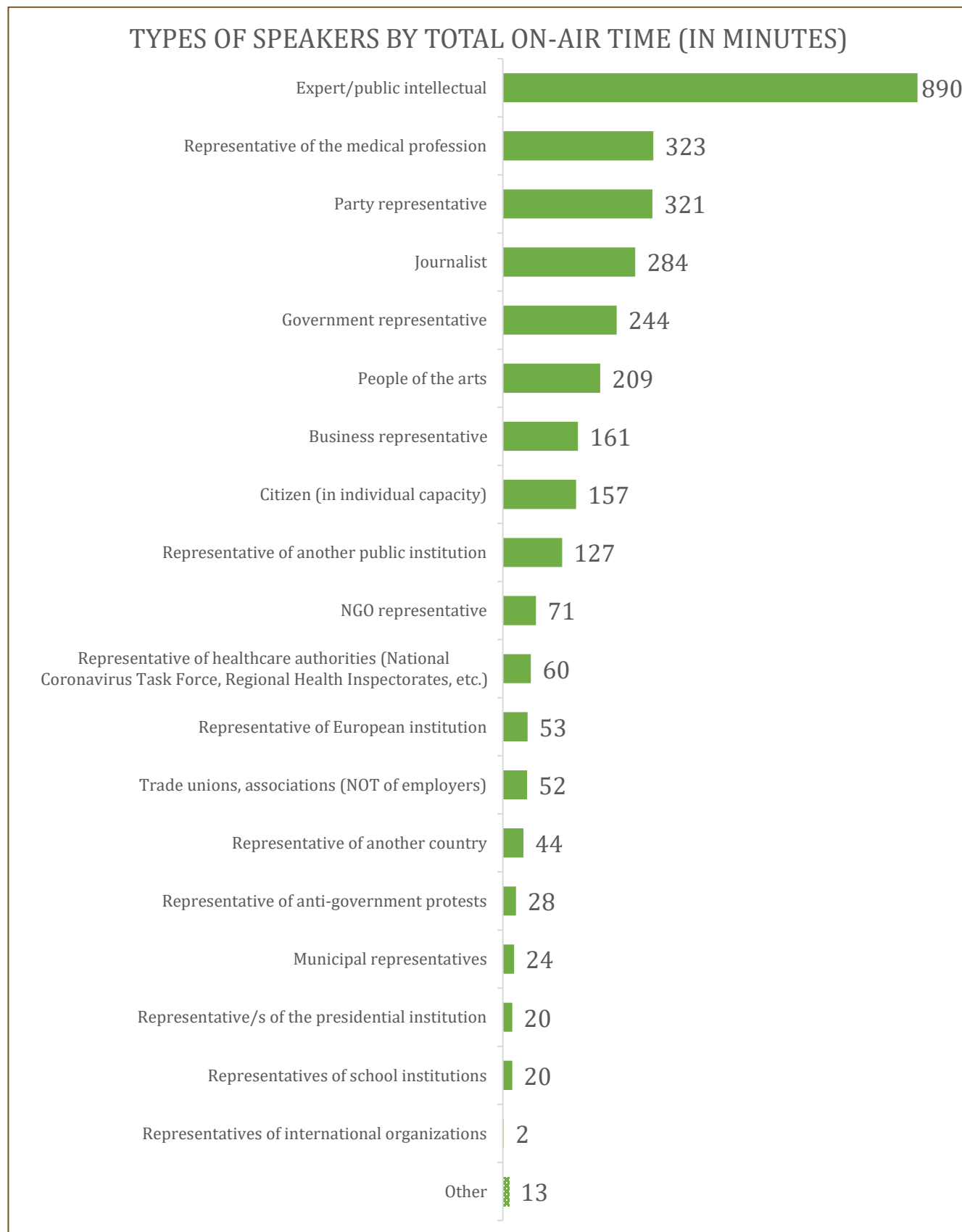




Among the speakers on all topics, first – by a wide margin – were experts, analysts and public intellectuals (34.6% of thematic units and 28.7% of broadcast time). Next by number of appearances were journalists and medical workers, but party representatives and government representatives were de facto given more on-air time.

Among the party representatives there was parity between the ruling coalition and the parliamentary opposition, but among the party representatives of the ruling coalition the representatives of VMRO had three times as many appearances as those of GERB. The senior coalition partner, GERB, was practically indistinguishable from the executive branch of government, but this is not a deficit of Bulgarian media – it is a specific structural characteristic of Bulgarian politics. By extent, the extra-parliamentary opposition was marginally represented.

**Figure 33: Types of speakers by on-air time – total for BNT and BNR**



The way civil society appeared on the public service media is noteworthy: it rarely appeared in organized form. In the few instances in which civil society organizations appeared on BNT1 and Horizont, it was mostly through representatives of business associations. Non-profit non-governmental organizations were given just two percent of the broadcast time, and representatives of the anti-government protests – less than one percent. On the other hand, five percent of the broadcast time was given to citizens who spoke in an individual capacity, promoting radical or conspiracy theories and complaining. In effect, this is privileging the so-called “ordinary people” at the expense both of organized and active citizens.

**This is the second main deficit of BNT1 and Horizont in performing their public service function: lack of meaningful integration of the voices of civil society.**

## 5. DISSEMINATION OF FAKE STORIES

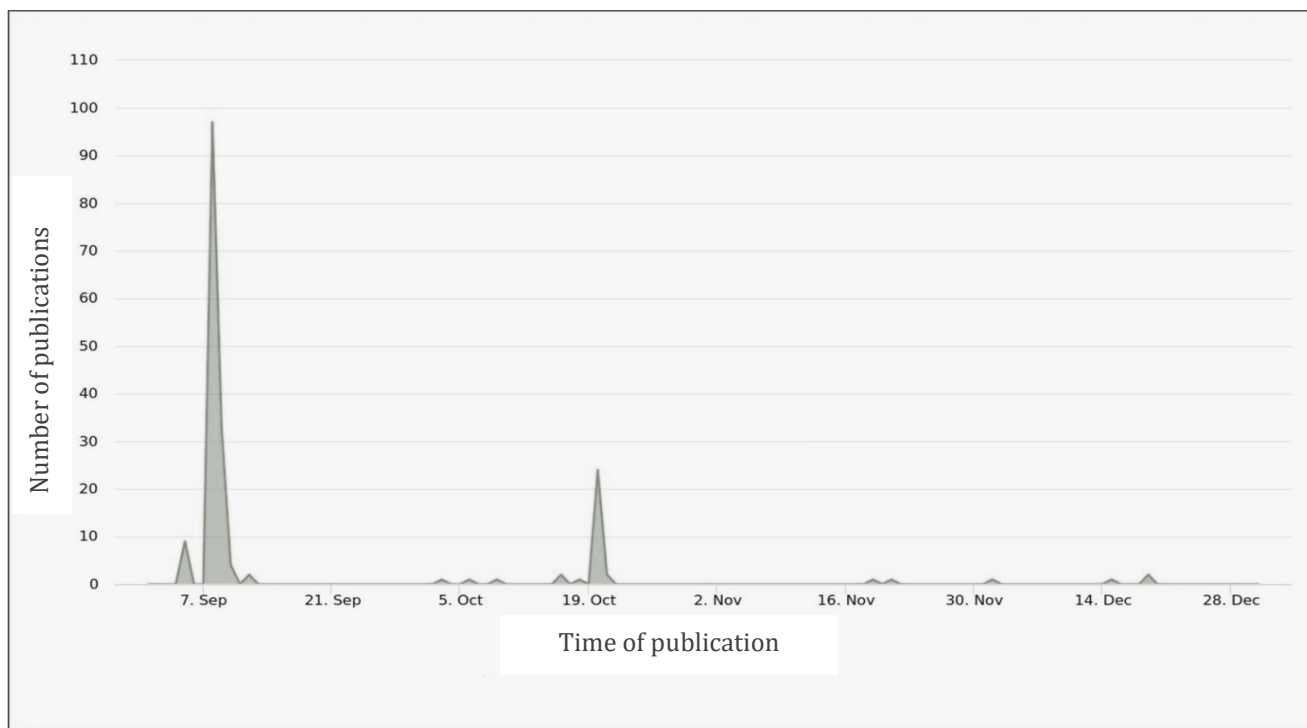
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In the monitored period, BNT1 and Horizont **did not spread disinformation.**

Despite this, the monitoring identified **several cases of appearance of “fake stories”** (misleading claims, conspiracy theories, offensive language): through “a listener’s phone-in” on Horizont, on the programme *Politically INcorrect* with Petar Volgin, and a single case on BNT1’s prime-time news programme. A case study was conducted of the online dissemination of the news about “the convocation of a People’s Court”, aired on BNT on 8 September and subsequently refuted by BNT itself.

Although this news was not aired on prime-time television and was refuted on the same day, its dissemination online shows that BNT has significant authority, and hence, strong political and media influence. The news was picked up by several high-ranking politicians who used it for political propaganda and, by their statements, multiplied its spread. It was also picked up by other media outlets, some of which turned it into part of a disinformation strategy. This news was circulated in 183 publications, the overwhelming majority of them published on the day it broke and on the next day.

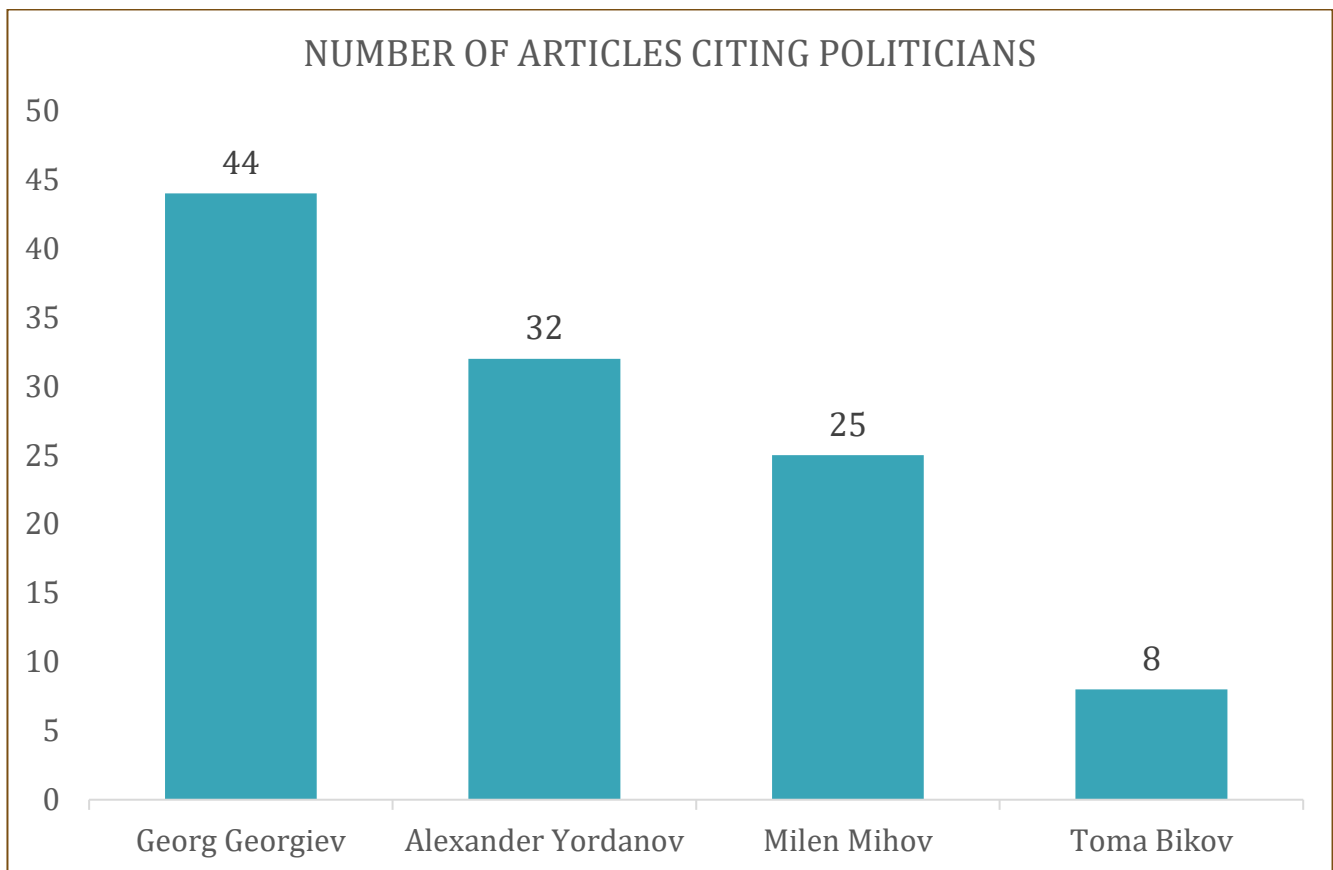
**Figure 34: Frequency analysis of the online dissemination of the fake story about “the convocation of a People’s Court”**



The viral effect of this fake story was stopped thanks to its timely refutation by a number of media outlets as well as by BNT itself.

At the same time, the monitoring identified four politicians who used BNT’s false information and circulated it to vilify the anti-government protests. It turned out that almost 60% of all articles circulating this news were citing those politicians.

**Figure 35: Number of articles citing politicians**



Also analysed were the editorial strategies through which three media outlets – factor.bg, PIK and BLITZ – continued to spread this news despite its official refutation by BNT.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

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Based on the findings of the survey, one may conclude that BNT and BNR are performing their public service function and protecting the public interest. This must be recognized as a significant achievement not only of the public service media themselves, which are managing to maintain an independent editorial policy, but also of Bulgaria's overall democratic development in recent decades.

Still, some concrete disbalances were identified in the coverage of publicly important topics and the presentation of the different points of view of the different stakeholders involved, along with several cases of production of fake stories. On their basis, the following recommendations can be made:

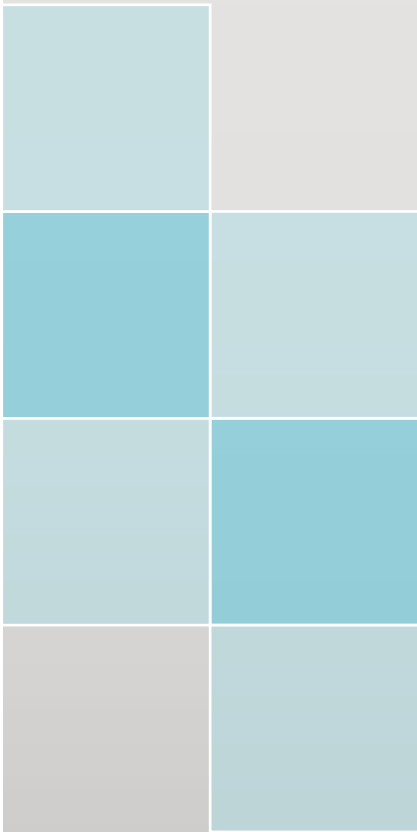
1. We have found that citizens are present in the news (of both BNT1 and Horizont) and current affairs programmes (only of Horizont) more often as individuals or as groups (patients, unemployed, clients, etc., quite frequently anonymous) than as part of organized civil society structures – representatives of non-governmental organizations and representatives of various active protest groups. Citizens are thus often treated not as active citizens but as “ordinary people” who are used to illustrate some point or are given an outlet to vent their complaints. We recommend that BNT and BNR – acting in accordance with their public service function – **develop a special policy to support active citizens promoting various causes and to help structure civil society.**

2. We have found that on both BNT1 and Horizont – both on the news and the current affairs programmes – the representatives of the extra-parliamentary opposition who, according to all public opinion polls, enjoy significant public support<sup>3</sup>, receive disproportionately less coverage than the representatives of the government and of the parliamentary parties. We recommend that BNT and BNR be **more sensitive to actual public attitudes** instead of strictly following the institutional agenda.
  
3. We have found, directly connected also to the above, that BNT and BNR are to a large extent reactive with regard to the agenda of public institutions and of the general media landscape, and seldom – if at all – actively promote topics and issues that are important to the public. The extremely marginal position of the subjects of “Education” and “Social policy” in both media is a clear indicator of this: insofar as the two subjects are given any broadcast time at all, it is solely in the context of “Covid-19”. We recommend that BNT and BNR themselves assume a more active public role: **moving from a reactive to a proactive editorial policy.**
  
4. We have found that BNT and BNR do not spread disinformation. Despite this – very rarely – fake stories appear on air and, because of the high authority of the public service media, can spread very fast. We recommend that **each of the two media develop additional capacity for fact-checking and early warning about cases of disinformation and fake stories**, whereby their present policy of providing pure information content will be continued and improved.

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<sup>3</sup> All polling agencies in the monitored period estimated that the total votes won by the extra-parliamentary opposition in the coming general elections in April 2021 would outnumber those cast for the ruling majority.





**Human and Social Studies Foundation –  
Sofia (HSSF)**

CONTACT DETAILS:

11, Slaveykov Sq., 4th floor, room 2,  
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria

E-mail: [office@hssfoundation.org](mailto:office@hssfoundation.org)

Website: <http://hssfoundation.org/>

