

Croatian fact-checking in the context of the Mediterranean media system: Actors, standards, and practices of fact-checkers under the *Točno tako* platform

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Abstract

This article examines the fact-checking ecosystem in Croatia using the comparative media systems theory. Twenty-one fact-checking projects under the *Točno tako* platform were analysed through content analysis of their websites. The analysis is operationalized within the framework of media systems theory, and systematically codes published materials related to stated missions, declared methodologies, financial and organizational transparency, and compliance with recognized international standards, such as the European Fact-Checking Standards Network. The results of the analysis, conducted independently by three researchers, show that the Croatian fact-checking ecosystem reflects several characteristics associated with the Mediterranean media systems: a predominance of NGO models with several variations, significant diversity in transparency and methodology, and significant variation in adherence to international standards, with only a minority of projects fully meeting EFCSN criteria. The analysis identifies points of alignment with and divergence from the typical Mediterranean media systems, providing empirical insights into their development and sustainability in the context of fact-checking. The findings reveal that this ecosystem exhibits certain features of the Mediterranean model, but also new hybrid forms due to convergence with the EU policies.

Keywords: fact-checking, comparative media systems theory, Croatia, transparency, the Mediterranean model¹.

Introduction / Uvod

Fact-checking has become one of the main pillars of the global response to contemporary challenges of misinformation, polarization, and lack of trust in traditional media and public institutions. While the practice of verifying information

¹ AI use disclaimer: During the preparation of this work the authors used Grammarly and Gemini in order to correct grammatical and syntax errors, and creation of tables and charts from the coding categories from Excel. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.



has roots in traditional journalism, the rise of dedicated fact-checking organizations, operating within and beyond newsrooms, has marked a significant shift in journalistic routines (Graves and Amazeen, 2019; Graves, 2016). This evolution has been prompted by the rise of digital platforms, accelerated news cycles, the proliferation of user-generated content, and fragmented public discourse. The global media ecosystem has become characterized by uncertainty and persistent debates about what counts as truth (Graves and Cherubini, 2016; García-Gordillo et al., 2025).

Unlike in the USA, the European fact-checking ecosystem exhibits some variations in organizational structures. Some projects operate inside established newsrooms, while others are run by NGOs, universities, or multidisciplinary alliances (Cherubini and Graves, 2016; García-Gordillo et al., 2025). Consequently, the EU has become a pioneer in the professionalization and standardization of fact-checking practice, combining national traditions with EU initiatives to coordinate transparency, methodological rigor, and ethical accountability (García-Gordillo et al., 2025). Recent regulatory interventions, followed by the foundation of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) and the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), have accelerated the adoption of common standards among practitioners (Vinhas and Bastas, 2025; Cazzamatta et al., 2024). However, a growing body of research debates the degree of independence and legitimacy in the context where fact-checking organizations are incentivized and promoted by public policy and European regulatory frameworks (Bleyer-Simon, 2025).

Fact-checking is simultaneously shaped by these international trends and by national context, including media system characteristics, political culture, and regulatory standards. In Croatia, the development of fact-checking has evolved on the foundation of ongoing media system transformations, continuous political parallelism, and the lack of resources typical for peripheral Mediterranean societies (Peruško, 2013; Grbeša and Volarević, 2021; Grbeša, 2025).

The recent establishment and operation of the *Točno tako* platform, a collaborative structure encompassing the work of 21 independent fact-checking projects, is a unique empirical site for analysing the transparency, methodology, and compliance practices of Croatian fact-checking organizations in relation to European standards. The website content of these organizations has been examined through the lens of media systems theory, with particular attention to Croatia's positioning within the Mediterranean media system model and its post-socialist legacies (Peruško, 2013; Hallin and Mancini, 2011; Moreno-Gil et al., 2022). The first part of the paper discusses the origins and development of external fact-checking practice and the Croatian fact-checking ecosystem. Secondly, the paper delves into comparative media systems theory with special emphasis on the Polarized Pluralist or Mediterranean model, situating Croatia within this context. The research questions are followed by a detailed explanation of the methodology and a discussion of the results. Conclusion summarizes the main findings of the research, with the stated limitations and avenues for the future studies.

Research background and theoretical framework / **Kontekst istraživanja i teorijski okvir**

Fact-checking: internal and external journalistic practice / **Provjera činjenica: unutarnja i vanjska novinarska praksa**

The rise of fact-checking as an integral part of journalistic practice has its origins in the United States in the 1920s, as the editorial process of verifying the accuracy of reported information, also known as internal fact-checking. Gradually, it became part of a standard verification process of news organisations and eventually developed into a distinctive editorial practice where journalists assessed the truth of claims made by politicians, public figures, or journalists, shifting to the external aspect of fact-checking, i.e., verifying the accuracy of information in the early 2000s. This practice of political fact-checking resulted in the sudden rise of fact-checking organisations, such as FactCheck.org (2003), PolitiFact (2007), and The Washington Post's Fact Checker, which promoted fact-checking as a mainstream journalistic practice and a distinctive research interest (Graves, 2016). This new approach to external fact-checking shifted journalism away from the neutral stance of procedural objectivity toward a model of scientific objectivity, where truth judgments are based on verifiable evidence (Cazzamatta, 2025).

The rise of fact-checking organisations in Europe came at a later stage compared to the US, reflecting internal issues such as the rapid increase of disinformation campaigns, economic issues, COVID-19, declining public trust in institutions, or, on the other hand, an increase in democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans (Graves and Amazeen, 2019). Thus, by 2020, dozens of fact-checking initiatives had appeared across Europe, characterised by various models of operation. They were adopted across newsrooms, media houses, and became part of university/academic projects, civil society organisations, NGOs, and others. The funding schemes and organisational structures have varied greatly among them. At the same time, many of these initiatives have been directly connected with major news organisations such as the BBC or Le Monde in France, allowing for their sustainability. Today, Europe has over 140 fact-checking organisations, with over 70 compliant with IFCN or EFCSN standards, highlighting the growth and increasing recognition of this practice across the continent (García-Gordillo et al., 2025; EDMO, 2025).

It is also important to highlight the role of the European Union in promoting fact-checking activities. For instance, the EU conducted a comprehensive inquiry in 2018 into the phenomenon of fake news (a term widely used before disinformation was more commonly adopted), which led to legislative action dedicated to tackling this phenomenon across approximately a dozen countries (Funke, 2018). This trend was further supported by large online platforms such as Meta and Google, which have financially supported many fact-checking and disinformation projects in Central and Eastern Europe (Graves and Amazeen, 2019).

The development of fact-checking as a common practice in Europe has shown a structural variety that can be divided into two operational models: the newsroom model and the NGO model (Graves and Cherubini, 2016), illustrating the differences

among Western and Northern Europe and Southern and Eastern Europe. This distinction also demonstrates the social and political specifics that have resulted in the rise of fact-checking initiatives. Furthermore, the prevalence of one model over another reflects broader differences in the character of national media systems.

The newsroom model interprets fact-checkers as practitioners established within already existing media news organisations (e.g., Les Décodeurs at Le Monde or BBC's Reality Check). While the fact-checkers can benefit from the organisations' existing resources and audience reach, they also remain tied to their editorial priorities and monetary support, limiting their scope of work (Graves and Cherubini, 2016). The NGO model, by contrast, is defined by its independence from traditional newsroom houses. Fact-checking organisations operating under this model usually either become part of or are run as (time-limited) funded projects of non-governmental organisations. These initiatives are predominant in Eastern Europe, which often cooperate with news outlets, and are composed of a small group of reporters. Despite their reliance on continuous sources of funding, they benefit from greater autonomy from editorial or commercial pressures and priorities (Graves and Cherubini, 2016). Examples of this NGO model are Croatia's Faktograf, Serbia's Istinomer, or Estonia's Delfi Faktikontrol. These two media models reflect broader distinctions between European media systems that have their roots in the strength of the sector, the role of civil society, and the regulatory background.

The Standardization of the Fact-checking Process / Standardizacija procesa provjere činjenica

The trend of politically focused fact-checking, especially widespread around the election period, resulted in the recognition of fact-checking as an integral part of journalism and has led to the establishment of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at the Poynter Institute in 2015. This umbrella organisation defined key principles of fact-checking practice, namely transparency, non-partisanship, and correction mechanisms, through the establishment of a so-called Code of Principles. These principles have been widely recognised by journalists and fact-checkers and have been adopted by over 170 organizations worldwide, establishing clear measures for ethical and methodological accuracy in fact-checking.

In Europe, the process of standardisation of fact-checking has advanced rapidly in recent years. Inspired by the US, a network of fact-checking organisations - the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) was established in 2022 through an EU grant. Similarly, to IFCN, it has adopted its own Code of Standards, a set of criteria designed to ensure that organisations fact-checking misinformation and disinformation adhere to the highest standards of methodology, ethics, and transparency to best serve the public interest (EDMO, 2025). EFCSN plays a central role in promoting and bolstering verification standards across the European fact-checking community. Moreover, the collaborative and network-based fact-checking model has helped boost the alignment of content and verification methods across different EU countries (Cazzamatta, 2024; Bleyer-Simon, 2025) and its neighbourhood, currently including over 60 members.

The formation of EFCNS was a policy-driven effort directly supported by the European Commission's funding and priorities from 2021 onward, rather than

solely a grassroots initiative. The Call for Proposals² Pilot Project and Integrity of social media resulted in the formation of EFCSN. The EU's support for fact-checking initiatives and disinformation projects has also driven the creation of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), a network that brings together 15 multi/national hubs spanning across the EU member states, joined recently by Ukraine and Moldova. One of the EDMO's hubs has been operating in the Adriatic region since 2023, encompassing Croatia and Slovenia, under the name Adria Digital Media Observatory (ADMO). The table below provides an overview of the EFCSN Code of Standards, a baseline for the analysis of fact-checking operations across the EU countries.

Table 1 EFCSN Code of Standards / **Tablica 1.** Kodeks standarda EFCSN-a

Article	Explanation
1: System of Compliance	Publicly stated compliance with standards.
2: Methodology	Topics of the public interest; clear and publicly available methodology that explains why and how certain issues are selected and investigated.
3: Ethical Standards	3.1 Non-Partisanship and Impartiality; 3.2 Privacy and Safety; 3.3 Honest Corrections
4: Transparency	4.1 Organisational Transparency; 4.2 Financial Transparency and Conflicts of Interest
5: Access	5.1 Assessment Procedure; 5.2 Criteria; 5.3 Application Form; 5.4 Assessors; 5.5 Reconsideration; 5.6 Renewal
6: Compliance and Enforcement	6.1 Complaints Reviewer; 6.2 Compliance Procedure; 6.3 Sanctions
7: Evolution of the Code	7.1 Procedure Revision of Code of Standards

Croatian Media and Fact-checking Ecosystem / Hrvatski medijski i ekosustav provjere činjenica

The Croatian media system has been shaped by its historical legacies, post-socialist transformations, and contemporary pressures of commercialization and digitalization. Comparative scholarship consistently positions Croatia within the Polarized Pluralist (Mediterranean) model of media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2011; Peruško, 2013). Historical patterns of political instrumentalization, limited journalistic autonomy, and clientelist governance structures from the period of socialism were reinforced during the 1990s democratic transition (Grbeša and Volarević, 2021; Peruško, 2013). Empirical analyses show an ecosystem marked by high political parallelism, strong state influence in public service media (PSM) governance, and persistent tensions between political elites and regulatory bodies (Peruško et al., 2021). These dynamics align Croatia with other Southern and Eastern European systems defined by fragile professionalization, weak rule-of-law culture, and high parallelism, rather than the civic function of journalism.

Croatia has a small, saturated, and highly concentrated media market, with significant foreign ownership in print and broadcasting sectors (Peruško, 2016; Herrero et al., 2017), reflecting features of the Mediterranean model. Commercial

² https://new.regione.vda.it/Media/Regione/BandiAvvisi/1Call_for_proposals.pdf (Accessed on November 17, 2025)

pressures have accelerated tabloidization, reduced investment in investigative journalism, and contributed to deteriorating professional norms (Grbeša and Volarević, 2021). Comparative research confirms that Croatia fits the South/East European model, while retaining some socialist-era practices rather than forming a distinct system of its own (Peruško, 2013).

Ibáñez et al. (2024) note that the liberalization of the media created a setting in which private ownership dominates while public outlets remain politically influenced. Democratic backsliding, characterized by weak professionalization and politicized journalistic routines, occurred alongside certain advances in professional autonomy and international integration. Despite these developments, Brautović (2021) argues that corrections processes, aimed at improving transparency and objectivity, remain limited compared to Western media systems.

Overall, the positioning of Croatia within the Mediterranean model provides the structural context for understanding its fact-checking sector evolution. Features of this model shape the entire media sector and emerging forms of verification and accountability, including the development of national initiatives such as the Točno tako platform (Grbeša, 2025).

Fact-checking in Croatia has evolved rapidly from 2020 onwards, but scholarly analysis remains limited. In 2022, Grbeša-Zenzerović and Nenadić documented only two organizations in the domestic landscape: Faktograf and Agence France-Presse (AFP), both signatories of the IFCN and EFCSN codes of standards and are fact-checking partners to VLOPs (Grbeša-Zenzerović and Nenadić, 2022, p. 27). Faktograf is the first Croatian fact-checking organization, initially founded as a joint project of the Croatian Journalists' Association and GONG, later becoming an independent publisher and a fully autonomous organization in 2021. Its public mission statement demonstrates commitment to standards shared with international counterparts such as PolitiFact and FactCheck.org (Brautović and John, 2023), and the EFCSN Code of Standards (Faktograf, 2025). Faktograf specializes in verifying statements by politicians, public officials, and viral online claims, while recently expanding toward solutions journalism (Klimatski portal, 2024).

Croatia has become increasingly integrated into the regional and European fact-checking infrastructure. AFP operates in Croatia through its Central and Eastern European network, as part of the ADMO hub. In addition, Oštro Slovenia, the Centre for Investigative Journalism with a fact-checking department, has established an affiliation in Croatia - Oštro Hrvatska (Portal Oštro, 2025).

The most significant development of the fact-checking ecosystem in Croatia occurred in 2023, when the Agency for Electronic Media published a Call for proposals *Establishment of a system for verifying information*³, as a key measure within NextGeneration EU Recovery and Resilience Plan (NPOO). The Call, published in July and reiterated in September 2023, aimed to strengthen the national fact-checking infrastructure by supporting the development and creation of fact-checking platforms, partnerships, workflows, and tools. Its objectives were to reinforce media resilience, improve transparency, and align national initiatives with European ethical and professional standards. The program encouraged multi-stakeholder cooperation and demanded high levels of transparency, methodological rigor, corrections policies, and

³ <https://npoo.aem.hr/2022/12/30/objavljen-javni-poziv-za-uspostavu-sustava-provjere-tocnosti-informacija/>

non-partisanship. Offering funding of up to €199,084 per project, the Call supported 21 fact-checking initiatives, mainly newly established, subsequently gathered under the Točno tako platform. As a result, this platform became the first nationwide structured fact-checking ecosystem in the EU primarily supported by state funding, making Croatia a unique European case (Bleyer-Simon, 2025).

Despite this recent expansion, the academic literature on fact-checking in Croatia remains limited. Existing studies mostly focus on individual organizations or specific periods, rather than the ecosystem as a whole. Scholarship has addressed Faktograf's work during the COVID-19 pandemic (Brautović and John, 2023), its topic selection and verification routines (Brautović, 2022), and early descriptive overviews of the field (Grbeša-Zenzerović and Nenadić, 2022). However, the recent institutional expansion and policy recognition of fact-checking have not yet been systematically analysed. This study addresses that gap by providing the first empirical mapping and analysis of organizational structures, practices, and standards of fact-checking initiatives operating under the Točno tako platform, as detailed in the Results section.

Comparative Media Systems Theory / Teorija komparativnih medijskih sustava

To better understand how Croatian fact-checking is positioned in the European context, this study employs comparative media systems theory, with special emphasis on the Mediterranean or Polarized pluralist model, as conceptualized by Hallin and Mancini (2011). This theory remains foundational for comparative research, with contemporary scholarship adapting its categories to include new contexts (Dobek-Ostrowska and Głowacki, 2016; Brüggemann et al., 2014; Labio-Bernal et al., 2024). The theory provides a valid lens to understand journalistic practices like fact-checking in different national and regional contexts (Moreno-Gil et al., 2022; Cazzamatta, 2024). Media systems theory allows us to define and examine how a national media ecosystem is shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces. Hallin and Mancini's models, which allow for nuanced observation of similarities and differences between countries (Ramirez and Guerrero, 2014, p. 23), are defined by four core indicators (Hallin and Mancini, 2004):

Media market development relating to the structure of the press (e.g., circulation, degree of commercialization); Political parallelism indicating the nature and extent of ties between the media and political parties; Journalistic professionalism indicating the level of autonomy and professional norms, and Role of the state showing the degree of state intervention. Based on these four indicators, Hallin and Mancini (2011) defined three core models: Liberal (North Atlantic), Democratic Corporatist (Northern European), and Polarized Pluralist (Mediterranean).

Ramirez and Guerrero (2014) summarize the media systems according to stated indicators. The Liberal model has an early development of high mass-circulation neutral commercial press, with low political parallelism. Broadcasting governance is professional and functions like an autonomous system, so the state's role is low and market-oriented. Finally, journalistic professionalism is high without institutionalized self-regulation. The Democratic Corporatist model exhibits high circulation and early establishment of mass-circulation press. The political parallelism is high due to the history of a strong party press. Broadcast systems have high autonomy, while the state protects press freedom through strong PSB and subsidies. The institutionalized self-regulation shows high

levels of professionalism. The Polarized Pluralist model exhibits most differences. The press is elite-oriented with low circulation, while political parallelism is high, with politics influencing the broadcasting commentary-oriented, which indicates lower journalistic professionalism and a high degree of instrumentalization. The table below represents the model's matrix (cf. Cazzamatta, 2024).

Table 2 Matrix of Hallin and Mancini's model / **Tablica 2.** Matrica modela Hallina i Mancinija

Dimension/ Model	Liberal (North Atlantic)	Democratic Corporatist (Northern European)	Polarized Pluralist (Mediterranean)
Media Market	Early development, high mass-circulation commercial press.	Early development, high mass-circulation press.	Elite-oriented, low circulation.
Political Parallelism	Low (neutral commercial press).	High (strong historical party press).	High (politics influences broadcasting).
Professionalism	High (professional and neutral orientation).	High (institutionalized self-regulation).	Low (commentary, instrumentalization).
Role of the State	Low, market-oriented.	Strong (protects press freedom via PSB and subsidies).	High (strong regulations, history of control).

Although Croatia was not included in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) original typology, subsequent scholarship has consistently positioned it within the Mediterranean model, while emphasizing specific post-socialist and post-conflict legacies (Peruško et al., 2017; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2016). Core attributes of this model remain defining characteristics of Croatia's environment: high political parallelism, instrumentalization of media, concentrated and fragile media markets, weak professionalization, and significant state involvement (Peruško, 2013). The following table provides an overview of the characteristics of Croatian media systems compared to the Mediterranean model. By situating Croatian fact-checking within this framework, the study assesses whether Croatian fact-checkers diverge from or reflect typical patterns of the Mediterranean model, as operationalized in recent comparative studies (Moreno-Gil et al., 2022; Cazzamatta, 2024).

Table 3 Characteristics of the Croatian media system within the Mediterranean model / **Tablica 3.** Značajke hrvatskog medijskog sustava prema mediteranskom modelu

Dimension	Mediterranean Model	Croatian media system (according to Peruško, 2013, pp. 713-720)
Media Market	Elite-oriented, low circulation.	Nationalization, privatization, and marketization of the media sector. Highly concentrated market, low press circulation.
Political Parallelism	High (politics influences broadcasting).	High parallelism of media owners and the state, limiting the diversity of media content, and a low democratic role of media. High exchange between journalism and political professions.
Professionalism	Low (commentary, instrumentalization).	Perceived journalistic autonomy is low. Legal framework takes precedence over self-regulation. Orientation towards commentary journalism.
Role of the State	High (strong regulations, history of control).	Croatia regulates all aspects of media. Strong regulatory role, direct subventions to minority media, and statist media policy influenced by government changes.

Implications for Fact-Checking / Implikacije za provjeru činjenica

By situating Croatian fact-checking within the Mediterranean model, the study assesses the extent to which media systems theory can be applied for examining specific journalistic practices as fact-checking within media systems. Specifically, the analysis addresses whether Croatian fact-checkers diverge from or reflect typical patterns of the Mediterranean model, as operationalized in recent comparative studies (Moreno-Gil et al, 2022; Cazzamatta, 2024). The fact-checking ecosystem is a relatively new field of research, and it is important to understand if the media system in which it operates is the only influential factor in its development.

To translate the Mediterranean model for the analysis of the fact-checking field, the study maps the four core indicators of media systems theory: media market development, political parallelism, professionalization, and the role of the state, onto empirically measurable features visible in the public-facing websites of fact-checking organizations (Hallin and Mancini, 2011; Brüggemann et al., 2014; Moreno-Gil et al., 2022). This strategy enables theory-driven coding of how organizations present their independence, professionalism, transparency, and institutional structure. The table represents the translation of these indicators into measurable categories for examining fact-checking, using EFCSN standards as a benchmark. Articles 5, 6, and 7 were excluded from the analysis because they are not applicable in this context.

Table 4 Media systems indicators for fact-checking - Articles 5, 6, and 7 are excluded. / **Tablica 4.** Pokazatelji medijskih sustava za provjeru činjenica – izuzeti članci 5., 6. i 7.

Media Systems Theory Indicator	Fact-Checking Ecosystem Indicator	EFCSN standard
Media Market	Organizational type (media/NGO/academic); visibility of funding; tools for audience engagement	Article 2: Methodology Article 4: Transparency 4.1. Organisational transparency
Political Parallelism	Explicit non-partisanship/editorial independence; disclosures of advocacy/political ties	Article 3: Ethical standards 3.1: Non-Partisanship and Impartiality
Professionalism	Adoption of EFCSN/IFCN codes; transparency of methodology; staff qualification display; visible corrections/accountability policies	Article 1: Systems of compliance Article 2: Methodology Article 3: Ethical standards 3.2: Privacy and Safety 3.3: Honest corrections
Role of the State	Disclosures of state/EU funding; references to regulatory compliance/national initiatives	Article 3: Ethical standards 3.1: Non-Partisanship and Impartiality Article 4: Transparency 4.2: Financial transparency and conflicts of interest

This paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ 1: *To what extent do fact-checking organizations under the Točno tako platform meet the methodological, ethical, organizational, and transparency standards established by the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN)?*

RQ 2: *How do fact-checking organizations under the Točno tako platform correspond or diverge from the features of the Mediterranean media system model?*

Methodology / Metodologija

In line with contemporary comparative media systems research and best practices for its operationalization, this study examines the website content of Croatian fact-checking organizations under the Točno tako platform. This methodological decision reflects approaches developed in recent Mediterranean media system research, where organizational transparency, public declarations, and visible standards are the primary units of analysis for cross-national comparison (Moreno-Gil et al., 2022; Cazzamatta, 2024).

This study employs web content analysis to systematically assess 21 independent fact-checking projects affiliated with the Croatian national platform Točno tako. It serves as a centralized hub consolidating and disseminating verified information produced by diverse fact-checking initiatives across Croatia to provide reliable fact-checked content and tools for media, researchers, and the public, supporting transparent and accurate reporting (Točno tako, 2024). The first part of the analysis classified projects by organizational categories: 1) type of lead organization; 2) type of partner organization; 3) publishing activity.

Table 5 Organizational types and publishing activity codes / **Tablica 5.** Tipovi organizacija i kodovi izdavačke aktivnosti

Category	Code	Description
Type of organization (lead and partner)	1 = Academic institution	universities, faculties, research institutes
	2 = Commercial Media organization	newsrooms, portals, journals, broadcasters
	3 = Non-profit media organization	radio, TV, news sites
	4 = Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)/Civil society organizations (CSOs)	associations, advocacy groups
	5 = other	any other type of organization
Has publishing activity	1 = yes	The organization actively publishes content
	2 = no	The organization does not publish content

Afterwards, the analysis assesses projects' adherence to the standards established by EFCSN, which outlines methodological, ethical, and transparency criteria that fact-checking organizations must meet to become verified members. To evaluate these dimensions, six domains were examined and coded on a five-point ordinal scale. The scale was organized in the following way:

1 = absent (*No evidence of the criterion is found anywhere on the website, policy document, or fact-check output. The element is omitted entirely, or any mention is so vague or irrelevant that it cannot be considered as addressing the standard.*)

2 = minimal (*There is only a token, generic, or superficial reference to the criterion, lacking any useful detail or actionable information.*)

3 = somewhat present (*The criterion is partially addressed. Some elements are present, but others are missing, unclear, out of date, or incomplete.*)

4 = substantially present (*The standard is met in most core respects, with detailed and largely complete coverage, allowing only minor omissions or ambiguities.*)

5 = fully present (*The criterion is comprehensively, explicitly, and accurately fulfilled in all respects, easy to locate, and fully aligned with relevant standards.*)

This scale ensured consistent comparative evaluation across all projects and content aspects. The rating scale and related features are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6 Codebook for the content analysis of the websites / **Tablica 6.** Kodeks za analizu sadržaja mrežnih stranica

Aspect	Observable Web Features	Rating Scale Description
Non-partisanship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Editorial independence and impartiality - Policy barring staff with political ties - Explicit conflict of interest disclosure - Prohibition of gifts/favours outside accepted norms 	1 = absent 2 = minimal 3 = somewhat present 4 = substantially present 5 = fully present
Transparency of Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public methodology page describing claim selection, research, and rating system - Accessible explanation of the verification process 	same scale as above
Financial Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extensive financial disclosures, including all income sources over 1% or 5,000 euros - Mechanisms to ensure independence 	same scale as above
Organisational Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Detailed organisational structure, including ownership and governance - Staff roles with detailed staff biographies and previous affiliations 	same scale as above
Corrections Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Published corrections policy with log of corrections and policy for requests and assessment of corrections - Channel for corrections/complaints submission - Notification of escalation options (external reviewer) 	same scale as above
Compliance Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policy page on external/self-review - Declaration of adherence to standards (EFCSN/IFCN) - Disclosure of compliance (if any) 	same scale as above

Three researchers, using a detailed codebook to ensure consistency and reliability, conducted coding independently. Discrepancies in the coding results were anticipated through a detailed discussion of categories and coding before the process. To assess intercoder reliability, three researchers independently coded a subset consisting of seven out of the total 21 websites. This sample constitutes one-third of the corpus, thereby adhering to recommended standards for reliability testing within qualitative content analysis. The coders employed a structured codebook, and their consistency was subsequently evaluated through the online ReCal3 tool. The analysis results showed reliability across several measures. Fleiss's kappa is 0.819, indicating substantial agreement among three coders. Krippendorff's alpha, allowing for measuring results of coding with more than two coders (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020), is 0.821, showing a substantial level of consistency and methodological rigor, supporting the validity and reliability of the findings.

This approach of combining organizational categorization and detailed website content assessment according to the EFCSN standards provides a structured, transparent, and replicable framework. It sheds light on the operational diversity and degree of international standard adherence among Croatian fact-checking organizations within the collaborative environment of the Točno tako platform. Because fact-checking organizations under Točno tako are newly established and highly diverse, observable website content provides an empirically reliable and comparable unit of analysis across cases.

Results / Rezultati

Distribution of Lead Organization Types / Raspodjela tipova vodećih organizacija

The distribution of lead organization types shows that out of 21 projects (N = 21), academic institutions (universities, faculties, and research institutes) lead the largest share, with 12 projects being managed by this type of organization. NGOs or CSOs make up the second largest category, accounting for eight projects. Only one does not fit under any of the categories. This distribution confirms the dominant role of academic institutions as lead organizations in these projects, with NGOs or CSOs also playing a significant role. Notably, commercial media organizations or non-profit media organizations do not lead any of the projects.

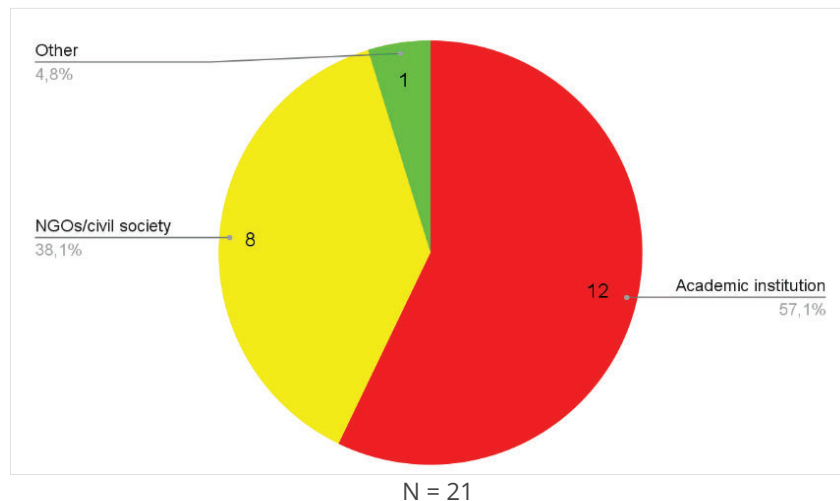


Figure 1 Distribution of Lead Organization Types / Slika 1. Raspodjela tipova vodećih organizacija

Distribution of Partner Organization Types / Raspodjela tipova partnerskih organizacija

Regarding partner organization types (N = 37), NGOs and CSOs participate in 17 out of 21 projects. The following category is academic institutions participating in nine, commercial media organizations in seven, and under the "others" category, there are three organizations. Non-profit media organizations participate in only one project as a partner. This result highlights the especially strong presence and engagement of NGOs or CSOs in the *Točno tako* fact-checking network, with commercial media and academic institutions playing notable but smaller roles.

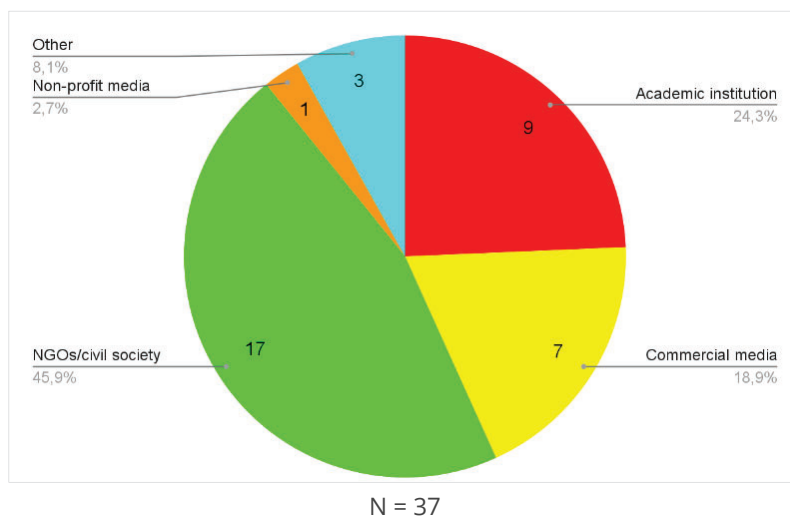


Figure 2 Distribution of Partner Organization Type / **Slika 2.** Raspodjela tipova partnerskih organizacija

Publishing Activity / **Izdavačka aktivnost**

The analysis includes all organizations, whether they are leading or partner entities in the examined fact-checking projects. Among all organizations (N = 58), 23 have a media outlet with active publishing activities. The remaining 35 organizations do not have publishing activity independently. During the research, it was noted that one of the organizations, previously classified as a media outlet, shut down and was erased from the Business Registry during the implementation of the project.

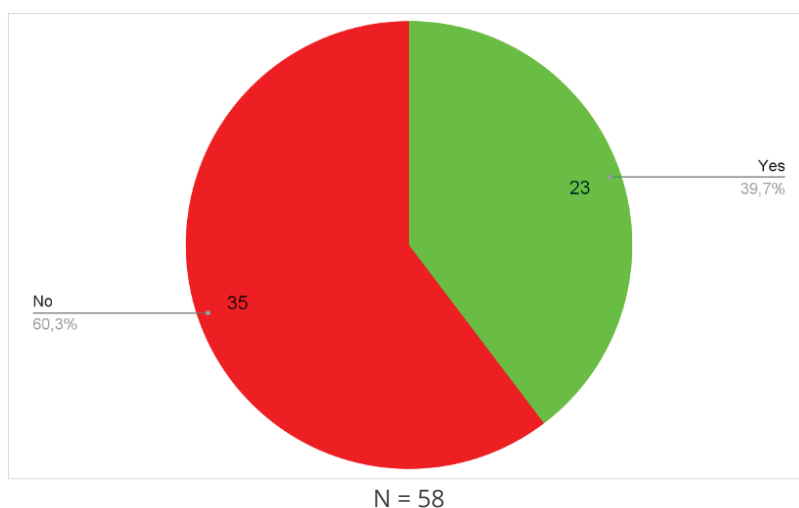


Figure 3 Distribution of Publishing Activity / **Slika 3.** Raspodjela izdavačke aktivnosti

Non-partisanship and Impartiality Compliance Level / Razina usklađenosti s nepristranošću i objektivnošću

Assessing non-partisanship and impartiality compliance across fact-checking projects indicated varied results. Of 21 projects, 10 are rated as *fully present* in terms of fulfilling standards of non-partisanship and impartiality. These standards are *somewhat present* in four projects; two are rated as *minimal*, and four as *absent*. Only one project is rated as *substantially present*. The results show that fewer than half projects demonstrate full compliance with non-partisanship and impartiality, while a notable number either lack these standards altogether or have minimal presence.

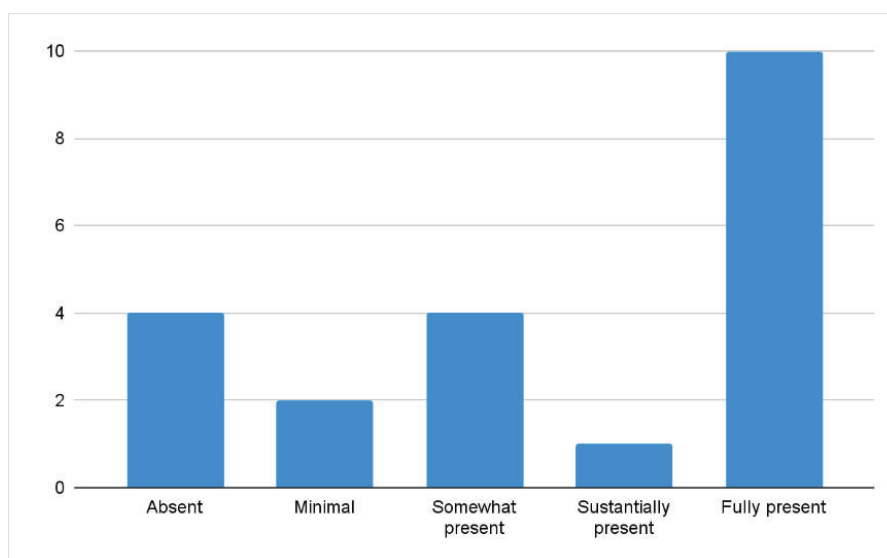


Figure 4 Non-partisanship and Impartiality / Slika 4. Nepristranost i objektivnost

Methodology Transparency Level / Razina transparentnosti metodologije

Transparent, clear, and easily accessible methodology is *fully present* in eight projects, and seven have it *somewhat present*. A *substantial* level of methodology transparency is observed in four projects, while two projects showed *absent* or *minimal*. These results reveal that a majority of *Točno tako* projects demonstrate at least moderate transparency in methodology, with more than a third showing full compliance. Only a minority lacks clear or accessible methodological information, highlighting generally positive practices within this category.

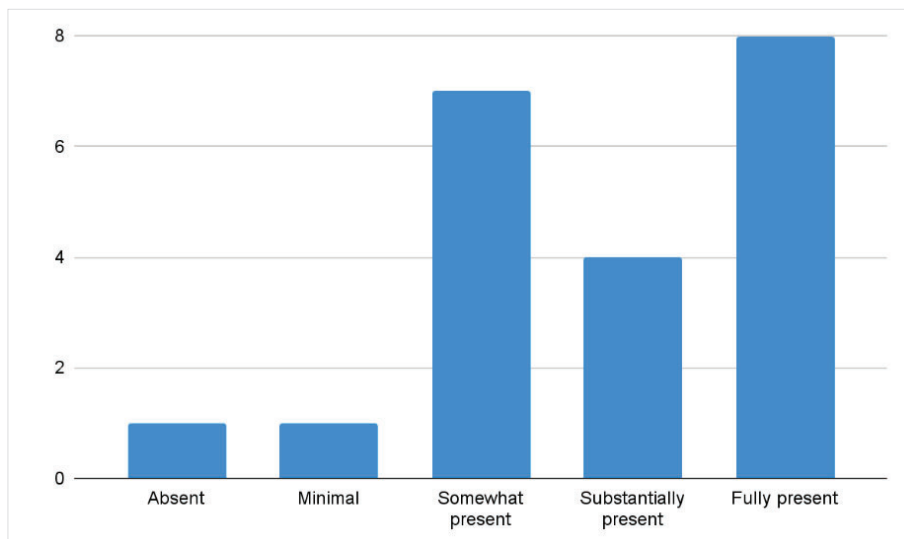


Figure 5 Methodology Transparency / **Slika 5.** Transparentnost metodologije

Financial Transparency Compliance Level / **Razina usklađenosti s financijskom transparentnošću**

The financial transparency compliance level reveals substantial variation. Most projects, eight of them, fall within the *somewhat present* category, indicating moderate disclosure of financial information and reporting practices. Only a smaller portion, two projects, fall into the category *fully present*. Six projects are classified under *minimal* financial transparency, reflecting limited openness to their financial reporting. One project each is marked as *absent* and *substantially present*. Overall, moderate transparency is most common, with strong financial openness present only in a minority of cases. A somewhat present category was used to categorize available financial information for a particular project, including the source and amount of funding. That does not mean that the entire financials were available, suggesting the lowest compliance among all for the category.

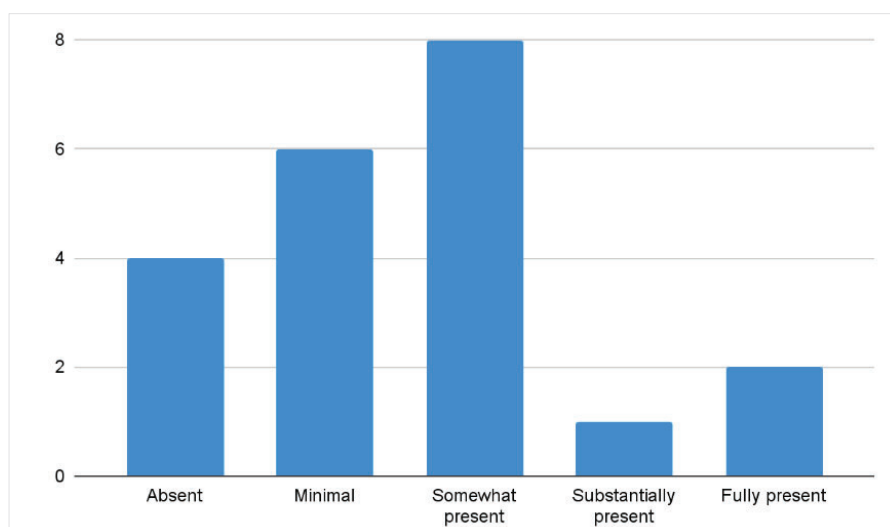


Figure 6 Financial Transparency / **Slika 6.** Financijska transparentnost

Organisational Transparency Compliance Level / Razina usklađenosti s organizacijskom transparentnošću

Organisational transparency also varies across the projects. It is *fully present* in nine projects, indicating that more than half of the projects offer detailed requirements for organisational transparency, including ownership, governance, and staff roles with detailed staff biographies and previous affiliations. On the other hand, four projects are rated as *minimal*, suggesting that organisational transparency obligations are met only at a basic level and, for example, include only the names of project members. Data is *somewhat present* at five projects, while *substantially present* at three of them. Notably, none of the project's organisational transparency is classified as *absent*. The results demonstrate a relatively strong organisational transparency, even as a substantial number of projects provide only minimal or partial information.

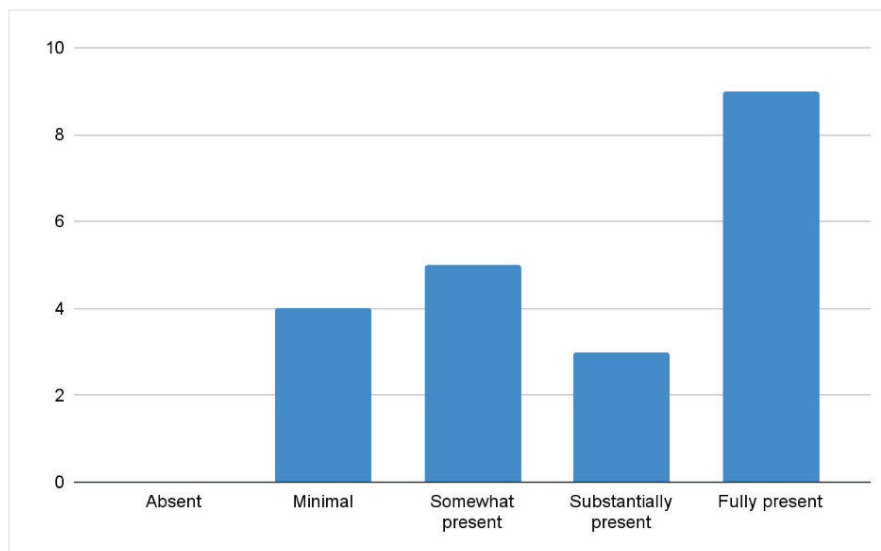


Figure 7 Organizational Transparency / Slika 7. Organizacijska transparentnost

Corrections Policy Compliance Level / Razina usklađenosti s politikom korekcija

The majority of the analysed fact-checking projects provide transparent information regarding their correction policies. Among the 21 projects, 10 projects fall under the category of *fully present*, while three of them have a corrections policy that is *substantially present* on their websites. A certain level of corrections policy presence is observed in four projects, with three classified as *minimal* and two as *somewhat present*. Notably, three projects completely lack any corrections policy, indicating an *absence* of this aspect of transparency. These results suggest that most projects demonstrate at least moderate transparency in their corrections policies, with a substantial proportion providing full or substantial compliance. Only a small minority lack clear or accessible information, indicating generally positive practices regarding corrections transparency across the sampled fact-checking projects.

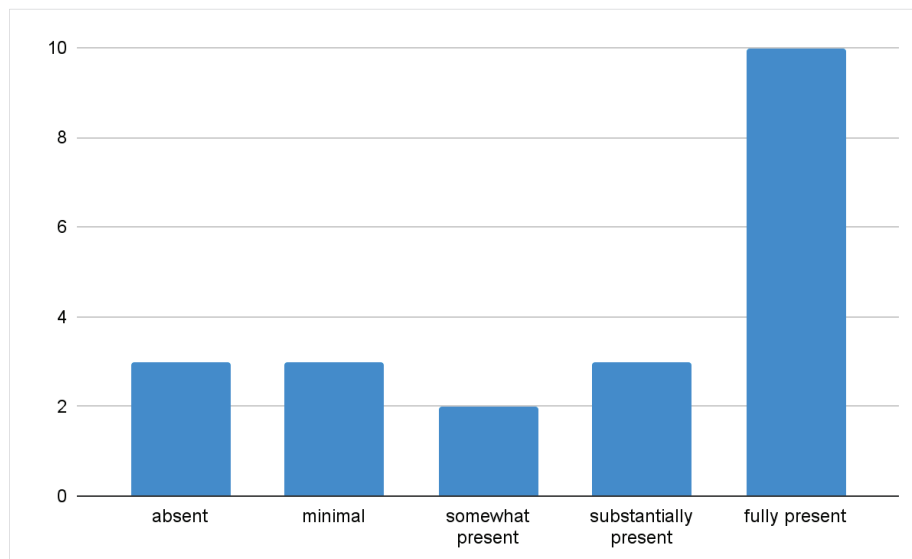


Figure 8 Corrections Policy / Slika 8. Politika korekcija

Compliance Mechanism Statement / Izjava o mehanizmu usklađenosti

Regarding compliance mechanisms, the majority of projects have at least some procedures in place to ensure adherence to relevant standards. Four projects have *fully present* mechanisms. Two of them have them *substantially present*, and eight projects are classified as *somewhat present*, reflecting intermediate levels of oversight. However, five projects lack any formal mechanisms entirely, and two show *minimal* implementation. Most of the projects claim adherence proscribed by Točno tako Call for proposals, IFCS or EFCSN.

Discussion / Rasprava

The empirical mapping of the Croatian fact-checking ecosystem under the Točno tako platform provides new evidence on how peripheral European media systems navigate through ongoing transformations in journalism. By analysing organizational structures, standards, and practices of Croatian fact-checking through the lens of the Polarized Pluralist (Mediterranean) model and its benchmarking against the EFCSN code, this study answers following research questions.

RQ1: *To what extent do fact-checking organizations under the Točno tako platform meet the methodological, ethical, organizational, and transparency standards established by the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN)?*

The results show that Točno tako platform organisations partially adopt EFCSN standards. While a majority of projects have moderate or strong transparency, particularly in organizational structure and the presence of corrections policies, systematic gap remains. Disclosure of financials and sources of funding is scarce or even absent, and ethical standards regarding non-partisanship are not at a high level. Some of these standards are also adopted on the declarative level, but the full compliance is yet to be researched.

Organizational transparency, for example, is comparatively strong: many projects provide clear information about their governance, staff roles, and institutional affiliations, demonstrating a baseline commitment to operational transparency. Corrections policies show relatively high compliance, suggesting that accountability practices are becoming more formalized within the Croatian fact-checking landscape. Methodological transparency is moderately present across the ecosystem, with over one-third of projects offering detailed public descriptions of their verification workflows. Strong performance in governance transparency and accountability seems driven more by formal EU/state requirements than by organic professionalization, echoing findings from broader Europeanization research (Moreno-Gil et al., 2022; Cazzamatta, 2024). It must be noted that, while many organizations have a corrections policy, the presence of corrected articles in the corrections log is minimal, or non-existent.

Financial transparency is the most significant weakness, with the majority of projects offering only partial or minimal disclosure of funding sources. This lack of transparency about financial flows mirrors broader patterns in the Croatian media sector, where historical clientelism and regulatory instability have for long time discouraged transparent financial reporting. Similarly, non-partisanship and impartiality are inconsistently articulated, which reflects strong political parallelism characteristic for Mediterranean model countries. Fewer than half of the projects fully meet EFCSN expectations, and several lack explicit independence safeguards altogether, representing a challenge to the credibility and public legitimacy of fact-checking initiatives. In Croatia, these challenges are negotiated within a new institutional framework, but the uneven transparency suggests that public accountability, while improved, is not yet fully institutionalized across the practice. In this respect, the Croatian experience aligns with European trends where the formal adoption of standards coexists with persistent national path dependencies. Also, it shows the convergence driven by the EU's standardization pressures.

The most significant level of compliance can be found regarding organisational transparency and correction policies. This strength is likely a direct, performative response to the stringent reporting requirements from the NPOO implementation body, which suggests that external, policy, and funding-driven incentives can successfully enforce procedural formalities.

During the implementation of the projects, only one organization successfully applied for and obtained EFCSN signatory status, whereas another organization, already an EFCSN signatory, neither disclosed this status on its project webpage nor demonstrated full compliance with the EFCSN Code of Standards, despite the expectation that the Code should also be applied to this alternative outlet.

RQ2: *How do fact-checking organizations under the Točno tako platform correspond or diverge from the features of the Mediterranean media system model?*

Analysis confirms that Croatian fact-checking organizations reflect several features of the Mediterranean model. The predominance of academic and NGO/CSO at the leading positions, alongside the absence of commercial media, highlights the sector's structural fragility, reliance on external funding, and limited newsroom autonomy. These patterns correspond to the expectations embedded in media systems theory: weak media market, weak professionalization and high dependence

on the state or other external funding mechanisms. The reliance on a single, state-administered EU funding mechanism further emphasize significant role of the state in enabling media functions. Persistent lacking in financial transparency and non-partisanship also reflect the model's tendencies toward limited autonomy.

At the same time, the ecosystem displays evidence of institutionalisation and standardisation driven by the EU policies. The widespread, though selective, adoption of EFCSN standards (visible mostly in transparency and corrections policies) marks a divergence from traditional Mediterranean features, marking the impact of EU-driven contractual compliance and standardization efforts. The findings reinforce the relevance of comparative media systems theory for understanding journalistic practices within their national context. Croatian fact-checkers operate within the constraints of the Polarized Pluralist system, yet their partial standardization represents a step towards institutional upgrade made possible by external interventions. This points to the growing importance of transnational policy-making actors in (re)shaping the national media context. The Croatian case supports the argument that post-socialist Mediterranean countries often constitute hybrid variants of the Polarized Pluralist model (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015).

These systems are formally Europeanized through policy and institutional imports, yet remain shaped by national context, as visible in the persistent weaknesses in financial transparency and non-partisanship. In conclusion, Croatian fact-checking emerges as a hybrid form, neither fully convergent with European models nor as only extension of national media system. Its organisational structures, significant external funding dependencies, and professionalization gap reflect the features of the Mediterranean model, while its centralized platform and formal adherence to international recognized standards are a product of transnational European policy intervention.

Conclusion / Zaključak

This study provides systematic examination of expanding fact-checking ecosystem in Croatia through Točno tako platform, confirming its deep structural links to the Mediterranean media system model. The findings demonstrate that Croatian fact-checking has undergone rapid, policy-driven institutionalization, primarily enabled by targeted public funding through the NPOO framework, aligned with European strategic priorities on disinformation. The empirical evidence reveals an ecosystem characterized by a civil society and academic core, with minor participation of the commercial media and high dependence on external interventions typical of the Polarized Pluralist environment.

While most initiatives demonstrate moderate to strong compliance with principles of organizational transparency and methodological clarity, signalling a partial Europeanization of the fact-checking practice, substantial weaknesses persist. Specifically, the low rate of full compliance in financial transparency and inconsistent articulation of non-partisanship policies mirror the high political parallelism and fragile professionalization inherent in the national media system. Croatian fact-checking emerges as a hybrid formation that is contextualized by the national system and heritage, but increasingly shaped by international standards

and regulatory expectations. However, the analysis indicates that while European policies can build infrastructure, they are not able to overwrite deeply embedded domestic cultural and political norms in a short period of time.

Despite offering valuable insights, this study has limitations. The analysis is based exclusively on publicly accessible website content, which may not fully capture internal workflows, informal accountability mechanisms, or the practical application of stated policies. Furthermore, the exclusive focus on Točno tako projects limit the ability to assess the long-term sustainability of these initiatives once the NPOO funding cycle ends.

Future research must therefore build upon this foundational mapping to explore the dynamics beneath the surface. Future studies should proceed along several directions: sustainability of this model and platform; alignment of stated with actual compliance, public perceptions of the platform's work, and comparative studies with other countries. Overall, the findings contribute empirical clarity to an understudied field and demonstrate that the development of fact-checking in Croatia must be understood as a technical response to misinformation and as a product of broader media system structures, policy interventions, and ongoing tensions between national vulnerabilities and European standardization efforts.

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Hrvatski *fact-checking* u kontekstu mediteranskog medijskog sustava: akteri, standardi i prakse platforme *Točno tako*

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Sažetak

Ovaj članak analizira ekosustav provjere činjenica u Hrvatskoj kroz perspektivu teorije medijskih sustava. Internetske stranice 21 projekta provjere činjenica, okupljenih u platformu *Točno tako*, analiziraju se koristeći se metodom analize sadržaja. Kategorije za istraživanje operacionalizirane su unutar teorije medijskih sustava, a analizirani su objavljeni materijali povezani s ciljevima, metodologijom, financijskom i organizacijskom transparentnošću te izjavama o usklađenosti s međunarodnim standardima poput Europske mreže standarda za provjeravanje činjenične točnosti (EFCSN). Rezultati analize, koju su neovisno provele tri istraživačice, pokazuju da hrvatski ekosustav provjere činjenica odražava nekoliko karakteristika povezanih s mediteranskim modelom medijskih sustava: dominacija modela neprofitnog sektora s određenim varijacijama, značajne razlike u dosljednosti glede transparentnosti i metodologije te varijacije u stupnju usklađenosti s međunarodnim standardima, pri čemu samo manji broj projekata u potpunosti udovoljava kriterijima EFCSN-a. Analiza identificira elemente usklađenosti i odstupanja od tipičnih značajki mediteranskog modela, pružajući empirijske uvide u razvoj i održivost ovih projekata u području provjere činjenica. Rezultati istraživanja upućuju na to da ovaj sustav djelomično pokazuje značajke mediteranskog modela, a istovremeno i nove hibridne oblike zbog sve prisutnijeg usklađivanja s politikama EU-a. Ključne riječi: *fact-checking*, teorija medijskih sustava, Hrvatska, transparentnost, mediteranski model.