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The Political Leaning of Fact-Checking: Countering Italian Disinformation on the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

The intense disinformation efforts that accompanied Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine highlight the importance of countering misinformation to mitigate the influence of foreign actors, particularly in vulnerable public spheres such as the Italian one. Despite widespread use, the effectiveness of fact-checking in correcting misinformation remains ambiguous, with limited exploration of the underlying reasons. This article focuses on the role of political leaning and partisanship in shaping individuals' comprehension of factual information, their inclination to fact-checking exposure, and their capacity to assimilate findings that challenge their preconceived beliefs. We measure the role of these variables for 10 different statements about Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, employing original survey data collected in Italy in spring 2022. We find veracity assessment to be associated with partisan views of the war for both true and false statements, with Russia-leaning views frequently correlating with lower exposure to and reception of fact-checks. Right-leaning political attitudes often work in the same direction, in some cases amplifying the partisan rejection of fact-checks. These findings contribute to literature on fact-checking, selective exposure, motivated reasoning, and misinformation, corroborating previous studies on the limits of debunking efforts and extending their insights to a setting well known for its high level of political parallelism. A crucial implication of these results is that political attitudes should receive greater consideration when addressing misinformation and foreign disinformation efforts, given their potential to amplify partisan barriers that moderate the corrective power of fact-checking. Furthermore, this partisan acceptance of fact-checks complicates the normative assessment of journalistic practices.

Keywords

belief correction; disinformation; fact-checking; Italy; media trust; misinformation; motivated reasoning; Russia; selective exposure; Ukraine

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1. Introduction

The diffusion of fact-checking, both as a "set of reporting practices" and as a "form of public critique" (Graves, 2016, pp. 24–25), has globally increased as a networked response to the rise of online misinformation (Amazeen, 2020; Saucier & Walter, 2022). The Italian information ecosystem has been no exception, with the emergence of fact-checking agencies like Facta, Pagella Politica, and Open (Duke Reporters' Lab, n.d.). The online spread of disinformation in democratic countries has emerged as a byproduct of the decline in trust in institutions and official sources of information (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), which has opened unprecedented opportunities for "both nationalist (primarily radical right) and foreign (commonly Russian) [influence] strategies" (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 122).

Although such efforts can encounter significant limitations in reach and impact (Budak et al., 2024; Eady et al., 2023), the effectiveness of fact-checking in countering them has also been questioned, with evidence suggesting limits in mitigating both the factual misperceptions and their effect on attitudes (Barrera et al., 2020; Jarman, 2016). The effectiveness of debunking efforts seems to be mediated by the relationship with the fact-checker (Blair et al., 2024; Margolin et al., 2018), selective exposure (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020), and motivated reasoning (Jarman, 2016; Walter et al., 2020; Walter & Salovich, 2021). The role of political cultures in shaping the reception of fact-checks, however, remains underexplored (Ecker et al., 2022), especially when it comes to contexts of high political parallelism such as the Italian one.

This article contributes to addressing this issue by exploring the role of political leaning and partisan attitudes in Italy when it comes to fact-checks on the war in Ukraine. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched on February 24, 2022, rapidly became a testing ground for both disinformation and fact-checking. The invasion has been accompanied by intensive disinformation campaigns and propaganda efforts aimed at foreign public spheres (Geissler et al., 2023; Hutchings et al., 2024; Lai et al., 2024; Pierri et al., 2023), with the ultimate goal of undermining their support for Ukraine, thereby limiting the capacity of democratic governments to provide military, economic, and diplomatic support to Ukraine. Having shown significant receptiveness to Russian illiberal narratives and foreign policy goals in the past (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2019), the Italian context proved to be one of the most fertile grounds for misinformation on the war in Ukraine (Castagna et al., 2023; Hoyle & Šlerka, 2024), with a high level of receptiveness to false Russian narratives justifying the invasion (Zilinsky et al., 2024) despite open support for Ukraine by the Italian government. As a result, assessing the capacity of fact-checking to counter disinformation and misinformation is even more crucial after 2022. While the definition of disinformation includes an intentional effort that is absent from the definition of misinformation, fact-checking aims at correcting the false beliefs that are spread by false information, regardless of intentionality. The two terms will therefore be employed interchangeably throughout the article when they are referred to as the object of fact-checking efforts, with the distinction becoming more salient when intentionality has a more prominent role. This article dives deeper into the Italian public sphere, emphasizing how partisanship and political leaning shape individuals' comprehension of factual information, their inclination to fact-checking exposure, and their capacity to assimilate findings that challenge their preconceived beliefs. For this purpose, we analyze original survey data collected in Italy in spring 2022, in which respondents (N = 1,001) were asked to rate the veracity of 10 statements on the war in Ukraine. For each statement, respondents were then given the possibility to read a fact-check and, in case they read it, they were asked to give a new veracity assessment of the original statement. This survey structure allows us to study how the interaction of political leaning

and partisanship impacts veracity assessment, fact-checking exposure, and fact-checking reception as separate independent variables. While misinformation seems to be primarily driven by partisanship, when it comes to selective exposure and motivated reasoning both political leaning and partisanship appear to be significant predictors; more specifically, right-leaning and pro-Russian attitudes tend to be associated more often with both mechanisms. Additionally, we find some evidence of significant interactions between the two predictors, as more right-leaning attitudes tend to amplify the effects of partisanship on motivated reasoning behind fact-checking reception.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it provides a review of four fundamental aspects of the research problem: the epistemological challenges of fact-checking, the limits to its effectiveness, the Italian context of political parallelism, and the peculiar role of selective exposure and motivated reasoning. Subsequently, the article outlines the main hypotheses of the study and the methods employed for data collection and analysis, including the operationalization and distribution of key variables. The article proceeds with the presentation of the results, and it concludes with a brief discussion of their limitations and implications.

2. Fact-Checking and Its Epistemological Challenges

In the field of journalism, the global fact-checking movement emerged from the professional need to regain control over the certification of what is true (Graves, 2016). The emergence of the hybrid media system has generated an extensive body of research on the challenges posed to democratic information environments (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Chadwick, 2017; Waisbord, 2018). The transition to a distributed network model of information has allowed the bypassing of previously crucial gatekeepers, enabling an unprecedented democratization of content at the cost of increasingly disruptive waves of misinformation (Amazeen, 2020). This transition has created significant opportunities for autocracies and extremists to exert influence: By exploiting (and often amplifying) waves of populist anti-elite discourse and spreading misinformation (Panievsky, 2025), they have actively undermined both trust and truth (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p. 3). As fact-checking emerges to restore truth, it therefore faces the challenge of trust.

Fact-checking can be broadly defined as a journalistic practice aimed at verifying the accuracy of factual claims circulating in the media ecology—particularly those made by political actors, as well as media outlets themselves. Yet, as several scholars have pointed out (among others, Graves, 2018), fact-checking is not merely a technical procedure of verification; it represents a distinct epistemic and institutional formation within journalism, shaped by specific norms, audiences, and legitimacy claims. Its legitimacy rests on methodological transparency, evidence-based reasoning, and public accountability, while simultaneously reaffirming—and reshaping—the traditional verification role of journalism. Recent scholarship has also emphasized that fact-checking should be understood as a heterogeneous and increasingly institutionalized global field, whose practices, professional identities, and organizational forms vary substantially across different media and political systems (Cazzamatta et al., 2024).

Taken together, this literature suggests that fact-checking should be understood not simply as a verification technique but as a journalistic practice aimed at restoring epistemic authority through autonomous and publicly accountable verification. Thus, when fact-checkers debunk disinformation by domestic and foreign actors, what they inevitably do is “redefine” the illiberal narratives those actors spread (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024).

These narratives find particularly fertile ground in periods characterized by institutional distrust and democratic strain (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), conditions that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has further intensified across several European public spheres.

Rather than being produced by disinformation alone, declining trust in journalism reflects broader crises of political representation and democratic legitimacy (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). While the rise of right-wing authoritarian populism in this context obviously challenges the institutional foundations of liberalism (Mudde, 2004, 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), we propose that this emerging increasingly illiberal public sphere may reject what we can define as the "normative" epistemology of journalism (Waisbord, 2018), including evidence-based understanding of truth and fact-checking efforts.

Nevertheless, although a substantial body of research has examined how audiences react to fact-checking—highlighting the role of motivated reasoning, selective exposure, political identities, and trust in shaping its effectiveness (e.g., Ecker et al., 2022; Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020; Margolin et al., 2018; Walter et al., 2020)—important questions remain unanswered. First of all, some contexts, such as Italy, remain significantly under-researched. This represents an important limitation because the effectiveness and legitimacy of fact-checking are not context-independent. They are shaped by national media systems, levels of trust in journalism, political cultures, and patterns of political polarization. Findings derived predominantly from the United States or Northern European countries cannot therefore be assumed to generalize automatically to media systems characterized by different institutional arrangements and journalistic traditions, such as the Italian polarized pluralist model (Humprecht et al., 2022). The Italian case is therefore theoretically relevant not simply because it has received less scholarly attention, but because it allows us to examine fact-checking under institutional and cultural conditions that differ from those in the contexts on which most existing evidence is based. According to Humprecht et al. (2022), Italy represents a borderline case within contemporary media system typologies. While it retains core features of the polarized-pluralist tradition—particularly high political parallelism and comparatively low levels of journalistic professionalism—it also exhibits characteristics of the emerging hybrid media system identified in the digital age. This combination of strong political contestation, comparatively low trust in journalism, and persistent overlap between media and politics makes Italy a particularly suitable setting for examining how audiences perceive and respond to fact-checking.

Additionally, it is necessary to investigate further determinants of the acceptance or rejection of fact-checking reconstructions. For instance, while in the contemporary media environment disinformation might spread to some degree across every ideological group, the risk of an epistemological polarization between a liberal and an illiberal public sphere is that the latter refuses to accept evidence-based corrections of misinformation, ultimately adhering to a post-truth epistemology based on emotions, values, and identity. The present article tests this idea by studying the possible interaction of illiberal identities and post-truth epistemologies when it comes to fact-checking.

Fact-checking should therefore be understood not simply as a verification technique but as an institutionalized claim to epistemic authority grounded in the professional norms of journalism. In this article, we build on this institutional and epistemological understanding of fact-checking to argue that its effectiveness cannot be understood independently from the political environments in which it operates.

3. Determining What Is Truth Beyond Evidence

Research on fact-checking has increasingly shown that its effectiveness depends less on factual correction per se than on the conditions under which corrective information is encountered and interpreted. Existing studies point to three complementary sets of determinants: political predispositions, interpretive frameworks, and perceptions of source credibility (Humprecht et al., 2020).

Political predispositions—including partisanship and motivated reasoning—shape whether audiences accept or reject corrective information (Margolin et al., 2018; Walter et al., 2020). At the same time, audiences interpret fact-checking through broader cultural understandings of journalism, media credibility, and institutional trust (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). Finally, recent work suggests that perceptions of source legitimacy, including whether information is attributed to journalists, fact-checkers, or AI systems, further condition the persuasive potential of corrective information (Zoizner et al., 2026). Across these studies, a consistent pattern emerges: The effects of fact-checking are conditioned by a complex interplay of psychological predispositions, interpretive cultures, professional logics, and institutional trust. Fact-checking's corrective potential depends less on the factual content itself than on the socio-political and epistemic environments in which it circulates. Understanding these determinants is thus essential for explaining not only when fact-checking succeeds or fails, but also how citizens' perceptions of truth, authority, and journalism are being reconfigured in the digital age.

4. Fact-Checking in the Italian Context: Between Polarization, Journalism, and Distrust

The Italian media and political environment provides a particularly insightful context in which to examine how fact-checking is perceived, trusted, and engaged with. While the international literature has largely focused on the United States and Northern Europe, Italy offers a distinct combination of structural and cultural conditions: a highly politicized media system, a long-standing overlap between journalism and political power, and deep-seated public skepticism toward both politics and the press (see Brüggemann et al., 2014). Within this environment, fact-checking has developed as a relatively recent and institutionally fragile practice, whose legitimacy and impact are shaped by the dynamics of polarization and media trust.

Within this media environment, fact-checking has developed as a relatively recent and institutionally fragile practice. Rather than being evaluated solely on methodological grounds, fact-checking is frequently interpreted through partisan lenses, with audiences assessing the credibility of fact-checkers according to their perceived ideological positioning. This dynamic is reinforced by comparatively low levels of trust in journalism and public institutions (Curini et al., 2024), making fact-checking itself an object of political contestation rather than a neutral corrective practice. For these reasons, the Italian case is not merely an application of international trends but an empirical laboratory for understanding how fact-checking interacts with political culture, media polarization, and the reconfiguration of journalistic authority. It exemplifies how the determinants discussed above—partisanship, epistemic trust, and institutional legitimacy—converge within a media system where the boundaries between truth and interpretation, journalism and politics, remain deeply contested. These characteristics make Italy a particularly informative setting in which to examine how political predispositions shape audiences' responses to fact-checking during periods of intense foreign disinformation, especially when we consider Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Russia has emerged as one of the most active foreign actors in exploiting the contemporary information environment through coordinated disinformation campaigns, aimed at weakening democratic consensus and support for Ukraine (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Hutchings et al., 2024). Following the full-scale invasion launched on February 24, 2022, these efforts intensified considerably, combining state media, digital platforms, and coordinated influence operations to disseminate misleading narratives across European public spheres (Geissler et al., 2023; Lai et al., 2024; Pierri et al., 2023). Given Italy's documented receptiveness to Russian narratives and the broader context of epistemological polarization discussed above, the war in Ukraine provides a particularly appropriate empirical setting in which to examine how political leaning and war partisanship shape audiences' responses to fact-checking.

5. Post-Truth Behavior: Selective Exposure and Motivated Reasoning

This section expands on the issue of fact-checking reception by highlighting the role of epistemological beliefs, i.e., beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing (Richter & Schmid, 2010), especially when such beliefs become politically polarized. As mentioned in the previous section, the increased distrust of journalistic sources has led to the emergence of a post-truth public sphere, particularly on the right side of the political spectrum (van Kessel et al., 2020). The evidence-based epistemology of journalism and fact-checking is at odds with directional post-truth approaches to information, which tend to select and elaborate political information through the filter of pre-existing beliefs (Thaler, 2024). Studying North Macedonia, Palloshi-Disha et al. (2023) show that political affiliation significantly increases individuals' vulnerability to disinformation, reinforcing confirmation bias and the tendency to accept politically congruent information while rejecting incongruent claims. This interpretation is consistent with previous research on political attitudes and fact-checking. Across European countries, Lyons et al. (2020) found that higher levels of democracy dissatisfaction are associated with lower levels of fact-checking favorability, which in some countries is negatively correlated even with conservatism. Similarly, Robertson et al. (2020) highlight how liberals and liberal/mainstream news consumers are more aware of, positive toward, and likely to report using fact-checking sites. Consequently, right-leaning political attitudes generally become predictors of selective exposure and motivated reasoning, even when it comes to fact-checks. In the context of this study, therefore, misinformation on the war in Ukraine is expected to be more successful on the right side of the political axis, where dissonant evidence is expected to be rejected more frequently. Moreover, right-leaning political attitudes are expected to predict lower exposure to and acceptance of fact-checks. This study aims at measuring these mechanisms in the following three stages: the veracity assessment of news; the selective exposure to fact-checking; and the degree of reception of fact-checks. When it comes to the first stage, it is hypothesized that:

- H1: Motivated reasoning is higher for politically right-leaning individuals.
  - H1a: More favorable views of Russia's invasion will be associated with lower ratings of statements favoring Ukraine and higher ratings of statements favoring Russia.
  - H1b: The strength of the above relationship will increase with right-leaning positioning.

While H1a tests the general prevalence of motivated reasoning, H1b posits a positive interaction between pro-Russian attitudes and right-leaning positioning in shaping truth assessments as outcomes.

Assuming that a post-truth epistemology dominates right-leaning citizens, moreover, we expect them to be less likely to choose to visualize fact-checks for statements disconfirming their beliefs, given the evidence-based epistemology of fact-checking journalism. We therefore posit that selective exposure to fact-checking is more frequently associated with right-wing positioning:

- H2: Directional selective exposure is higher for right-leaning individuals.
  - H2a: More favorable views of Russia's invasion will be associated with lower likelihood to read fact-checks for counter-attitudinal statements.
  - H2b: The strength of the above relationship will increase with right-leaning positioning.

Selective exposure may lead only a portion of respondents to choose to visualize fact-checks. Even this portion, however, is likely to be conditioned by epistemological polarization when it comes to accepting counter-attitudinal fact-checks. We expect motivated reasoning in fact-checking reception to be enhanced on the right side of the political spectrum:

- H3: Right-leaning political attitudes tend to be associated with lower acceptance of counter-attitudinal fact-checks.
  - H3a: More favorable views of Russia's invasion will be associated with lower assessed veracity of fact-checked statements favoring Ukraine and higher assessed veracity of fact-checked statements favoring Russia.
  - H3b: The strength of the above relationship will increase with right-leaning positioning.

Once again, H3a tests the general prevalence of motivated reasoning, while H3b posits a positive interaction between pro-Russian attitudes and right-leaning positioning in shaping the reception of fact-checks.

6. Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we use original survey data collected in Italy in spring 2022 (N = 1,001). The data were collected by Kantar through their own digital platforms, with indirect economic incentives (about one euro upon survey completion) and quotas for education, gender, and age. The set quotas were mostly achieved, apart from a slight underrepresentation of the youngest and oldest cohorts.

The data collection process received ethical approval from the University of Amsterdam and was carried out in compliance with strict ethical standards. Namely, participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study, were asked for their informed consent, were warned about potentially uncomfortable questions, and had the option to withdraw at any point. The data were treated strictly confidentially and used exclusively for research purposes.

Respondents were asked to rate the veracity of 10 statements on the war in Ukraine. Subsequently, they had to decide whether to read the fact-check corresponding to each statement and were asked to give a new veracity assessment of the claims they had fact-checked. Table 1 summarizes the 10 statements, the side they favor, and the corresponding fact-check. The selected statements had appeared on prominent fact-checking websites and were balanced in the side they favored.

Table 1. Statements included in the survey.

Statement	Side favored	Fact-check
V1) The Russian attack repeatedly hit civilian targets in Ukraine.	Ukraine	True
V2) China has publicly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine.	Ukraine	False
V3) NATO is keeping previous agreements on which countries are allowed to join NATO.	Ukraine	True
V4) In Russia-occupied Crimea and in the Donbas, Ukrainians live in repression and fear.	Ukraine	True
V5) Russia is committing genocide in Ukraine.	Ukraine	Unverified
V6) Ukraine's government is antisemitic and controlled by neo-Nazis.	Russia	False
V7) Ukraine has repeatedly broken the ceasefire they previously agreed to.	Russia	True
V8) The U.S. is funding biological weapons research in Ukraine.	Russia	False
V9) The Ukrainian Armed Forces are supported by far-right militias.	Russia	True
V10) Ukraine signed a law that forbids publishing news only in Russian.	Russia	True

By the questionnaire structure, we can analyze veracity assessment, fact-checking exposure, and fact-checking reception as distinct dependent variables, studying the impact of partisanship and political leaning in separate regression models for each statement. We employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models for H1 and H3, while H2 is tested with a logistic regression model, given the binary outcomes of visualizing or avoiding fact-checks. All models include an interaction term between war partisanship and political leaning. Since the 10 statements vary in veracity, side favored, and topic, the three outcomes examined here (initial veracity assessment, choice to access a fact-check, and post-exposure reassessment) are all defined at the statement level. Estimating statement-level models allows us to capture claim-specific variation and to show more clearly for which statements political predispositions matter most.

6.1. Outcome Variables

Statement ratings, both prior and after fact-checking, are measured with Likert scales ranging from 1 (*very certain it's false*) to 5 (*very certain it's true*); variables tracking exposure to each statement's fact-check are binary variables. Table 2 presents, for each of the 10 statements, the descriptive statistics of the three corresponding dependent variables: assessed veracity, exposure to fact-checking, and subsequent re-assessment.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of dependent variables.

Statement	Variable	%	Mean	*SD*	Min	Max
The Russian attack repeatedly hit civilian targets in Ukraine (true).	veracity		4.04	1.00	1	5
	exposure	54.7				
	reception		3.99	0.97	1	5
China has publicly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine (false).	veracity		2.43	1.08	1	5
	exposure	34.9				
	reception		3.45	1.32		

Table 2. (Cont.) Descriptive statistics of dependent variables.

Statement	Variable	%	Mean	*SD*	Min	Max
NATO is keeping previous agreements on which countries are allowed to join NATO (true).	veracity		3.26	0.92	1	5
	exposure	39.3				
	reception		3.62	1.02	1	5
In Russia-occupied Crimea and in the Donbas, Ukrainians live in repression and fear (true).	veracity		3.50	1.00	1	5
	exposure	42.6				
	reception		3.84	1.00	1	5
Russia is committing genocide in Ukraine (unverified).	veracity		3.74	1.13	1	5
	exposure	51.5				
	reception		3.48	1.07	1	5
Ukraine's government is antisemitic and controlled by neo-Nazis (false).	veracity		2.38	1.09	1	5
	exposure	35.2				
	reception		3.11	1.30	1	5
Ukraine has repeatedly broken the ceasefire they previously agreed to (true).	veracity		2.62	1.02	1	5
	exposure	29.8				
	reception		3.65	0.93	1	5
The U.S. is funding biological weapons research in Ukraine (false).	veracity		3.05	1.02	1	5
	exposure	45.3				
	reception		3.19	1.15	1	5
The Ukrainian Armed Forces are supported by far-right militias (true).	veracity		3.01	0.98	1	5
	exposure	33.8				
	reception		3.74	0.94	1	5
Ukraine signed a law that forbids publishing news only in Russian (true).	veracity		2.94	0.86	1	5
	exposure	28.4				
	reception		3.83	0.93	1	5

6.2. Predictors

Our key predictors are political leaning and war partisanship. Political leaning is measured on a self-assessment scale varying from 0 (*left*) to 10 (*right*). War partisanship, on the other hand, is measured through a 7-point Likert scale measuring the level of agreement with the statement "Russia's military operation in Ukraine is legitimate." In each model, the impact of the following three socio-demographic variables is also assessed: age, gender, and college education. It should be noted that right-leaning attitudes and support for the Russian invasion are positively and significantly correlated (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation among predictors.

	War partisanship	Political leaning	Gender	College education	Age
Russia-leaning		0.186***	−0.011	−0.023	−0.054
Right-leaning	0.186***		0.022	−0.051	0.016
Gender (F)	−0.011	0.022		−0.027	−0.020
College education	−0.023	−0.051	−0.027		−0.165***
Age	−0.054	0.016	−0.020	−0.165***	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

7. Results

We first present descriptive results, showing how veracity assessment, fact-checking exposure, and fact-checking reception vary across the political spectrum and the various degrees of support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

7.1. Group Comparison

Looking at accuracy ratings prior to fact-checking, a few points stand out. First, respondents seem to be familiar with only a few of the various topics covered by the claims: In 8 out of 10 cases, the most frequent rating is 3, with respondents being unsure whether the claim is true or false (Figure 1). The average rating, however, is significantly close to 3 only for statements 8, 9, and 10; it should be noted that claim 8 (The U.S. is funding biological weapons research in Ukraine) appears to be, among the statements considered, the only Russian false narrative that has significant success, even though the moderate (but positive) rating of claim 3 should not go unnoticed: Although only a minority (15%) believes in the false narrative that NATO enlargement is a breach of previous agreements, the majority of respondents does not refuse the claim, with 47% being "uncertain" about its veracity. Additionally, verified claims such as the Ukrainian breach of ceasefire agreements (statement 7) receive a disproportionately lower average rating, signaling a general lower awareness of facts disfavoring Ukraine. Moreover, the variation pattern of truth ratings among the categories of political orientation and war partisanship is often similar.

As an example, one might consider evaluations of statements 1 ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.01$) and 8 ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.02$), which are claims favoring Ukraine and Russia respectively. On average, the former seems to receive a higher truth rating by left-leaning pro-Ukrainian individuals (Figure 2), while the latter is higher rated by right-leaning, pro-Russian respondents (Figure 3).

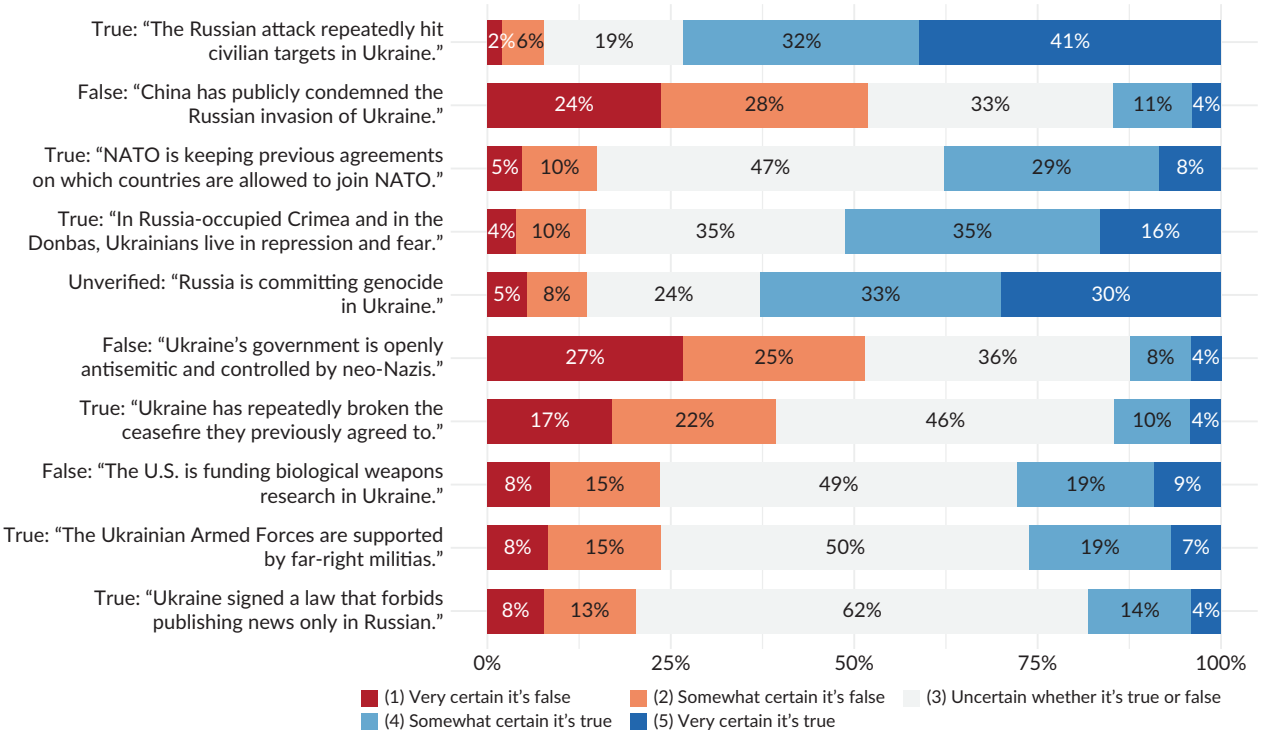


Figure 1. Veracity assessment of 10 claims on Russia's war against Ukraine in Italy.

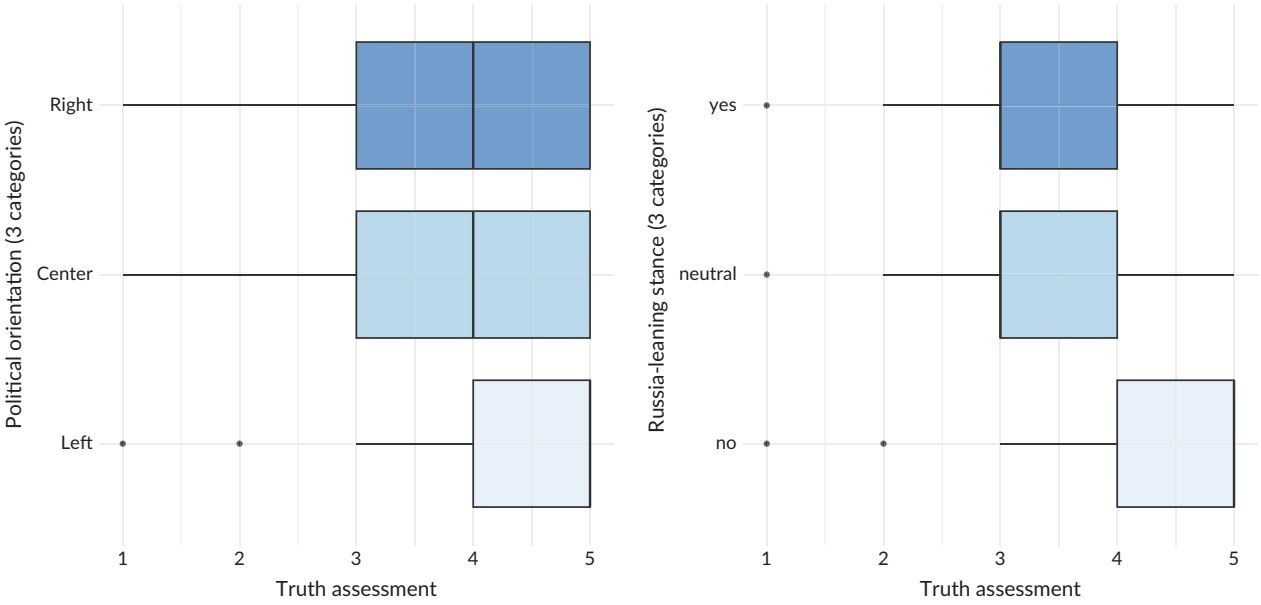


Figure 2. Truth assessment (prior to fact-checking) of statement 1. Note: Distribution by political leaning ("Left" = 1–3, "Center" = 4–7, "Right" = 8–10) and Russia-leaning stance ("no" = 1–2, "neutral" = 3–5, "yes" = 6–7).

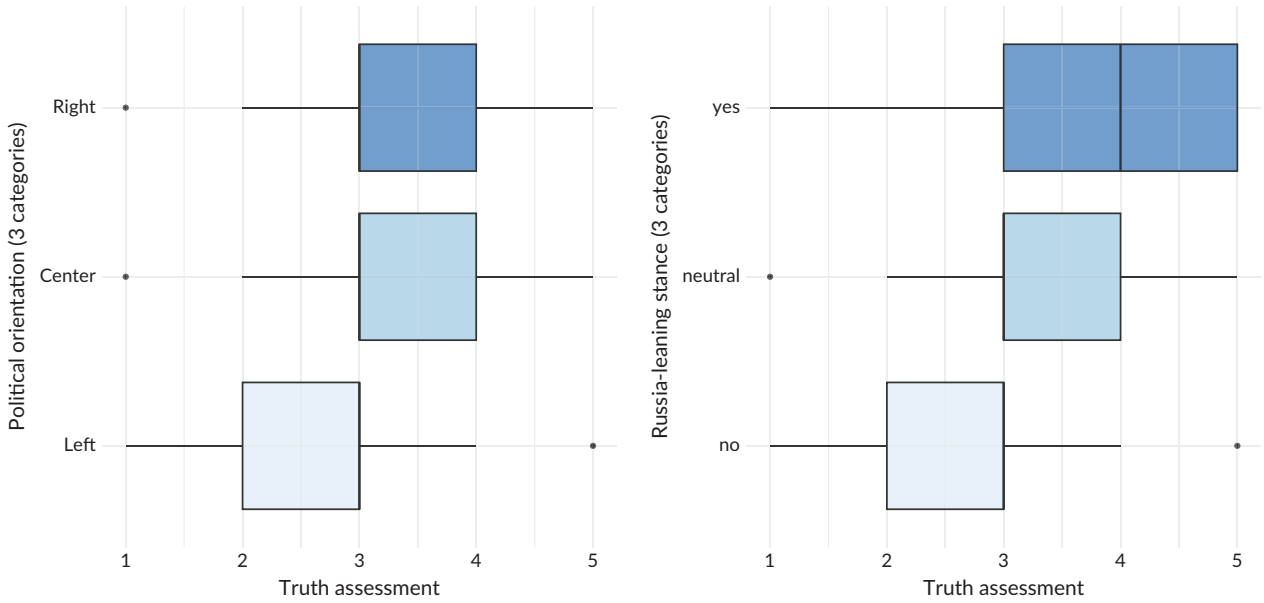


Figure 3. Truth assessment (prior to fact-checking) of statement 8. Note: Distribution by political leaning ("Left" = 1–3, "Center" = 4–7, "Right" = 8–10) and Russia-leaning stance ("no" = 1–2, "neutral" = 3–5, "yes" = 6–7).

This highlights a possible overlap between general political leaning and partisanship regarding the two sides of the conflict. Finally, as shown in Table 2, fact-checking visualization is low, as most respondents refuse exposure to fact-checks. This should be considered when comparing assessments before and after visualization.

7.2. Hypothesis Tests

Next, we model veracity assessment, fact-checking exposure, and fact-checking reception as a function of political leaning, war partisanship, and socio-demographic variables, with an interaction term between political leaning and war partisanship. We report individual OLS regression model results for each statement rating, and logistic regression model results for each fact-check visualization. Veracity assessment results are reported in Table 4.

Across statements, we find evidence of motivated reasoning, as Russia-leaning attitudes consistently predict higher ratings for statements favoring Russia and lower ratings for statements favoring Ukraine. The only exception is statement 2, which probably interacts with political identities in a more nuanced way, as it involves other issues such as attitudes towards China. Overall, H1a is corroborated. The interaction term is statistically significant only for statement 5, where right-leaning individuals seem to be slightly more prone to motivated reasoning. Overall, however, our results show motivated reasoning across the political spectrum, and we therefore reject H1b. We proceed with fact-checking exposure and reception, to better understand how such symmetry translates to corrective measures. Fact-checking exposure results are reported in Table 5.

Table 5. Regression results for fact-checking exposure.

Variable	Statement 1 (true, Ukraine)	Statement 2 (false, Ukraine)	Statement 3 (true, Ukraine)	Statement 4 (true, Ukraine)	Statement 5 (unv., Ukraine)	Statement 6 (false, Russia)	Statement 7 (true, Russia)	Statement 8 (false, Russia)	Statement 9 (true, Russia)	Statement 10 (true, Russia)
Political leaning	1.015 (0.025)	1.012 (0.026)	0.985 (0.024)	0.968 (0.024)	0.987 (0.024)	0.980 (0.025)	0.933*** (0.025)	0.968 (0.023)	0.925*** (0.024)	0.943** (0.025)
Partisanship	0.901*** (0.033)	0.870*** (0.035)	0.997 (0.037)	0.887*** (0.033)	0.892*** (0.032)	0.961 (0.036)	0.972 (0.038)	0.960 (0.035)	0.964 (0.037)	0.921** (0.038)
Leaning × partisanship	0.979* (0.012)	0.981 (0.013)	0.981 (0.012)	0.986 (0.012)	0.994 (0.012)	0.999 (0.013)	0.999 (0.013)	0.996 (0.012)	1.009 (0.013)	0.992 (0.014)
Gender (F)	1.642*** (0.214)	1.096 (0.147)	1.182 (0.154)	1.355** (0.177)	1.424*** (0.184)	1.145 (0.152)	0.887 (0.124)	1.004 (0.129)	1.385** (0.188)	1.278* (0.181)
Age	1.017*** (0.004)	0.998 (0.004)	1.005 (0.004)	1.012*** (0.004)	1.014*** (0.004)	1.001 (0.004)	0.999 (0.004)	1.010** (0.004)	1.012*** (0.004)	1.005 (0.004)
College education	1.107 (0.154)	1.229 (0.175)	1.496*** (0.207)	1.262* (0.175)	1.181 (0.163)	1.034 (0.147)	1.078 (0.159)	1.451*** (0.199)	1.182 (0.171)	1.214 (0.182)
Constant	0.404*** (0.095)	0.532** (0.128)	0.396*** (0.094)	0.323*** (0.077)	0.421*** (0.098)	0.467*** (0.112)	0.453*** (0.113)	0.435*** (0.101)	0.221*** (0.055)	0.245*** (0.063)
Observations	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
McFadden *R*-squared	0.033	0.014	0.011	0.025	0.024	0.003	0.008	0.012	0.021	0.015

Notes: One observation was excluded because of a missing value; odds ratios from logistic regressions; standard errors in parenthesis; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 4. Regression results for veracity assessments.

Variable	Statement 1 (true, Ukraine)	Statement 2 (false, Ukraine)	Statement 3 (true, Ukraine)	Statement 4 (true, Ukraine)	Statement 5 (unv., Ukraine)	Statement 6 (false, Russia)	Statement 7 (true, Russia)	Statement 8 (false, Russia)	Statement 9 (true, Russia)	Statement 10 (true, Russia)
Political leaning	−0.025* (0.011)	0.009 (0.013)	0.016 (0.011)	−0.008 (0.012)	−0.018 (0.012)	0.018 (0.012)	0.024** (0.012)	0.041*** (0.011)	0.006 (0.011)	0.017* (0.010)
Partisanship	−0.236*** (0.016)	0.094*** (0.019)	−0.123*** (0.016)	−0.142*** (0.017)	−0.271*** (0.018)	0.257*** (0.017)	0.160*** (0.017)	0.157*** (0.017)	0.140*** (0.0168)	0.099*** (0.015)
Leaning × partisanship	−0.007 (0.005)	0.007 (0.006)	0.003 (0.005)	−0.010* (0.006)	−0.014** (0.006)	0.000 (0.001)	−0.006 (0.006)	−0.003 (0.006)	−0.002 (0.006)	−0.002 (0.005)
Gender (F)	0.014 (0.057)	−0.311*** (0.066)	−0.020 (0.057)	−0.234*** (0.061)	−0.262 (0.063)	−0.128** (0.062)	−0.261*** (0.061)	−0.228*** (0.061)	0.119** (0.060)	−0.064* (0.053)
Age	0.001 (0.002)	−0.005** (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	−0.003 (0.002)	−0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	−0.001 (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	0.003* (0.002)
College education	0.215*** (0.061)	−0.251*** (0.071)	0.003 (0.061)	−0.011 (0.065)	0.067 (0.068)	−0.160** (0.066)	−0.087 (0.065)	−0.158** (0.065)	−0.028 (0.064)	0.079 (0.056)
Constant	3.916*** (0.102)	2.944*** (0.119)	3.236*** (0.102)	3.771*** (0.109)	3.898*** (0.114)	2.433*** (0.111)	2.840*** (0.110)	3.028*** (0.109)	2.928*** (0.107)	2.851*** (0.095)
Observations	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
R-squared (adj.)	0.210	0.064	0.051	0.084	0.219	0.199	0.104	0.118	0.068	0.052

Notes: One observation was excluded because of a missing value; OLS regression coefficients; standard errors in parenthesis; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Except for statement 2, Russia-leaning attitudes consistently predict lower likelihood to visualize fact-checks for statements favoring Ukraine, with odds being around 10% lower. For statements favoring Russia, the significance of war partisanship vanishes, except for statement 10. Our results point at a different mechanism from the one suggested by H1a: Regardless of the side favored, a Russia-leaning stance either reduces the odds of exposure or has no relation to the choice of visualizing fact-checks. Additionally, we observe a similar pattern for right-leaning positioning. Under certain circumstances, individuals holding more right-wing, pro-Russian views are more likely to avoid fact-checks, regardless of the bias carried by the statement. These patterns are independent of each other, as the interaction term is not statistically significant. We therefore reject H2b. Fact-checking reception results are reported in Table 6.

For a correct interpretation, it should be considered that each model only includes respondents that visualized fact-checks, which in some cases led to small *N* sizes. Regression results highlight an imbalance in motivated reasoning when it comes to fact-checking reception: While both political leaning and partisanship remain often significant predictors of the assessed veracity of pro-Ukrainian statements, such significance is absent for pro-Russian ones (for political-leaning, statement 9 stands out as an exception; this is easily explained by the nature of the statement, which directly concerns right-wing identity). This suggests an asymmetry in the corrective power of fact-checking, which often seems less effective in reaching the pro-Russian side when it comes to statements favoring Ukraine. Before fact-checking, for example, a pro-Ukrainian stance seemed to predict a lower truth-assessment of the statement "Ukraine has repeatedly broken the ceasefire they previously agreed to." Such significant correlation disappears after visualizing a fact-check labelling the statement as true. On the other hand, a pro-Russian stance is associated with a lower evaluation of the veracity of the statement "The Russian attack repeatedly hit civilian targets in Ukraine," even after visualizing a fact-check confirming it. Overall, our results corroborate H3a for statements favoring Ukraine, but not for statements favoring Russia. More importantly, we find some evidence of significant interaction between political leaning and war partisanship: For statements 1, 4, and 5, the negative effect of Russia-leaning attitudes on fact-checking reception is slightly amplified for right-leaning individuals. For these cases, H3b is corroborated.

Table 6. Regression results for fact-checking reception.

Variable	Statement 1 (true, Ukraine)	Statement 2 (false, Ukraine)	Statement 3 (true, Ukraine)	Statement 4 (true, Ukraine)	Statement 5 (unv., Ukraine)	Statement 6 (false, Russia)	Statement 7 (true, Russia)	Statement 8 (false, Russia)	Statement 9 (true, Russia)	Statement 10 (true, Russia)
Political leaning	−0.014 (0.014)	−0.039 (0.027)	−0.008 (0.017)	−0.035** (0.016)	−0.010 (0.017)	−0.032 (0.026)	−0.019 (0.021)	−0.027 (0.020)	−0.049** (0.019)	−0.020 (0.021)
Partisanship	−0.202*** (0.023)	−0.027 (0.043)	−0.242*** (0.026)	−0.219*** (0.026)	−0.173*** (0.027)	−0.057 (0.038)	−0.001 (0.030)	0.019 (0.031)	0.018 (0.029)	−0.021 (0.031)
Leaning × partisanship	−0.017** (0.008)	0.019 (0.015)	0.003 (0.008)	−0.022*** (0.008)	−0.018** (0.009)	−0.002 (0.013)	0.015 (0.010)	−0.006 (0.011)	−0.013 (0.010)	−0.009 (0.010)
Gender (F)	0.010 (0.077)	0.074 (0.143)	−0.006 (0.094)	−0.203** (0.088)	0.037 (0.090)	−0.021 (0.139)	0.045 (0.108)	0.046 (0.109)	0.214** (0.102)	0.137 (0.111)
Age	0.002 (0.002)	0.004 (0.004)	0.001 (0.003)	−0.001 (0.003)	0.008*** (0.003)	0.000 (0.004)	−0.007** 0.003	−0.003 (0.003)	−0.001 (0.003)	−0.003 (0.003)
College education	0.195** (0.082)	0.169 (0.151)	0.063 (0.098)	0.139 (0.094)	0.149 (0.096)	0.200 (0.149)	0.056 (0.114)	−0.032 (0.115)	0.034 (0.107)	0.160 (0.117)
Constant	3.793*** (0.145)	3.123*** (0.265)	3.537*** (0.170)	3.895*** (0.167)	2.971*** (0.170)	3.056*** (0.255)	3.971*** (0.197)	3.337*** (0.209)	3.659*** (0.203)	3.851*** (0.214)
Observations	547	349	392	425	515	352	298	453	338	284
R-squared (adj.)	0.140	0.002	0.173	0.181	0.098	0.002	0.011	-0.006	0.023	0.008

Notes: OLS regression coefficients; standard errors in parenthesis; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

8. Discussion

A first contribution of this study lies in distinguishing between three analytically separate stages of the fact-checking process: individuals' initial assessments of factual claims, their voluntary exposure to fact-checks, and their subsequent reception of corrective information. Considered together, the results show that political leaning and war partisanship do not operate uniformly across these stages. Rather, their relevance and direction vary depending on whether respondents are assessing a claim, deciding whether to consult a fact-check, or reconsidering the claim after exposure to corrective information.

At the stage of initial veracity assessment, war partisanship is the most consistent predictor. Importantly, however, this does not amount to a simple right-wing asymmetry. Political leaning plays a comparatively weaker role, suggesting that initial evaluations are primarily shaped by attitudes toward the conflict rather than by ideological positioning alone.

A different pattern emerges for voluntary exposure. Here, right-leaning positioning and pro-Russian attitudes are associated with a lower propensity to consult fact-checks, suggesting that selective exposure reflects not only the avoidance of counter-attitudinal information but also a broader reluctance to engage with fact-checking as an epistemic practice. The strongest asymmetry emerges after exposure to corrective information. While fact-checks substantially reduce motivated reasoning for some claims, pro-Russian attitudes continue to predict lower acceptance of several Ukraine-favoring corrections, with right-leaning positioning further amplifying this resistance in some cases. This suggests that political asymmetries become progressively more pronounced as individuals move from initial evaluations to engagement with, and interpretation of, corrective information.

Beyond these findings, our case offers broader theoretical insights into the study of fact-checking. While much of the existing literature has focused on the United States and Northern Europe, our findings suggest that the effectiveness of fact-checking should not be understood independently from the institutional and cultural contexts in which it operates. Fact-checking is embedded within media systems characterized by different levels of political parallelism and trust in journalism (Humprecht et al., 2022).

Italy provides a particularly informative setting because it combines a long tradition of political parallelism with comparatively low levels of trust in journalism and strong overlaps between media and politics. In such a context, fact-checking is unlikely to be perceived solely as a neutral verification practice; rather, its legitimacy may itself become an object of political evaluation. Our findings are consistent with this interpretation. This suggests that fact-checking depends not only on corrective information itself but also on audiences' recognition of epistemic authority.

This finding reinforces recent conceptualizations of fact-checking as an epistemic institution rather than merely a journalistic technique. Verification does not simply establish whether a statement is true or false; it also implicitly claims authority over the definition of factual reality.

Beyond the Italian case, these findings suggest that the challenges faced by fact-checking initiatives are likely to become increasingly relevant across democratic societies experiencing growing political polarization and declining trust in journalism. Since our data were collected in 2022, the informational environment has

become even more saturated by generative AI, synthetic content, and increasingly sophisticated influence operations. Under these conditions, improving the technical quality of fact-checking alone may not be sufficient. Strengthening the institutional credibility of journalism and rebuilding public trust appear equally essential if corrective information is to retain its democratic function.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the cross-sectional nature of the survey prevents causal claims regarding the relationships observed between political attitudes, fact-checking exposure, and fact-checking reception. Although the analyses identify significant associations, they cannot establish the direction of these relationships.

Second, the analyses of fact-check reception rely only on respondents who voluntarily chose to consult the available fact-checks. This substantially reduces the number of observations for several models and suggests caution when generalizing the results concerning the final stage of the fact-checking process.

Beyond that, our empirical analysis focuses on a highly salient and politically contested issue: the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The exceptional political and emotional relevance of this topic may have amplified motivated reasoning and selective exposure. Future research should therefore examine whether similar patterns emerge across different policy domains and forms of misinformation, as well as in other national media systems characterized by different levels of political polarization and institutional trust.

From a conceptual perspective, although our survey design allows us to distinguish between initial belief formation, voluntary exposure to fact-checks, and post-exposure reception, it does not directly observe the cognitive mechanisms underlying these processes. In particular, motivated reasoning and selective exposure are inferred from observable behavioral patterns rather than measured directly through psychological indicators.

Furthermore, our operationalization of partisanship is issue-specific, as it relies on respondents' attitudes toward the Russian invasion of Ukraine rather than broader partisan identification. While this choice is theoretically appropriate for the present study, future research should examine whether similar dynamics emerge when political identities are operationalized through party identification or ideological attachment.

It should also be noted that self-reported measures of political leaning can be imprecise, and some dynamics may be blurred due to self-desirability bias. In addition, our sample does not perfectly match the set interlocking quotas, which can lead to slight distortion for the youngest and oldest cohorts.

Another aspect to consider is that, although the theoretical framework discusses factors such as source credibility or platform dynamics as potentially relevant for fact-checking effectiveness, our survey did not directly measure these mechanisms. Consequently, their role can only be inferred from the broader institutional context and should be examined more directly in future research.

Finally, the data collected in 2022 may not reflect the way in which the Italian population may have adapted to over four years of full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

9. Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing literature on fact-checking by showing that political attitudes influence different stages of the corrective process in different ways. Rather than treating fact-checking as a single outcome, we distinguish between initial veracity assessments, voluntary exposure to corrective information, and the reception of fact-checks after exposure. This analytical distinction reveals that political leaning and war partisanship do not shape all stages equally. While motivated reasoning characterizes initial evaluations across different political positions, more pronounced asymmetries emerge when individuals decide whether to engage with fact-checks and whether to accept corrective information.

Our findings also contribute to comparative research on fact-checking by demonstrating the importance of national media systems. The Italian case illustrates how political parallelism, comparatively low trust in journalism, and contested journalistic authority shape audiences' engagement with corrective information. Although these findings are grounded in a specific national context, they point to broader dynamics that may become increasingly relevant in other polarized democracies where journalism's epistemic authority is under pressure.

More generally, this study suggests that the limits of fact-checking should not be understood solely as failures of information correction. They also reflect broader transformations in the relationship between journalism and its publics. If audiences no longer recognize journalistic institutions as legitimate arbiters of factual claims, improving the technical quality of fact-checking alone is unlikely to overcome resistance to correction. Understanding how epistemic authority is constructed, challenged, and maintained across different media systems therefore represents an important direction for future research on journalism, misinformation, and democratic communication.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data are available at this repository: https://osf.io/thuvm.

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