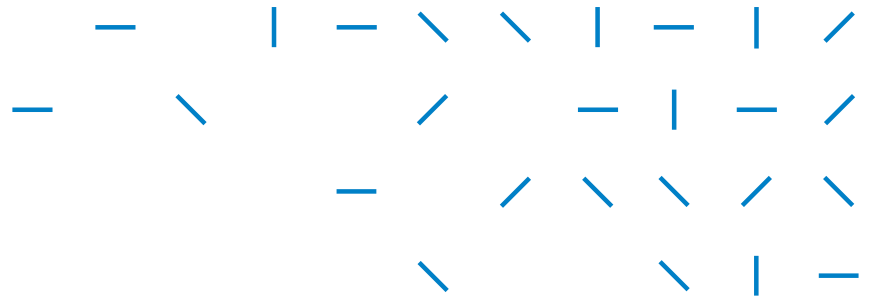**Baltic Centre for Media Excellence**

MEDIA LITERACY SECTOR MAPPING
IN GEORGIA, LATVIA, MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE

General Overview
and Recommendations

2021

Contents

Introduction

Media literacy is a core element of information consumption in a rapidly changing media environment. In such an environment, high media literacy within the audience also generates a demand for quality journalism and helps quality media to survive and develop, as well as to remain trusted. Critical thinking and responsible media use are among the most essential elements in order to strengthen the cognitive dimension of societal resilience to stand up against disinformation and other types of aggressive information. To a different degree, the selected countries are facing multiple challenges connected to the information environment. However, in all these countries, media literacy is seen as a tool for facilitating and saving democratic processes.

Although the term "media literacy" does not have a single definition, and could be interpreted in different ways (for example, to fit in with a donor's agenda), the definition used for the purposes of this analysis is put forward by the European Commission: "Media literacy refers to all the technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow us to access and have a critical understanding of and interact with media. These capacities allow us to exercise critical thinking, while participating in the economic, social and cultural aspects of society and playing an active role in the democratic process". [1]

By using this umbrella definition, the research team introduced and designed the **A-A-A approach** on mapping media literacy developments, which means focusing on **A - actors**; **A - audiences** and **A - activities**. Given the dynamics of developing the media literacy sphere, the team focused on a set of country specific recommendations in the following dimensions: cross-sectoral cooperation and networking; evaluation of media literacy activities; sustainability and funding; media involvement. The executive summary starts by providing background information. The general findings are listed afterwards. Selected threats and strengths are followed by general recommendations.

Background Information on the Countries' Development

The selected countries have different political, economic and social contexts, which is also reflected in the country reports. Changing political environments, economic challenges and different societal compositions make every case (including the timeline) unique. Latvia is a member of the EU and NATO, which largely reflects its participation in media literacy initiatives, research, and knowledge exchange with allies. The EU and NATO are active supporters of initiatives aimed at strengthening societal resilience and media freedom, as well as increasing the ability to protect the information space from attempts by authoritarian regimes to weaken democracies.

The research helps to identify the main facilitators, which are affecting media literacy developments. Within the last three years, the main changes are connected to 1) hostile activities by foreign countries, namely – Russia; 2) the perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic leading to increased polarisation and the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on society and its consequent influence on the media environment. Both challenges are connected to the production of mass disinformation, a polarisation of societies and an increased societal distrust of government institutions and the media. The first challenge has led to the securitization of media literacy, leading to a further rise in disinformation and increasingly hostile narratives. The second challenge of the disinformation, is that it has fuelled the polarisation and distrust. The collapsing business models of the independent media has reinforced this as their independent voice has been stifled and they have needed to seek support to survive. One of the means to do this has been by getting involved in media literacy calls/activities.

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[1] https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupID=2541

The following global indexes demonstrate differences not only among the selected countries, but also show the dynamics of the changes in each country within the last three years. **Media freedom ranking**[2] evaluates the press freedom situation in 180 countries and territories. Latvia is among the leaders and its ranking has improved from 24 to 22/180. Moldova from the rank of 91 in 2019 and has moved to 89/180 in 2020. Ukraine gets into the first 100 countries, sharing the rank of 96/180 in 2020 and 97/180 in 2021 position. Georgia has stayed at the same place 60/100.

Global Innovation Index[3] is an annual assessment of the innovation ecosystems of 132 economies. It takes into account more than 80 different indicators, which have decreased in all selected countries. The most significant decrease is in Georgia, moving from a ranking of 48 to 63. Moldova moved from 58 in 2019 to 64 in 2021. Ukraine was ranked 45 in 2020 and moved to 49, Latvia from 32 in 2019 moved to 35 in 2021.

The Global Peace Index[4] includes more than 20 indicators in 163 countries and aims at assessing peacefulness, for example, the number of armed services personnel, the level of violent crime, etc, as well as internal and external conflicts. In this ranking, Ukraine significantly improved from being 150/163 in 2020 to 112/163 in 2021. Improvement can also be seen with regards to Moldova – from 65/163 in 2019 to 59/2021 in 2021. Latvia and Georgia dropped in this ranking. Latvia has lost three positions – from 32 to 35/163. Georgia dropped from 84/163 in 2020 to 89/163 in 2021.

The Global Corruption Index[5] is based on 43 variables and includes analysis of 193 countries and territories. According to the global corruption index, Latvia is ranked 32/193 (low level of risk), which was an improvement from 37 in 2020. Georgia improved from 50 to 41/193 (low level of risk), Moldova improved from 119 to 114 (medium level of risk) and Ukraine, which also is in the medium risk group, moved from rank 132 to 123.

In addition to differences in economic, political and social development, the countries have all faced multiple crises, during the last two decades, thus there are also common issues in the area of media literacy, which forms the core of the general findings below.

1. General Findings

The Missing Strategic Holistic Approach

Every selected country is going through a process of securitization of the **media literacy as part of national security and defence**. These changes were made in response to military and informational aggression from Russia, however, each faces the threat at a different scale. In all countries, there is a need for **a holistic strategic approach to media literacy**. At the same time, this approach has developed at different rates in each country .

Nevertheless, in each country there are attempts or plans to create systemic policy with action plans. **The main obstacles, however, can be summed up in the following ways**: the lack of a holistic vision and evidence-based approach; missing a joint understanding and definition of the role of media literacy in society; low level institutional coordination and cooperation; a lack of resources; and a lack of political will to define and prioritise selected vulnerable groups, including minorities.

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[2] https://rsf.org/en/ranking
[3] https://www.wipo.int/global_innovation_index/en/
[4] https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GPI-2021-web.pdf
[5] https://risk-indexes.com/global-corruption-index/

Government Institutions: Trust, Transparency and the Required Coordination and Cooperation

Different approaches are implemented in designing institutional leadership in each country. In Ukraine and Georgia, there are attempts to establish consolidating bodies (separated or based on Ministries). In Latvia and Moldova, there are no clear publicly available strategies for development. Among the most common institutional implementers in all countries are the Ministries responsible for education, culture and digital technologies and transformation.

In each country there are attempts (at different stages of implementation) to create governmental agencies and/or platforms to combine media literacy initiatives and activities. At the same time, a strong **connection to the government raises concerns** within the NGO community, especially in countries with high levels of corruption. There is a clear need for more trust, based on transparency between state and non-state actors.

As a result of a missing strategic approach, there are problems with government related cross-institutional cooperation - among ministries, regulators and governmental agencies in every country. While strategic documents underline the priority of critical media literacy and outline the skills needed to evaluate information for well-informed decision making, the dominant approach in all four countries, is for certain government bodies **to focus on digital literacies and technical skills, and not on critical thinking**.

Non-Governmental and International Organisations: Setting the Agenda

This lack of understanding, coordination and cooperation among government structures, accompanied by the **dominance and importance of non-governmental actors, creates an imbalance in setting the agenda.** NGOs mostly get financial resources from international organisations and foreign actors.

Donors and supporters through requesting specific projects, developing calls and competing initiatives are transforming the media literacy environment at the AAA level - by selecting actors, defining audiences and endorsing activities. The current agendas of international supporters and donors are aimed to fill gaps - to support the non-governmental community and to create projects for minorities, also in minority languages. However, international organisations need to evaluate interventions, and they need to come up with projects adapted for local audiences, as well as demonstrate successful examples to other non-governmental partners in other countries.

Formal Education - Past or Future Oriented?

In each country, the implementation of the media literacy curriculums has started. This has been initiated by and supported by NGOs. There were different approaches at the beginning and differences in the current implementation of media literacy in schools, and special education institutions, including universities. In each country, as mentioned, concerns have been expressed that the current curriculums are **prioritising digital literacy and technical skills. It is essential to include more critical-thinking**, oriented knowledge and skills to advance critical thinking from an early age. Some important governmental stakeholders actively promote digital literacy, like the Ministry of Digital Transformation in Ukraine. The media developing tendencies, like Metaverse, should also be followed to stay up to date.

Among other concerns are that previously developed resources are becoming outdated. The resources should reflect changes in the media environment and be understood by both teachers and students. In all countries, schools are the dominant audience for both - addressing and creating media literacy activities for children and creating and implementing different types of activities for teachers.

Non-governmental actors and academia play a crucial role **in training teachers**, creating specific material for teachers, and ensuring the requirements for the competences needed are kept up to date. Teachers are among the groups most focussed on. The tendency is to also educate future teachers at universities. There are promising changes in higher education curriculums with different examples of changes being made in curriculums for communication specialists, including journalists*Research, Evaluation and Evidence Based Improvements*

The transforming media ecosystem and the ongoing information challenges create a need for **regular research and follow-up, in order to design and implement evidence-based activities**. The government institutions, working on the analysis of societal resilience, do not, however, share the data with media literacy implementers. Sharing would be beneficial for designing better targeted approaches.

There might be different formal and informal formats for sharing the data for rapid evidence-based interventions, but evidence is crucial for media literacy projects actors. **The general knowledge of media consumption habits and media literacy skills should not only be based on quantitative analysis, but also on qualitative analysis.**

Neither should future projects be based on outdated information for the target audiences or on limited data. Without the updated information on targeted audiences, the implementers could fail by covering outmoded formats, ways and topics. The government institutions in some countries have plans to conduct the research that would cover the country and to make it public. At the same time, the publication of this data should be evaluated.

There is a lack of resources and skills for in-house research within the non-governmental institutions. Representatives from academia are providing project based, research, but this is without the resources for conducting longitudinal analysis. However, they do express an interest in joining evaluation activities and would be able to support such research activities. The evaluation of media literacy projects is mainly carried out by donor organisations or in projects implemented with the support of donor organisation.

Promoting Media Literacy and Qualitative Journalism to Enhance Demand for Media Literacy

The countries represent different media systems and meet different internal challenges, including media polarisation associated with the surviving interests of political entities. **The joint concern is hostile informational activities from neighbouring authoritarian regimes**. In the information ecosystems of Georgia, Latvia, Moldova and Ukraine, there are both media involved as active media literacy implementers (and partners), and those media outlets that are a source of disinformation.

Promotion of quality journalism is essential to protect the information environment. The unused potential of Public Broadcasting to enlarge media literacy activities is mentioned in all four countries. The content produced could be adapted and used for educational purposes.

In Ukraine and Georgia, there is a dominance of disinformation and counter disinformation initiatives. **Journalists are among the target audiences in media literacy activities**. There is a need to encourage the journalistic community by providing skills and tools to help them in various ways. For example, helping them in finding disinformation, and finding an appropriate way to counter it, without exercising toxic fact checking and provoking amplification of disinformation.

Allocating financial resources in this area is important for private media, which could be both state connected and international organisation / donor related. The media literacy initiative in the media must be of good quality and constantly updated and assessed. Having partnerships with poor quality media could increase

scepticism within the audience. Thus, the trivialisation and oversimplification of media literacy content in the media should also be avoided.

Special **support is needed for regional journalists and outlet**s, in both - training journalists and increasing their ability to analyse information and to encourage the creation of media literacy related initiatives.

2. Identified Threats and Vulnerabilities

Although every country has its own specific information environments, common threats and vulnerabilities can be identified. Social, political and cultural trends should be taken into account when addressing the risks of instabilities - be it political or financial. Combinations of successes and failures makes a unique set of lessons to be learned in the case of each country, while also being important to the region in general.

The threats and vulnerabilities are grouped according to the focus on the following topics: cross-sectoral cooperation and networking, sustainability and funding, evaluation of media literacy activities and media involvement. This section of the overview highlights selected threats and weaknesses from the country reports. The following issues, given the general developments, are of high importance to be followed in the region.

Cross-sectoral cooperation and networking:

- There still is a lack of understanding of media literacy concepts and consequently a lack of advancement in the needed competences. There is also the lack of a role for media literacy outlined in national defence strategies by the authorities (instead, it is reduced to digital literacy);

- The lack of unity and coherence among different governmental institutions and agencies and the absence of a leading institution responsible for media literacy policy all further complicates the situation and adds unpredictability;

- There is no systemic policy on media cooperation with regards to promoting media literacy;

- Frequent organisational, personnel or managerial changes may affect the project, cooperation or even the responsibility of a government institution;

- Decision-making systems in the field of education remain excessively bureaucratic, thus making the process of media literacy implementation less flexible;

- Due to limited resources, the network competition can be an obstacle to organisations for sharing their views among each other (cooperation vs. competition);

- In the case of government funding, risks can also be linked to the increased interference by state actors in the content of media literacy projects;

- Professional burnout of staff of small-scale media literacy projects can be observed. This happens for instance, when faced with the challenge of the low efficiency of their efforts and slow changes in their audiences;

- Insufficient representation of media literacy efforts across the regions can also be regarded as a threat.

Sustainability and Funding:

- There is a lack of understanding of the importance of media literacy among companies and other actors with financial resources;

- Media literacy can potentially lose its place in the priority of donor organisations;

- There is a lack of financial stability in the countries (and in donor countries). The Covid-19 pandemic has also led to the risks of a negative impact on financial stability , especially for non-governmental actors;

- Governments are financially incapable of fulfilling its obligations/goals in the media literacy area;

- Media literacy is not valued and supported enough at the municipal/local level;

- Donors tend to limit funding to small grants;

- Collaboration among organisations is often initiated by the donor, within a specific project.

Evaluation of Media Literacy Activities:

- There is a lack of flexibility in redefining goals and indicators to be measured and reached;

- There is a lack of understanding of media literacy concepts and key media literacy competences by some donors and organisations;

- Evaluation processes are underfinanced. The financial costs of evaluation are frequently left out of the estimated costs of projects and the internal capacity of actors to implement evaluation is poor;

- The involvement of professional experts would increase the costs of the project. In-house expertise is in high demand. However, the number of staff involved in media literacy projects is rather limited.;

- Changes in society and media consumption challenges comparative evaluation in the region;

- Not all donors, especially in small-scale projects, fund evaluation;

- Due to the homogeneous approach of donors to targeting groups, many target groups, including vulnerable groups, remain neglected;

- Poor selection of evaluation methods can create a misconception of the success of the project (for example, the sole use of self-evaluation forms does not fully measure the impact of the project).

Media Involvement:

- Commercial media create media literacy from the attracted/awarded resources, not from their own resources, thus increasing the dependency on external support;

- Journalists working on media literacy related topics could become (and are becoming) victims of online harassment and campaigns;

- Providing media literacy grants to the media can increase doubts about the quality of journalism;

- Resistance to cross-border conspiracy theories and manipulative content can be challenging at a national level;

- Excessive focus on disinformation can have the side-effect of neglecting other needs of the audiences in some of countries;

- Distrust towards the mainstream media can increase largely because of the polarised media environment.

3. General Recommendations

The previously listed country related threats and vulnerabilities must be addressed differently, given the country specifics. At the same time, there are also general recommendations to follow. While implementation of some recommendations is linked to the different stages of development for each country and politically sensitive issues, other recommendations are less challenging and could be taken into consideration by the main actors.

Sustainable development and the future of media literacy depend on the willingness of involved actors to accept the notion of a changing environment and to adapt to new challenges with well-coordinated responses. The general recommendations are separated into three categories - actor focus, audience focus and activities focus.

Actor Focus:

- Consider supporting the creation of a non-governmental agency fully dedicated to media literacy and serving as the regional hub with possible representatives in various countries but located in a country with a lower level of corruption and higher political transparency. The organisation could be funded by international and regional organisations, including media, academia and professional communities;

- Specify responsibility of government institutions and staff responsible for dealing with media literacy issues, consider cross-sectoral reporting on implementation;

- The agency could serve as a coordinator for donors to media literacy activities to avoid overlapping projects, and providing targeted assistance in segmenting and addressing audiences, based on moderated action plans;

- The coordination of donors can provide long-term assistance and move from project-based planning to long-term planning activities;

- Regional annual meetings for core actors should be considered as well as other networking face-to-face formats of support for corporations and regional consortiums;

- Media literacy actors should have the possibility to be paid for improving their knowledge, for advancing and updating it and to learn from existing practices;

- Creation of regional professional associations for media literacy actors could help to enhance the community, to provide legal, psychological and knowledge support, while minimizing possible domestic tensions (competition, burnout, sharing best practises);

- Assist and support evaluation activities, provide financial and skill support for growing in-house research capabilities;

- Network of organisations and experts in media literacy in the regions would be beneficial in "decentralising" media literacy activities.

Audience Focus:

- Audience measurements should become an integral part of media literacy activity planning at all levels - from regional to national and local;

- Besides core funding for the general projects, a specific focus on regions and local communities is needed. Local media could be used as a target audience for improving skills of the journalists - then providing a possibility of grants for media literacy related projects;

- Aim at a better coordination of actors and audience segmentation and prioritisation as well as checking overlapping audiences;

- Promote media literacy activities among professional groups, not based on demographics.

Activities Focus:

- Systematically address critical thinking in media literacy curriculums in formal education, including primary school;

- Core funding, longitudinal funding and grant models are essential to support non-governmental organisations;

- The search for innovative solutions could be supported by identifying the prospective actors and endorsing a collaborative environment;

- Curriculums for addressing professional journalists, based on trending issues in the information environment could be considered and implemented in other media capacity building activities. Given the growing number of debunking activities, it would be beneficial to start with courses on avoiding amplification of disinformation;

- Monitoring of aggressive information as well disinformation could be used for a rapid response in targeted campaigns (early warning of high-level threats, general pre-banking; insights; timeliness);

- Formal and informal meetings for media literacy actors would benefit from being updated on trending hybrid activities in connection to national defence;

- Consider the possibilities to refine long-term initiatives, to meet the ongoing challenges;

- Encourage the media to engage the audience in interactive media literacy activities and diversification of media literacy skills, as well as to promote the inclusion of media literacy tools in entertainment formats.

Methodology

This report and recommendations are based on the country reports conducted by the country teams in Georgia, Latvia, Moldova and Ukraine in the second part of 2021. Detailed mapping of media literacy actors, audiences and activities was created using the same methodology, which included:

- Desk research;

- Semi-structured in-depth expert interviews;

- Online survey.

The **desk research** included an analysis of policy papers, traditions of development of media literacy, and significant changes in the trajectory of the development of the environment that have occurred. The focus of the analysis was to evaluate changes within the last three years. However, it also includes relevant historical background on media literacy policies such as; media education development and disinformation resilience development; and the redirecting of responsibility from one institutional body to another.

For **the semi-structured interviews**, the scheme of selecting experts was created. This included selecting at least three experts in every country from the following clusters: government related; non-government related; academia and media related; and supporter and donor related. At least 12 experts from each country were interviewed by using the same interviewing guide with five subsections of questions adopted for all countries.

Survey - **the online survey** was created to collect qualitative data on activities and audiences used by different media literacy actors. In the survey, active actors (at least 20 invitations in each country were sent) were asked to fill in the questionnaire. The survey included four sections, including the profiling of selected media literacy activities.

The research teams used available conferences and meetings to collect additional information needed to make an analysis, which focused on 1) cross-sectoral cooperation and networking; 2) evaluation of media literacy activities; 3) sustainability and funding; 4) the role of media in increasing media literacy.

Research Lead

Dr. Solvita Denisa-Liepniece

Country Researchers

Tamar Kintsurashvili (Georgia)

Maiko Ratiani (Georgia)

Dr. Solvita Denisa-Liepniece (Latvia)

Angela Vacaru (Moldova)

Dr. Dariya Orlova (Ukraine)

Dr. Diana Dutsyk (Ukraine)

Halyna Budivska (Ukraine)

Maksym Sribnyi (Ukraine)

Project Team

Gunta Sloga, Executive Director, BCME

Martins Murnieks, Head of the EaP Programme, BCME

Sandra Zilberta, Project Coordinator, BCME

Joanna Storie, Copy Editor

Ilva Paidere, Layout Designer