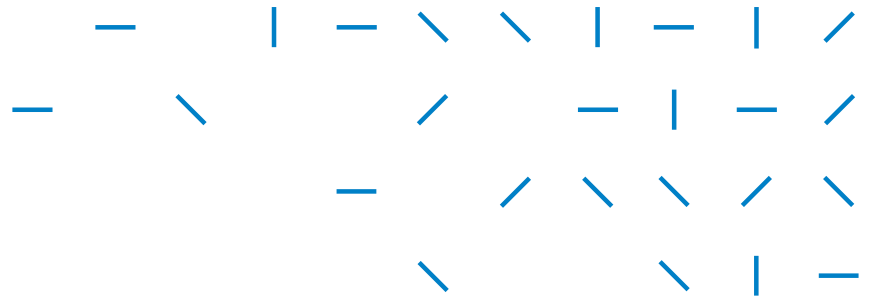**Baltic Centre for Media Excellence**

POLICY BRIEF

With Media Literacy Towards Cognitive Resilience:

Updates from the Baltic States, and lessons learned from Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia

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Contents

Introduction

As humans and human minds become an additional **field for battles in cognitive warfare**[1], media literacy serves to increase both awareness and resilience in societies. While the concept of human domain remains innovative and is being used mainly in the security and defense environment, the term media literacy has been used and overused widely, almost reaching the point of - meaning everything and nothing.

The definition of media literacy selected for the comprehensive 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."[2]

By using this umbrella definition, the research team introduced and designed **the novel A-A-A approach on evaluating and mapping media literacy developments**, which means focusing on A - actors; A - audiences and A - activities. In each country report, given the dynamics of developing the media literacy sphere, the researchers came up with 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.

Based on analysis conducted in six selected countries, this policy brief highlights current developments in the field of media literacy and suggests further **developing of media literacy infrastructure to increase cognitive resilience** and forms five prospects: media literacy as a matter of security and multi-field cooperation; media literacy in cognitive warfare - monitoring and alert system; media literacy actors as a collective cognitive immunity system; revising the role of the journalistic community; future oriented media literacy - complexity and connectivity.

Prospect 1: Media literacy as a matter of security and multi-field cooperation

While there is a need for a holistic strategic approach to media literacy in each country, there are unique scopes of obstacles at each level selected for the analysis. In every analysed country, it is possible to observe a shift in strategic documents towards further securitisation of components of media literacy. Ukraine, before the Russian invasion, moved forward with developing government bodies with functions of combining the StratCom and media literacy elements. The newly developed institutions and projects, as mentioned by the experts, were lacking implementation and coordination. Also in the Baltic countries, with newly adopted National Defense and Security Plans and Strategies, the reflection towards cognitive elements is connected to protection of the information environment, strengthening psychological resilience and critical thinking, as well as endorsing local media.

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[1] Cluzel, François (2020). Cognitive Warfare. NATO Innovation Hub. John Hopkins University & Imperial College London (2021). Countering cognitive warfare: awareness and resilience. NATO Review. Accessed March 20, 2022, https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/05/20/countering-cognitive-warfare-awareness-and-resilience/index.html

[2] European Commission. 2021. Media literacy expert group (E02541). Accessed November 7, 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupID=2541

One example is the new National Defense Development Plan 2022-2031 in Estonia or the currently debated Strategy for Preparing Citizens for Civil Resistance in Lithuania. Also, Latvian interviewed experts shared a similar vision on introducing further holistic approach through developing the strategy on StratCom and having more focus on media literacy components.

The current Russia's aggression in Ukraine leaves no doubt that, without a delay, authorities from the Baltic should move to increase the cognitive resilience by strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation, reaching, and engaging multiple audiences, making them an integral part of the total defense. At the same time, there is room for increasing cooperation with the security and defense sector, for example in Latvia, where the representatives of institutional bodies mentioned the lack of cooperation at both the policy and implementation levels.

Without cooperation and coordination, there is a risk that the ongoing campaigns and initiatives would remain in random and non-targeted disorder, as the country reports suggest. For example, projects on digital competences, having a less focus on more complex critical thinking components are still dominating in school curriculums. The question of the right balance between the digital skills and critical thinking knowledge should be brought to the attention and solved by applying both: 1) a narrowed approach in targeting based on longitudinal measurements; 2) and trending threat analysis. Formal and informal exchanges for media literacy actors would benefit from being updated on trending hybrid activities in connection to national defense.

The lack of alignment and re-direction of responsibility is weakening this area of increasing importance. The current analysis provides a comprehensive basis for further mapping of actors, activities, and audiences. The multi-sphere and multi-dimensional cooperation should be appropriately designed, financed, and monitored.

Prospective 2: Media literacy in cognitive warfare - monitoring and system of alert

Monitoring both the information landscapes and audiences (attitudes, behaviors, skills, and knowledge) is at the core for understanding developments in cognitive domain and is crucial for increasing cognitive resilience. While different stakeholders engage in monitoring and analysis, the media literacy field lacks data, which could serve as a camerton for designing and updating the projects, which would enable better addressing emerging threats and trends.

The development of the media literacy field should be based on the in-depth analysis of audiences, to understand the targeted audiences, to design appropriate projects (given media and information consumption habits, values, communication patterns). The media literacy sector needs this in all the studied countries. This includes the media, which is engaged in media literacy project implementation. Another element of high importance is the need to evaluate the effectiveness of actions taken. All these elements, including the monitoring of the media environment, are crucial for cognitive resilience. The evaluation of media literacy initiatives needs a comprehensive approach, to make sure that the targeted audience has been reached, it is satisfied, and becomes more resilient by obtaining the newly developed or upgraded set of skills.

Measurement and evaluation of media literacy components as well as media literacy projects and their implementation remain an emerging issue. In all selected counties, evidence shows that the actors of short-term projects (which form a significant part of all projects), are merely meeting formal criteria (such as the number of participants, materials printed, etc.). Yet, the effectiveness of media literacy projects has not been addressed. Some organisations pointed out that they lacked internal expertise to measure effectiveness.

Proper methodology and training would allow both - to increase knowledge of the target audience, and to develop alert systems (by connecting emerging threats to skills, attitudes and other issues related to mindsets). Faced with an information overload, a proper longitudinal target audience analysis could help to identify the ongoing shifts in mindsets which have to be addressed in further activities (for example, assessing the countermeasures of disinformation).

Monitoring and evaluation should be properly funded and linked to other types of activities. It would also help to define and reach new audiences, and to diversify new formats. This is where the media literacy field could benefit from further cooperation with the security and defence sector. Audience measurements should become an integral part of media literacy activity planning at all levels - from regional to national and local. Monitoring of aggressive information as well disinformation should be used to enable a rapid response in targeted campaigns (early warning of high-level threats, general pre-banking; insights; timeliness).

Prospective 3: Media literacy actors as a collective cognitive immunity system

Symbiosis and networking among the government, non-government and international actors create different and unique mapping in each country. In Lithuania and Estonia - while education, technology and culture are among the dominant sectors, indicators demonstrate growing connection to the security and defence field. The collective cognitive immunity system should absorb and find an appropriate format for further cooperation with the network of media literacy actors, unique in its activities in regions, local networks, and able to centralise and decentralise itself.

Further support to decentralisation of media literacy activities, especially in lifelong learning projects engaging with communities defined as vulnerable (social status, level of education, linguistic factors, etc.), is needed to diversify the information environment. Media literacy components are mostly targeted for teachers, the dominant target audience in the countries. At the same time, configured ways can be explored to attract attention and to engage with other types of audiences, for example, including vulnerable groups of people, such as people with disabilities, people in prisons, etc.

A specific need, discovered in all six countries, is the double-costs of projects due to the linguistic diversity of audiences. There is a need to adopt, translate and to find facilitators/trainers, who could address the audiences in their native language and the language of large minorities, such as Russian or Polish. Project implementers often mention it as a problem and call for better pan-Baltic cooperation for the projects in Russian language, and, in the future, also in Ukrainian. Given the humanitarian crisis caused by Russia's invasion in Ukraine, the need to make appropriate content in Ukrainian should be considered as one of future developments.

There are lessons learned from the recent mobilisation of media literacy actors and networks; the use of rapid redirection of Ukrainian projects, reaching previously addressed as well as recruiting new audiences, with repeating campaigns and implementing new ones. Grassroot initiatives, built on the basis of media literacy components, have become part of total defence. While there are both institutionalised and grassroots initiatives, the architecture of the media literacy sector is an important part of the collective cognitive immunity system. In the Baltic States, the grassroots initiatives should be supported and endorsed, and regionalised.

Prospective 4: Revising the role of the journalistic community

Countering disinformation by verification is one of the main (but not the only) interpretations of media literacy activities in media related projects. Many initiatives on verification, including by recognised leaders in the field, were developed earlier in Ukraine and Georgia, within the last few years, and by a rapidly growing number of actors in the Baltic States. Given the growing number of debunking activities, it would be beneficial to evaluate knowledge among media practitioners on how to avoid the amplification of disinformation. In addition, the journalists working on fact-checking and verifying projects should be protected from online harassment and physical violation.

Excessive focus on disinformation can have a negative side-effect of neglecting or limiting addressing other needs of audiences. Media literacy capacities should not be limited to debunking disinformation, as wise strategies for debunking should be debated and updated. Also, better coordination with information landscape monitoring bodies and alert systems could create targeted pre-bunking activities.

There are several systems of support by the states and international donors, aimed to develop deeper engagement by both the media and media audiences. The main goal is to increase cognitive resilience of journalists and their audiences. Although the journalists and media are frequently perceived as natural drivers of media literacy initiatives, they also need to be addressed as a target audience and supported as actors. Closer cooperation with the media sector could increase resilience, not only by increasing resilience of society but also through understanding vulnerabilities of journalistic communities.

One of the strengths in cross-sectoral coordination in Ukraine is hyperlocal and local media forums, diversity of media and media activists' related networking platforms (created on an annual basis), big networking events to endorse exchange of good practices and key developments in the media literacy field. At the same time, prior to the invasion, Ukrainian government agencies, including the Stratcom Center at the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy and The National Media Literacy Project, were in dialogue with NGOs working in the fields of media literacy and countering disinformation.

Among other good practices in Ukraine, which are worth considering for the Baltic States, are the successful partnerships among some organisations/initiatives, including, for instance, the production of joint content or content exchange (especially among the fact-checking initiatives and media), and organising joint thematic events and/or activities, etc. For further coordination, the media and media literacy field need to have more regular meetings, which should be developed at different levels in the Baltic States, thinking also about specific formats for Russian language regional media.

Given the widening definition of media and general transformation of the information environment and media consumption among the public, civic activists and their organisations should be engaged in regular resistance training. Evaluating their needs and help with the action plans for possible multidimensional crises should be endorsed. The more pan-Baltic multitargeted formats for networking are needed. Engagement with experts from the Eastern Partnership countries should be considered.

To avoid engagement with Russia's proxies and a possible misuse and damage of trust to the media (as well as the trust to media literacy implementing institutions), emphasising the role of transparency in media ownership is recommended, as is educating the audiences about media systems and providing opportunities for project implementers to obtain updates from those, who monitor and inform about the ownership and changes in ownership.

Prospective 5: Future oriented media literacy - complexity and connectivity

Changing warfare includes many non-physical battlefields; it is multi-agent and multi-pronged.[3] Cognitive superiority, as addressed by Dean S. Harley III and Kenneth Jobson, is domination over diplomatic, informational, military, and economic domains of warfare. As emerging conflicts take place in the cognitive domain, man is described by the authors as "bio-psycho-socio-techno-info being."

Notably, the just mentioned human matrix is addressed in the previously mentioned set of competences of media literacy, presented in the definition used for this research. The media literacy field has the potential to be integrated into further activities strengthening and protecting the human domain. The role of individuals and preparedness to recognise, evaluate and process malicious information, aimed to persuade (with rational and irrational elements) is considered as increasing through interactions with the tech sphere (persuasion, big data, and vulnerabilities).

While newer and more sophisticated forms of manipulation will be created with the use of deep learning, for example more advanced deep-fakes, the identification of malicious actors should be shared as soon as possible with the media literacy community to endorse capabilities of wider audiences.

The media literacy competences should be revised and supported for all age audiences (from early childhood to seniors), in appropriate formats, thus helping them to navigate in a changing environment. Among the requirements for further protection, more narrow critical thinking activities should be considered, when dealing with persuasion and influence, thus also creating possibilities to form the demand for interactions with media literacy actors.

If previously mentioned emerging threats could be described as general, the six analysed countries each have a specific focus on development of cognitive warfare elements through the prism of activities of Russia and its influence on the domestic audiences in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, as well as Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine.

Multi-domain operation could allow them to detect influence activities and new vulnerabilities. The vulnerability-based media literacy design should be considered as promising to strengthen local communities. There is a clear need for constant checking of the resonating and newly implemented narratives by hostile propaganda in the audiences.

As addressing future influence attacks is also based on prevention, actions taken by the governments to limit access to hostile information provides opportunities to study the architecture of rational and irrational narratives used, to make shifts in media consumption, to revise the structure of the network. It is key to assess the trust and sense of belonging in terms of the locally banned Russian sponsored propaganda media.

Systematically addressing critical thinking competencies in media literacy curricula in formal and informal education is a matter of national security and should remain a priority. It should continue receiving sufficient funding, undergo revising, making it up to date to achieve a wide-ranging outcome, including at the preschool level. The search for innovative solutions could be supported by identifying the prospective actors and endorsing a collaborative environment.

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[3] Hartley III, Dean S., Jobson, Kenneth. (2021). Cognitive Superiority. Springer. p. 223.

General information about the project and report

On methodology and data

This report and recommendations are based on the country reports conducted by the country teams in Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, and Ukraine in 2021 - 2022. Detailed mapping of media literacy actors, audiences and activities was created using the same methodology, which included: desk research (policy papers, traditions of development of media literacy, and significant changes in the trajectory of the development of the environment that have occurred); semi-structured in-depth expert interviews (government related; non-government related; academia and media related; and supporter and donor related); and online survey of the main actors.

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